



# FIXING A MYSTERY INJURY

**PLAYING THROUGH PAIN ALMOST SIDELINED THIS ATHLETE. FINDING THE RIGHT SPECIALIST HELPED MAKE HIM A CHAMPION.**

Finding a specialist to accurately diagnose and treat a knee injury kept Hunter Pappas on the field for a championship college season.

A few years ago, Hunter Pappas injured his right knee playing on Wall Township High School's football team. It concerned him enough to get an MRI, but the imaging test didn't reveal an obvious injury, so he kept playing, thinking it was just an annoying case of tendinitis.

But the pain didn't go away. Several more doctor visits also failed to find the source of the discomfort. Pappas tried physical therapy, rest, knee bracing and anti-inflammatory medications to help ease the pain, but they didn't resolve the recurring problem.

"It didn't hurt that much when walking normally," says Pappas. "But it was hard to walk up stairs, and it hurt to do squats or get into my football stance."



**PATRICK S. BUCKLEY, MD**

His love of football kept him playing even though he was in pain. "It was pretty tough," he says. "I just pushed through it because I wanted to play."



After his football season ended, the pain still continued, so Pappas met with yet another doctor. This time, things were different.

### AN UNUSUAL PROBLEM

Patrick S. Buckley, MD, ordered another MRI. An orthopedic specialist at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJUH), sports medicine surgeon at University Orthopaedic Associates and Clinical Assistant Professor of Orthopedic Surgery at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, Dr. Buckley spotted what no one else had: Pappas had significant inflammation and a small tear of his patellar tendon, a tough band of tissue that connects the kneecap to the top of the shinbone and helps straighten the leg.

“This is not your common football injury, like an ACL [anterior cruciate ligament] or meniscus tear,” Dr. Buckley says. “Hunter had a lot of swelling at the bottom of his kneecap, where the patellar tendon attaches. That’s consistent with something called patellar tendinopathy.”

Unlike tendinitis, which is inflammation of a typically normal tendon, tendinopathy occurs when a tendon has been inflamed for a long time. “The actual structural makeup of that tendon changes,” Dr. Buckley says.

To repair Pappas’s damaged tendon, Dr. Buckley performed a procedure called a knee arthroscopy, patellar tendon debridement and repair in April 2021 at RWJUH. The hospital offers treatment for a range of orthopedic issues, including various sports injuries, traumatic injuries and fractures, and joint replacements of the hip and knee.

“I went in with a camera and small instruments to make sure everything else was okay and really work on the back side of the patellar tendon,” Dr. Buckley explains. “I cleaned damaged tissue out of that area and sewed it back

together.” The procedure took about 90 minutes, and Pappas went home the same day.

### GRIDIRON GRIT

Recovery took time. Pappas wore a knee brace for about six weeks and underwent physical therapy for several months.

“Hunter worked really hard at the therapy side of it not only to build strength but also to retrain lower extremity muscles to function in a way that is more normal,” Dr. Buckley says. “When you take the pain generator away, you can start rebuilding the foundation and return to a normal level of activity.”

Pappas was highly motivated to do everything he could to get back in action because he had an offer to play college football at Anna Maria College in Paxton, MA.

“The recovery was pretty challenging,” Pappas says. “But in my head, I was like, ‘I need to do this if I still want to play football in college.’ So I pushed through it, and in the end, it all came out amazing.”

Not only did Pappas join the team as an offensive lineman, but he also was able to play with his older brother, Tyler, during a record-breaking season in which the team became the Eastern Collegiate Football Conference champions.

Pappas says his knee now feels fantastic. “I can walk up stairs without any pain,” he says. “I can squat down to pick up something from the ground or do weight lifting reps without having to stop halfway through the set to stretch my knee.”

Dr. Buckley says Pappas’s success shows that patients in pain shouldn’t stop searching for solutions until they get relief.

“A lot of times, you may be told you have to live with something or there’s no real solution,” Dr. Buckley says. “But seeing a specialist, especially one with expertise in the injury, has a lot of value.”



## ORTHOPEDIC SERVICES FOR ALL AGES

### The Orthopedic Center at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJUH)

prides itself on achieving the best outcomes for each patient. The center has a multidisciplinary team consisting of nurses, physical and occupational therapists, patient care technicians and board-certified, fellowship-trained orthopedic surgeons who work together to create a customized plan that meets each patient’s unique needs.

RWJUH’s adult orthopedic services include procedures and care for:

- Joints
- Spine
- Orthopedic trauma
- Sports medicine
- Hands
- Upper extremities
- Feet and ankles

For information, visit [www.rwjbh.org/ortho](http://www.rwjbh.org/ortho).

### The Bristol-Myers Squibb Children’s Hospital at RWJUH

has pediatric orthopedists affiliated with RWJBarnabas Health Medical Group who are recognized for excellence in the care of children and adolescents, and are dedicated to furthering their field by developing protocols as well as techniques for the treatment of children with orthopedic problems. Pediatric orthopedic services include treatment related to:

- Trauma and fractures
- Scoliosis and other spinal disorders
- Pediatric and adolescent sports medicine
- Congenital upper limb anomalies/birth defects
- Hereditary disorders
- Growth-related problems
- Hip dysplasia
- Bone tumors/cysts
- Musculoskeletal infections
- Club feet
- Neuromuscular disorders
- Cerebral palsy
- Spina bifida
- Pediatric shoulder, elbow, wrist and hand

For more information or to schedule an appointment with one of our pediatric orthopedic providers, call **732.390.1160**.