

## Dr. Americo A. Savastano, Early Sports Medicine Specialist

### *From an Italian hilltop to Federal Hill*

MARY KORR  
RIMJ MANAGING EDITOR



**Figure 1.** Dr. Americo A. Savastano [URI]

The late **AMERICO A. SAVASTANO, MD**, (1906–1987), (**Figure 1**), Chief of Orthopedics at Rhode Island Hospital from 1965–1978, was an early leader in sports medicine. His story is as American as baseball; in fact, he served on President Lyndon Johnson’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, when it was co-chaired by baseball legend Stan Musial.

As a young boy of about 6 years old, Americo left for America, leaving his family home in the hill town of Orchi, Italy, north of Naples, where his father Carmine was a blacksmith, to cross the North Atlantic alone circa 1912 to live with family friends in Providence, on Federal Hill.

In a Maine newspaper article in 2017, his son, Jeff Savastano, said his dad worked as a 12-year-old shining shoes on the street. It was not an unusual thing to do, as many Providence youth found work on the streets, in their homes, and in factories, as photos by Lewis W. Hine documented in Providence in 1912–1913. (**Figures 2–4**)

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**Figure 2.** Boy peddling bills on Atwells Avenue.



**Figure 3.** Delivering bread on Spruce Street, Providence.

**Figure 4.** (Left) Children worked alongside family members. This photo was taken next door to a cigar store on Atwells Avenue, and shows the workers and children stripping tobacco leaves for the cigars.

[PROVIDENCE AND FEDERAL HILL, 1912, PHOTOS:  
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, LEWIS WICKES HINE]



The young Americo attended public schools, followed by the Rhode Island State College, later called the University of Rhode Island. His yearbook shows “Savvy” majored in general science. The honors student was on the track team, and a member of the glee club, band, and Chemical Society. Upon graduation in 1928, (Figures 5 and 6), he attended Harvard Medical School, graduating in 1932.

Perhaps his interest in orthopedics and sports medicine stemmed from his post-graduate training at the New York Rehabilitation Hospital. In addition, from 1936 to 1945, he was as an instructor in orthopedic surgery at the Polyclinic Hospital and Medical School in New York City.

In the December 1962 edition of the *Rhode Island Medical Journal* (RIMJ), he looked back on those years, specifically treating boxers. He stated that the chief argument against boxing is that the contents of the skull (the brain and its appendages) are the chief target. Severe brain damage and death are not uncommon in the sport and he hoped that the Boxing Education and Research Foundation would develop some sound ideas regarding safety, and that an insurance, welfare, and pension plan can be established, such as existed in other sports.

During the 1960s, Dr. Savastano chaired the Rhode Island Medical Society’s Sports Medicine Committee, which co-sponsored an annual sports medicine conference at his alma mater, URI, bring in experts from around the country to address sports safety advances across the spectrum –



geared to athletes, coaches, parents, schools, leagues and physicians. (Figure 7)

His interest in the field took him far and wide. In 1967, he served as team physician at the Pan American Games in Winnipeg, Canada. The following year he was a member of the Exchange Orthopedic Program to Russia. In 1968 he was cited for leadership by the American College for Sports Medicine.

In 1970, Dr. Savastano was inducted into the Rhode Island Heritage Hall of Fame, which cited him as “a specialist in the medical aspects of sports...who organized and conducted orthopedic clinics in many parts of the world.”

Dr. Savastano passed away at the age of 80 on April 4, 1987. His obituary in RIMJ stated his medical accomplishments: “He scored first in several treatments never before attempted in Rhode Island, such as reconstruction or replacement of arthritic hips and knees, and the use of surgically implanted steel rods to straighten the spines of scoliosis victims. He developed the Savastano Vitallium, a total knee replacement, and was the editor/author in 1980 of “Knee Joint Replacement Surgery.” The obituary also stated he pushed for legislation to require motorcyclists to wear helmets and protective gear.

