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Decades after earning MD, retired 49er returns to Stanford to finish residency

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A series of fortunate events eventually brought successful medical device entrepreneur Milt McColl, MD, back to his original mission — clinical medicine.

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Milt McColl, a successful medical device entrepreneur and former linebacker for the San Francisco 49ers, is a second-year resident in the Stanford Health Care-O'Connor Hospital Family Medicine Residency program. McColl earned his medical degree from Stanford in 1988.

Paul Sakuma

When Milt McColl, MD, decided to finish his residency after nearly 30 years away from clinical medicine, he didn't expect to be back at Stanford, where he played football and earned his bachelor's and medical degrees.

That, he said, was a stroke of luck, or what he said his father prefers to call the moment "when preparation meets opportunity."

McColl, 58, admits that brand of luck determined most of his professional life after college. It was there when he was signed as a free agent by the 49ers — the same week he was accepted to [Stanford's medical school](#). It was there when he landed his first medical internship, and there again when the medical device industry captured his attention, which it held for almost three decades.

But the decision to finish his residency was different.

“Nothing I’ve done in life is because I planned it. Usually it was because the opportunity sort of arose,” McColl said recently as he grabbed a quick lunch at a bustling café at [Santa Clara Valley Medical Center](#), where he had a shift later in the day. “This was the most thought-out, planned-out thing I’ve done in my career because it was really difficult two years ago to make the decision to do it.”

It was especially tough to leave his CEO position at Gauss Surgical, which developed a real-time blood loss measuring device for operating rooms. “I think the hardest discussion was with the investors that I’ve been running a company with for five years,” McColl said.

Under his direction, the company raised \$12.5 million and was working to get a patent on the second generation of the product, which was later approved. McColl handed the CEO role to company founder Siddarth Satish, whom he met at Stanford and with whom he still occasionally connects to lend an ear. But when he started his internship, he devoted the full force of his energy to the [Stanford Health Care-O’Connor Hospital Family Medicine Residency program](#), where he is now a second-year resident.

An unusual career trajectory

McColl’s trajectory from a successful medical device startup CEO to resident isn’t as circuitous as it might appear, in part because he always kept a hand in medicine by volunteering at a free clinic and because he worked with medical professionals in medical device development. But by his mid-50s, he was a little burned out from the demands of business and was looking for something new — maybe even a second career.

“I was kind of worn out, and was volunteering at a primary care clinic in San Francisco,” he said. “About once a month I would go up there, and I started realizing how much I enjoyed working with patients and doing medicine.”

So, he explored the feasibility of finishing his residency. He had his medical license, which he got in 1989 after completing his first internship, but some program directors intimated that he didn’t fit the profile of a typical resident.

That wasn’t the case at O’Connor. Grace Yu, MD, the residency program director, said McColl was an unusual candidate, but his commitment to and enthusiasm for the program and clinical medicine impressed her.



McColl played seven seasons for the 49ers. While playing professional football, he attended medical at Stanford.

San Francisco 49ers

McColl's residency class of 2019 was Yu's first as the director of the program, a position previously held for 30 years by Robert Norman, MD, a family practice physician. Yu, a clinical assistant professor of medicine at Stanford and graduate of its medical school, remembers the three of them talking in-depth about McColl's goals and the pitfalls he would face. But the rigors of clinical work weren't new to him, and the letters of recommendation from the physicians at the clinic where McColl volunteered stood out.

"They said, 'Nobody else in their 50s would be thinking about this, or if they were maybe you'd be wondering what their underlying motives were. But his are absolutely sincere and you should really be thinking about him strongly,'" Yu said.

'Testament to his character'

After he was matched to O'Connor, McColl was eager to improve his clinical knowledge before the internship year of his residency started, so he accompanied doctors on rounds and reviewed medical references. "He put in all of that extra work because he knew it was going to be harder coming in, after being away from that rigor of clinical medicine for so many years," Yu said. "I think it was a testament to his character."

Yu believes that McColl's background in professional athletics and in medicine makes him understand, perhaps better than more traditional residents, that "you have to devote so much time and physical energy, as well, into crafting your profession."

"He appreciates ... how wonderful the field of medicine can be — how deeply rewarding — and the impact that physicians can have, not only on their individual patient's lives but a community," she said. "I think he gets that."

Yu and McColl had concerns about whether he would fit in with his class of residents, many of whom had similar concerns. But Jeff Peng, MD, one of the chief residents this year, said McColl's humble, fun and friendly personality quickly squelched any uncertainty.

"It's so effortless," Peng said. "He just fits in so well."

He said McColl is always enthusiastic about learning and doesn't hold himself above anyone else. "He doesn't really talk about all of his accomplishments," Peng said. "He focuses on learning and medicine, and he's just a great guy to have around."

Patients sometimes look to McColl for answers, assuming he's in charge, Peng said, but McColl immediately defers to senior residents or attending doctors and tells patients, "No, no, I'm still learning!"



Most people who are doing this are our kids' ages."

McColl said he's thankful that other residents have been so accepting of him. "Technically I'm not the strongest among any of them because they're fresh out of medical school and their minds are like sponges," he said. "But I think I have some other values that they appreciate in terms of just being around life for a while."

McColl said his experience helps puts the pressure of doing a residency into perspective. For instance, the stress of launching a company "was extremely challenging."

