

TENNIS DOCTORS

Group Practice

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ON THE TABLE NEXT TO TENNIS BAGS, towels and empty ball containers, a half-dozen cell phones and pagers rang and chirped incessantly.

"The hospital," says plastic surgeon John Fasano, who put down his tennis racquet to return the page and give a quick bit of advice for a patient at Martin Memorial.

Moments earlier, neurosurgeon John Afshar took a similar call from Lawnwood Regional Medical Center.

In fact, the group of about a dozen doctors who gather at the North River Shores Tennis Club every Thursday night spend enough time taking pressing phone calls that it's become a bit of a joke among them.

"Oh, there are lots of interruptions," says Dr. Sorrell "Sandy" Strauss, an oral surgeon who organizes the group and is partial owner of the tennis club. "One night, we had four doctors, and three were standing on the edge with their cell phones, talking. We thought maybe they were talking to each other."

But it's tennis, not talking, that draws these medical professionals from a variety of specialties every week. With the cool breeze blowing through the surrounding trees, the doctors come for the quick aerobic workout, stress release and easy-going camaraderie.

Strauss, whose son Jim is also an oral surgeon who plays regular tennis, says simple word-of-mouth throughout the hospital made the group grow in the five years they've been playing together.

"Tennis is a doctor's sport, even though they think of doctors playing golf," he says. "The problem is, golf takes too long. You can leave the hospital and play (tennis) for an hour and a half, and you get your daily exercise."

That's exactly what Dr. George Rittersbach, a colon rectal surgeon and chairman of the board at Martin Memorial, does. Since he makes the schedule for his group of doctors, he's never on Thursday evenings, he said.

"We're all so busy, and we don't see each other just to talk," he says. "Here, we'll discuss medical issues, local politics and medicine. We don't have a chance to do that as much as we used to."

"Of course, we also screw around a lot, too," he adds, laughing as one doctor teased another from across the court.

There's almost every specialty represented, including a cardiologist, a pulmonary specialist, a cardiac surgeon, obstetrician, podiatrist and a nephrologist. There's also an orthopedic surgeon – who would become very popular if there's ever an injury on the court.

soft clay courts and about 225 members, is set off Britt Road and is surrounded by woods. Strauss, who started playing at the club about 15 years ago, built his home overlooking the courts and bought into the club when the original owner was ready to retire.

He helps look after the courts, which require substantially more maintenance than the asphalt hard courts normally found in public parks. He's there so frequently, he says, that once at the hospital a man recognized him as "the maintenance man" at the club.

"When I'm not in the office, I'm at the tennis club," Strauss says. "I may be fixing the sprinklers or working on the court or giving a lesson to one of my granddaughters. It allows me to lose all the stress from my office."

Of course, for the doctors, their practice is never that far away – especially with all the cell phone ringing.

Oral surgeon Federico Grande, who proudly shows a picture on his cell phone of his twin babies holding a tennis ball, joined the group about four years ago. He works in the same practice as Strauss and his son.

"I bring two things – my keys and my cell phone. Those are the essentials," he says. "Oh yes, and my racquet."