Dr. Savastano’s journey, which began on a hilltop in a small Italian town, is truly the story of an American dream realized – through study, hard work (even if it meant shining shoes), and securing the ties that bind, within and beyond the surgical arena. ❖



Figures 5 and 6. Rhode Island State College yearbook, 1928, portrait of A. A. Savastano (top), and Class of 1928

## 2nd Postgraduate Conference—

## MEDICAL ASPECT OF SPORTS

*Sponsored by the University of Rhode Island and the Rhode Island Medical Society  
At the F. W. Keaney Gymnasium, U. of R.I., Kingston, on August 22-23, 1963  
For Physicians, Trainers and Physical Education Instructors*

## THURSDAY MORNING

AUGUST 22, 1963

**PRESIDING:** **Dr. A. A. Savastano** Chairman, Committee on Medical Aspects of Sports, Rhode Island Medical Society  
Orthopedic Surgeon, Department of Athletics, University of Rhode Island

9:00 REGISTRATION

9:30 **WELCOME** **Dr. Ernest W. Hartung** Vice President, University of Rhode Island  
**Dr. Thomas Perry, Jr.** President, Rhode Island Medical Society

9:45 **Panel Discussion: ADMINISTRATIVE SPORTS MEDICINE**  
**FROM THE ADMINISTRATOR'S VIEWPOINT** **Professor Maurice Zarchen**  
Director of Athletics, University of Rhode Island  
**FROM THE COACH'S VIEWPOINT** **Ralph Cordisco**  
Director of Athletics, Haverstraw-Stony Point  
High School, Haverstraw, New York  
**FROM THE TEAM PHYSICIAN'S VIEWPOINT** **Dr. G. Edward Crane**  
Athletic Surgeon, Brown University

10:45 **Panel Discussion: PRESIDING: Jack Zilly**  
Head Coach of Football, University of Rhode Island  
**QUALIFICATIONS FOR PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS** **Dr. A. A. Savastano**  
**MEDICAL PROBLEMS AND THE ATHLETE** **Dr. S. J. P. Turco**  
Director of Student Health, University of Rhode Island  
**FIELD DIAGNOSIS AND DECISIONS** **Kenneth Rawlinson**  
Head Trainer, University of Oklahoma

11:30 **PHYSIOLOGICAL RESPONSES IN ATHLETES** **Dr. Warren Guild**  
Harvard Medical School

## THURSDAY AFTERNOON

**PRESIDING:** **Dr. Joseph E. Donohue** Assistant Director of Student Health, Providence College

1:45 **DIAGNOSIS AND MANAGEMENT OF COMMON ANKLE INJURIES**  
**Dr. Thomas B. Quigley**  
Chairman, Committee on Medical Aspects of Sports,  
The American Medical Association  
Assistant Clinical Professor of Surgery,  
Harvard Medical School  
Surgeon, Peter Bent Brigham Hospital  
Surgeon, Harvard University Health Services

2:15 **DIAGNOSIS AND MANAGEMENT OF COMMON KNEE INJURIES**  
**Dr. Frederick vom Saal**  
Chief, Department of Orthopedic Surgery,  
St. John's Hospital, Yonkers, N.Y.

2:45 **DIAGNOSIS AND MANAGEMENT OF COMMON FACIAL INJURIES**  
**Dr. Armand Versaci**  
Assistant Surgeon, Rhode Island Hospital

3:30 **DIAGNOSIS AND MANAGEMENT OF COMMON ELBOW AND SHOULDER INJURIES**  
**Dr. Thomas B. Quigley**

4:00 QUESTION AND ANSWER PERIOD

## FRIDAY MORNING

AUGUST 23, 1963

**PRESIDING:** **Carl V. Slader** Associate Professor of Physical Education, University of Rhode Island

9:00 **CONDITIONING DRILLS . . . Before and During Football Season** **Kenneth Rawlinson**

9:30 **PREVENTION OF CERTAIN KNEE INJURIES** **Dr. Daniel F. Hanley**  
Director of Student Health Services, Bowdoin College  
Physician to the 1960 U.S. Olympic Team in Rome

10:00 **PREVENTION OF HEAD AND NECK INJURIES**  
Head Gear Problems  
Neck Strengthening Exercises  
**Kenneth Rawlinson**

**Figure 7.** This program for Dr. Savastano's sports medicine conference at URI, co-sponsored by the Rhode Island Medical Society, appeared in the June 1963 issue of the *Rhode Island Medical Journal*. In the same issue, he contributed an article on the high school athlete.