



You Will NOT Quit!

The True-Life Story of a Diabetic
with Determination.

Edited by Jack Crager

As an elite triathlete and a member of the sport's U.S. National Team, Jay Hewitt competes in more than half a dozen demanding swimming/biking/running endurance races a year. Each time out, he wears a band on his ankle that identifies him as a type 1 diabetic. Underneath that label on the band is Hewitt's motto: "You will not quit."

It's a creed he relies on while enduring Ironman triathlon distances: a 2.5-mile swim and 112-mile bicycle ride, topped off by a 26.2-mile marathon run. (Ironman events are the longest of triathlons, which vary in distance.) Hewitt completed his personal-best Ironman in 9 hours 47 minutes in November 2004 in Panama City, Florida, where he placed 96th out of 2,116 racers and 21st in his age group. "I race Ironmans to prove that diabetes cannot stop me from achieving my goals," says Hewitt, 38, of Greenville, North Carolina. "I am honored if I inspire others to overcome any obstacle to achieve their dreams."

There was a time when Hewitt's Type-Achievement attitude may have helped lead him to trouble. He was diagnosed

with type 1 diabetes in 1991, when he was 24 and in his first year of law school, after what he calls "an absolutely normal adolescence and early adulthood." With no family history of diabetes, he was surprised at the diagnosis, which came after a wintertime period of illness, fatigue, and finally hospitalization. Hewitt has never had a full explanation for the source of his diabetes, but his own theory is that it was brought on by stress. "I was working hard in my first year of law school, which was psychological warfare, and I probably developed some kind of virus during that winter," he says. "With diabetes, your immune system can attack the eyelet cells in your pancreas. After you get a virus, it's a case of a malfunction in the immune system so that it kills the wrong cells. I think that's what happened to me."

Now he lives with the disease vigilantly, checking his blood sugar ten times a day, maintaining a healthy diet, and injecting insulin about five to seven times daily. "I honestly don't remember what it's like to live without diabetes. It's a part of my life," he says. "But I think from the very beginning I wanted to try to live like a non-

diabetic. That means I wanted to live not in denial but in determination: to live so that my body doesn't know it's diabetic, by keeping my blood sugar as normal as I can. I work to keep it in check. And then racing is just part of my personality—I really love the challenge."

Hewitt says the aerobic training that accompanies his racing has helped him maintain his glucose levels. "Exercise gets your metabolism up and your circulation going and helps you keep your blood-sugar in check. For anyone, it's great for your heart. Blood is a life-carrying substance and also a cleansing substance."

But he acknowledges that his level of exercise is extreme. "I wouldn't recommend this for every diabetic," he says with a laugh. "For most people, I say, get up and go for a walk. Jog if you can. Ride your bike. Swim. You don't have to run marathons—just get some activity. That will also help you burn the glucose in your system that your insulin is waiting to transfer into your muscles."

At age 33, he ran his first marathon as a fund-raiser for the ADA at Kona, Hawaii, which is also the site of the U.S. Ironman Triathlon Championships. His successful 26.2-mile debut on that gorgeous route inspired him to take up the triathlon.

Hewitt's ability to compete, of course, is complicated by his condition. "I have to accept the fact that my body is not going to be as predictable as a non-diabetic's body would be," he says. "Endurance events have a direct impact on your blood-sugar level, and fluctuations in blood sugar can really affect your performance. So when I'm training, I duplicate the conditions I expect in the race, in terms of what I consume, the climate,

everything that will affect blood sugar and hydration."

Managing type 1 diabetes for an athlete is a complicated formula, but most times Hewitt has found it. Although he carries an insulin pump in triathlon races just in case, he has never injected it during actual competition. He keeps a glucose meter on his bike and checks his blood sugar six times during a 10-hour race: right before the start, four times en route, and immediately after the finish. And he adjusts his fuel. After tough races in Sweden, Idaho and Wisconsin, he analyzed his diet and race-day intake, talked to experts, and came back for his best Ironman ever at Florida in late 2004.

"As a diabetic, you have to check your blood sugar often so you can see how it's affected by different foods. Some days it's not the food, it's who knows what? You can't explain it, and you have to accept that," he says. "Other days your glucose level is affected directly by what you've eaten and your activity level."

Hewitt tries to maximize both of those factors. He adds that athletic events are like a microcosm of the challenge of living. "I've had great joy and euphoria in a race and I've had total abject disappointment and misery," he says, "sometimes lying in a medical tent, other times having everything work and crossing the finish line and being absolutely fulfilled. You know, life is the same way: It's a long long day; there are a lot of events; some people are better at some events than you are and in other things you are better. And you have to keep your perseverance—whether you have diabetes, or don't have it, or have something else. It's an attitude you've got to take through life." ▲