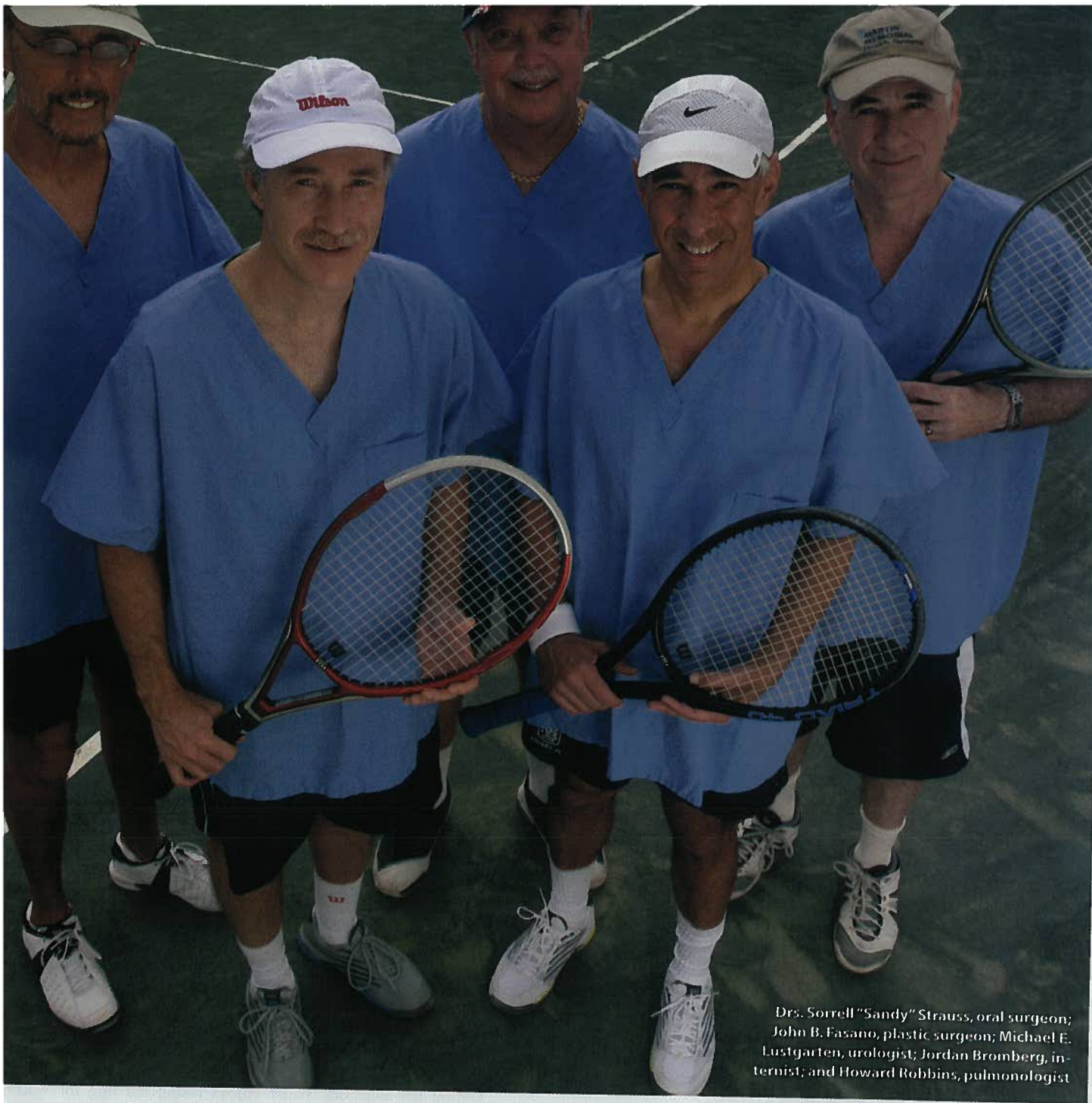
There is much chatter about the hospital and something one doctor heard on National Public Radio the other day. But there is also some impressively high-quality tennis.

Jim Strauss, Sandy's son, is one of the younger doctors, and he was also once the top tennis player at Martin County High School.

"Being a doctor, it's like any job, but there's a lot of stress," he says. "This is a way to get exercise and forget about your worries."

Years ago, a group formed when Martin Memorial would sponsor games, and drug sales representatives organizes round-robins. But when Sandy Strauss took over, the group formalized and grew to a weekly





Dr. Sorrell "Sandy" Strauss, oral surgeon; John B. Fasano, plastic surgeon; Michael E. Lustgarten, urologist; Jordan Bromberg, internist; and Howard Robbins, pulmonologist

doubles, and switch partners after each set.

In December, the club had a "Doctors' Tournament," where about two dozen doctors came out to compete. While there are different levels of play on tournament days, part of what makes the Thursday evening doctor group so consistent is the fact that everyone plays on basically the same level.

"Anyone can beat anybody else on any given day," Fasano says. "It's a good group of people, good quality tennis."

On the courts nearby, children were receiving tennis lessons from the head pro, Scott DeCoste, who runs the club's operations with his wife. The club also hosts the annual Hibiscus House fundraising tournament each March.

For the doctors, it's a perfect way to stay healthy and be with friends – so long as their phones can stay quiet.

"With this club, the motto is, 'Where you always get a game,'"