

For Miami Dolphins quarterback Jay Cutler, type 1 diabetes is an opponent he battles daily

Steve Dorfman, The Palm Beach Post

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Allen Eyestone/The Palm Beach Post

Being a starting NFL quarterback – as Jay Cutler has been since 2006 – is arguably the most challenging position in professional sports.

But try doing it as a type 1 diabetic – as Cutler, 34, has been doing since being diagnosed with the disorder in 2008.

Playing professional sports with type 1 diabetes is not unheard of, but is exceedingly rare – especially in football. Cutler, who previously played for the Denver Broncos and Chicago Bears, is the only one among some 1,700 active NFL players who has been publicly identified as having the disease. Since 2002, there have been only two others.

So what challenges does having type 1 diabetes – an autoimmune disorder in which the pancreas stops producing insulin, the substance that regulates one’s blood sugar (glucose) level – pose for Cutler?

Among other things, he must now and for the rest of his life:

- Monitor his glucose level at least a half-dozen times daily and try to never let it get higher than 200 (it was 550 on the day he was diagnosed just before his 25th birthday) or drop lower than 60.
- Time everything, he eats and drinks with his insulin injections.
- Make adjustments based on the unpredictable nature of the disease – all while competing against the world’s most elite athletes

As he told the magazine Diabetes Health in 2014, “I had lived 25 years a certain way and suddenly had to start counting carbs. It’s a very personal disease, and people aren’t going to help you with it. You need to deal with it yourself. It’s a transition phase for me right now. I’m still in it.”

Fortunately for Cutler, he was not wholly unfamiliar with the disease prior to 2008. When he was in college at Vanderbilt, his quarterback coach Jimmy Kiser was a type 1 diabetic.

“There were times,” Cutler told DH, “when he would start talking off the wall stuff, and it wasn’t going anywhere, and all of us on the team knew it was time to bring Jimmy a Coke.”

Kiser gave Cutler some advice about timing his insulin shots, stressing that everybody’s response to insulin varies from day to day.

Della Matheson, the Director of Education at the Diabetes Research Institute at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine (and a type 1 diabetic herself), believes that Cutler’s ability to quickly process information on the football field has likely helped him in managing his diabetes.

“Everyone with Type 1 diabetes has to become adept at multi-factorial thinking,” she explained. “There are so many daily variables involved with managing this disease – and no two days are ever the same.”

Low-key by nature, Cutler downplays the challenges he faces. If his blood sugar ever drops too low while traveling or during a game, he says, “I always have a Snickers or Milky Way nearby to offset a low.”

He tries to enter games with his glucose level at 80 or 90 and knows drinking Gatorade can also bring it up if necessary. He checks his glucose level every time he returns to the Dolphins’ sideline.

But no matter how meticulous Cutler (and any type 1 diabetic) is with his food and drink intake and insulin injections, sometimes other factors – such as stress, activity level, hormones, illness, injury, etc. – can complicate matters.

“No matter how much you plan, type 1 diabetes can be unpredictable,” said Matheson. “The adrenaline of playing in a football game only makes it more so.”

Since being diagnosed, the publicity-shy Cutler – who is married to and has three children with former reality TV star Kristin Cavallari – has been an advocate for children and fellow athletes trying to compete while managing type 1 diabetes.

His Jay Cutler Foundation has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to help fund diabetes research and his youth clinics stress the importance of being proactive in dealing with the disease.

As he told Media Planet in 2015, “Diabetes isn’t a crutch or an anchor. It’s just another obstacle to manage and work around.”