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THE EDITOR'S CORNER

How Many Home Runs Have You Hit Lately?

1998 will go down in baseball history as the year in which Mark McGwire demolished the 37-year-old record for most home runs hit in one season. To an extent, the home run is a metaphor for successful orthodontic treatment.

McGwire hit a home run almost every eight times at bat—a phenomenal rate for a baseball player. Orthodontists are expected to hit a home run every time up. When McGwire saw a ball he had hit disappear over the wall in fair territory, he knew he had hit a home run and proceeded to round the bases. How do orthodontists know when they have hit a home run in treatment? There is no wildly cheering crowd, no umpire giving a signal, no report in the newspaper. What differentiates a home run from a foul pop fly?

McGwire nearly missed first base in all the excitement over No. 62. If you don't arrive at a correct diagnosis and treatment plan, you won't even make it to first base. If you do, you're off and running.

If you achieve all your treatment goals, you are rounding second base and on the way to third. Still, you must evaluate your success in achieving these goals by reviewing and grading the results of the case. Otherwise, you will trip and miss third base, and your home run may not count.

If the patient is satisfied with the treatment result, you are safely past third and on the way home. But you won't know whether the patient is happy unless you ask. A patient satisfaction survey and/or post-treatment conference will get you across home plate.

The official scorers of this endeavor are the patient and the family dentist. They have to be shown by photographs, at a post-treatment conference and in a report to the dentist, what was accomplished in treatment. If the patient and the dentist send you at least two referrals—one to replace the completed case in your practice and one more to grow on—you can truly say you hit a home run. If not, you might as well be stranded on base.

McGwire's feat was largely an individual effort.

Orthodontic treatment is a team effort, with the team consisting of the doctor, the staff, the patient, and the parents. Sometimes your team can let you down. Even if you and your staff perform flawlessly, the patient can make some costly errors that may result in, if not a strikeout, perhaps only a bloop single.

Of course, orthodontics is not a game, and there is no record for orthodontic home runs in a season or a career. Still, each practice can learn to keep score. Instead of autographed baseballs, you will have home-run models lining your trophy case to give you the joy and assurance that you have a Hall of Fame practice. ELG

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