

# Alexius Rachun

*November 10, 1911 — October 20, 1990*

Alexius Rachun was a professor of clinical medicine and a member of the staff of the University Health Services and the team physician for the university for thirty-one years before his retirement in 1978, when he became professor emeritus.

Alex was born in Brockton, Massachusetts of Lithuanian parentage. As a child he learned the Lithuanian language and became skilled in his ancestral folk dances, which he delighted in teaching to his younger sisters and a multitude of neighborhood children. He was always interested in athletics and participated actively in a variety of sports from his days in high school when he was the boxing champion of the school, to his later years, which featured a hole-in-one achieved at the Country Club of Ithaca in 1979.

His father died when Alex was 18, and as an elder brother Alex helped to provide for his father's absence. About that time, however, he was one of a number of the students in his high school who were selected for testing by a psychologist who was doing a study in the school system. The fellow found Al's performance so amazing that he called the school authorities to urge that Al be persuaded to go to college to study either journalism or medicine (rather odd alternatives, it would seem). No one in Alex's family had ever attended college, and funds were not easy to come by, but family and friends rallied around and contributed to make his education possible. He graduated from New York University with a bachelor's degree in 1936 and from the Long Island College of Medicine (now the SUNY Downstate Medical School) in 1940.

During these years he continued his imaginative extracurricular pursuits. He continued his love of dancing and performed occasionally on the stage in New York City, most memorably at the World's Fair of 1939. During summers he and a friend toured the Borscht Circuit in the Catskills as magicians and sleight-of-hand artists. On other occasions he sought adventure in travel, sometimes by prolonged bicycle trips and occasionally by "riding the rods" of freight trains.

Upon completing his internship at Brooklyn's Cumberland Hospital in 1942, Alex was commissioned as a First Lieutenant in the Medical Corps of the United States Navy and was assigned as a battalion surgeon with the First Beach Battalion from 1942 to 1946. This was harrowing duty as the unit participated in landings in Africa and, more particularly, in Italy, where at one point at Anzio he spent 17 consecutive days in a foxhole. He was discharged as Lt. Comdr. MC USNR.

Following his naval service, Alex took another year of residency at the Lowell General Hospital. He came to Ithaca to inquire about the possibility of establishing a general practice in town. He talked to Norm Moore who convinced him to join the University Health Services with the intent of developing a program in athletic medicine. Although this was not a field with which Alex was familiar, he learned quickly, largely on his own for this was not yet a specialty with any depth of clinical or scientific expertise. He immersed himself deeply in his work, seeking out consultants who could provide him with instruction and attending an eclectic series of post-graduate courses that would round out his skills in this new area of specialization. He gradually became a leader in the field.

He published several papers on sports injuries in various medical journals and was a frequent speaker at meetings and teaching sessions all over the country. He was recognized for his skills by his appointment to AMA's Committee on the Medical Aspects of Sports and he became the first chairman of its subcommittee on the classification of sports injuries. He was a founder and the first chairman of the Athletic Medicine section of the American College Health Association. For many years he led the teaching sessions on sports injuries that he originated for the annual meetings of the ACHA. These sessions continue to this day and are now entitled the Alexius Rachun Teaching Conferences.

And during all these years Alex continued as the team physician for the football and other sports teams at Cornell. In this role he not only made full use of his diagnostic and therapeutic skills, but he had a significant impact on many of the athletes far beyond their clinical or orthopedic problems. Bob Kane was always impressed with how the athletes would flock around Alex, particularly on road trips, to hear words of wisdom and even guidance from this kindly master. Indeed, a number of former athletes later expressed their thanks to Alex for guiding them to careers in medicine.

In spite of Alex's sincere dedication to the well-being of his charges, it wasn't always deadly serious. His sly sense of humor was always just below the surface. Old timers recall the occasion of his dead-pan announcement to the football players and staff before an important game that he was going to replace the usual pregame steak breakfast with an intravenous meal of cabbage soup. This is hard to believe now, but apparently the proposal was convincing enough so that some alarmed parents called the higher authorities of the university to find out what kind of foolishness that crazy doctor was up to now.

Upon retirement from the university, Alex joined the staff of the emergency department of the Tompkins Community Hospital and provided a valuable service to the community in this role for three years. He then filled the position as medical director of the Reconstruction Home until 1989.

Alex was a delightful and remarkable man. An absolutely straight shooter. Crusty but tender. Serious but with a light touch. Dedicated but with a broad perspective. A most natural and complete physician, who established an instant rapport with his patients, whether they were sturdy athletes or frightened young women or frail and confused senior citizens.

He leaves behind his wife, Addie, whom he met on a golf course fifty years ago and married shortly thereafter; his son, Alexander, of Trumansburg; two daughters, Priscilla Rachun Linn, of Arlington, Virginia and Elizabeth Maria Rachun, of Ames, Iowa; a brother; two sisters; five grandchildren; and numerous nieces and nephews. He also leaves behind a host of neighborhood children, for whom he was a favorite and most revered story teller.

*Norman S. Moore, W. Jack Lewis, Allyn B. Ley*