"I mean, you're running out of money, and you have all these employees that rely on you. Then the product's not working as well as you thought and the customers aren't buying it," he said. "It just encompasses you."

McColl wasn't naïve about the demands of a residency. His father, William "Bill" McColl, also played professional football (for the Chicago Bears) while earning his medical degree. After becoming an orthopedic surgeon, he was a Presbyterian missionary and took his family — including young Milt — to Korea and treated leprosy patients before he settled into practice in California.

Still, Milt McColl said he had his wife, Cindy, and their four sons to consider in returning to medicine. But their youngest had just left for college, making the timing good.

Cindy McColl said her husband of 34 years always toyed with the idea of completing his residency, and because their kids are grown, it's workable in a way that it might not be for younger residents. "Most people who are doing this are our kids' ages," she said. "It's a much different thing to do when you have a young family. ... I feel like at this age we have a lot more flexibility."

Milt McColl said there also other advantages to doing it now. "I wouldn't have wanted to miss my kids growing up," he said. He didn't want to miss watching their kids play sports. His youngest is now a junior at Harvard and playing baseball there. The other boys, like McColl, his wife and all of McColl's siblings, have attended Stanford. One played water polo and now plays rugby; another played baseball, and the fourth was a swimmer. None of them are pursuing medicine.

Following in father's footsteps

McColl aspired early to follow his father into both football and medicine, and his father supported those goals. The elder McColl also gave his son advice about doing both, including suggesting that he take first-year medical school classes during his senior year, even with the extra demands of playing college football. Following that advice resulted in Milt McColl's first encounter with the kind of "luck" that defined his next move.

After graduating from college in 1981, McColl was accepted to a number of medical schools, including his father's alma mater the University of Chicago and UCLA, but he also thought the NFL would draft him. He was disappointed when that didn't happen but looked forward to attending medical school. He was on Stanford's waitlist, so he accepted UCLA's offer. In early summer, he had secured an apartment in Los Angeles and registered for classes, but he had a few months of downtime before the move. That's when then-San Francisco 49ers head coach Bill Walsh, who knew McColl since he was his head football coach at Stanford, suggested he try out as a linebacker for the 49ers as a free agent.

"As happenstance had it ... the guy ahead of me got injured the first day of practice, and he stayed injured for six weeks. I ended up getting every play, and after training camp, I made the team," McColl said.

That was in September. Now he had to make a choice; UCLA wanted a full commitment to medical school, which meant no football. Luckily, as he was trying to figure out what to do, Stanford let him know a spot had opened up at its medical school. Did he want it?

"So, I walked in to talk to the dean that week and said, 'Hey, I just made the 49ers. Can I go to medical school here? And, by the way, I already have completed a number of the first-year classes (because my dad had given me a heads up to do that) so I don't even need to go to class the first quarter.'" He did need anatomy, but the rest of his fall quarter was clear. The dean agreed, and McColl spent the quarter practicing and playing football during the day, and working in the anatomy lab at night.

The 49ers won the Super Bowl that season, and McColl spent the next six years balancing a professional football career with the demands of medical school.

More luck

Then in 1988, during his last year of medical school, he had another stroke of luck: The dean told him that Valley Medical Center was in desperate need of a transitional intern because one had dropped out mid-year. McColl had enough credits to graduate that day. Did he want the internship? So again, McColl made a deal, this time with the medical center's internship director, who let McColl work the internship for three months, break for the football season, then return to finish the internship, which he did the following spring.

But that left McColl, who said he's "not the kind of guy that can just sit around," with a couple months to fill before his residency was to begin in July. That's when he met three guys with an orthopedic-device startup. They asked McColl to join them, and he became one of Origin Medsystem's first employees. By the time his residency

I wake up every day thinking, ‘What can I do today to pass my boards?’”

was set to start, he said he “was the guy who knew the most about their first product.”

“When all of a sudden it started not working very well, I felt like I couldn’t leave the company because I felt terrible,” he said.

So, he delayed his residency for what he thought would be a year, “and it turned into 28.” Now, McColl said he’s come full circle, back to both medicine and Stanford. The Stanford connection is one he didn’t expect. But a year after McColl matched with O’Connor, which is owned by Verity Health Systems, the hospital transferred institutional sponsorship of its residency program to Stanford. That meant McColl’s residency class, which started at O’Connor, was now part of the Stanford Health Care-O’Connor Hospital Family Medicine Residency program.

For now, McColl, whom Yu described as the “happiest” and most enthusiastic of the residents, said he has one goal: “I wake up every day thinking, ‘What can I do today to pass my boards?’ because I don’t want to be the first person in this program to not pass them.”

He’s confident he’ll pass but believes his strengths are in his ability to connect with and help patients, something he owes to his life experiences.

“Oh my, the stories I hear from the patients about things they’ve been through,” he said, recounting the story of a woman whose mother and unborn baby died two days apart. “People go through really hard things in life. Anything I have is nothing compared to what these people are going through.”

After his residency, McColl’s ultimate goal is to work in community-based facilities like the San Francisco clinic where he volunteered, the Indian Health Center of Santa Clara Valley, O’Connor Hospital or Valley Medical Center, where O’Connor residents in his program rotate through during their residencies. McColl said he gets “more satisfaction” working with traditionally underserved patients at community clinics because they “don’t feel entitled” and are so happy to get health care.

“That’s what I want to do for the rest of my life,” he said.



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