

Diabetics Are Athletes Too

An Olympic gold medalist provides inspiration for our patients.

BY BEN PEARL, DPM AND GARY HALL, JR.

Diabetes and an athletic lifestyle are not mutually exclusive. Diabetics are tired of walking out of a podiatrist's office with a pair of prescribed shoes that look like Herman Munster's. They want a normal lifestyle. "Old school" doctors need to recognize that there are new and more appealing options for our patients. We must also take on the role of a coach for our patients who are athletes and those who need to become more like athletes. By helping our patients feel

more comfortable and enthusiastic about exercising, we help them reach their fitness goals and control their diabetes. High quality appealing footwear is an important component

portant message was that while additional requirements were necessary in properly managing diabetes, a person living with diabetes can compete equally with a non-diabetic. Some-

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Figure 1: Gary Hall Jr. was something of a nonconformist in the pool during his gold medaled Olympic career. These days, he makes waves on Capitol Hill for diabetes advocacy, and has made it his business to stay current with diabetes research.

in helping our diabetic athletes and helping our diabetic patients to become athletes. Diabetic advocate and Olympic swimmer Gary Hall, Jr. provides a firsthand account of the problem:

"For all the efforts of removing the stigma attached to living with diabetes, the unfortunate mark of diabetes remains apparent in prescribed footwear. I dedicated my life to proving that diabetes didn't have to stop individuals from accomplishing their dreams, whatever the dream was. For me it was swimming in the Olympics. When I won gold, I was able to help tear down that barrier (often viewed as liability) that separated people with diabetes from the rest of the pack. The im-

how, that message hasn't come through in shoe design. If you have diabetes you are asked to wear, let's face it, ugly shoes.

It's hard enough to get diabetes patients to comply with the call to exercise. Asking someone to slap on ugly shoes and exercise exacerbates that challenge. With a diabetes diagnosis, we are bombarded with the mantra, 'diet and exercise.' Regular exercise helps increase insulin sensitivity and lower blood glucose levels, but competitions have a dramatically different effect.

The stress associated with competition sends blood sugars soaring. Throw in endorphins and adrenaline and levels can reach dangerous and dizzying highs. My targeted blood sugar level before a major competition (last glucose test taken five to ten minutes prior) was around 140 to 150. I competed in the 50 meter freestyle; it typically took me 21 second to swim. I tested my blood sugar immediately after a competi-

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THE DIABETIC FOOT

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tion, and my levels were never less than the high 300's. This dramatic hike associated with game day is common for athletes, young and old, fast and not so fast, and is in stark contrast to the blood glucose effects of practice days.

I enjoy sharing with people that as a swimmer, about 60% of my training was done out of the pool. For any athlete living with diabetes, at any level, it is imperative to have a good pair of "trainers." Is it too much to ask that a good pair of diabetes-friendly sneakers be good-looking too?"

Fear

Fear has its place as a wake-up call in certain cases, but the unfamiliar will not help diabetic patients comply when it comes to equipment. How much of what we dispense is actually worn at home? It turns out that prescriptive shoes are only worn about 15% of the time in the home, according to research by David Armstrong, DPM. Appliances are only used about 25 % of the time.

In an uncertain fast-changing world, people are more comfortable with things that are familiar to them. In Martin Lindstrom's bestseller, "Buy-Ology," he attributes this phenomena to the ritualistic behavior that becomes attached to branding. It explains why people engage in tribal behaviors as well. His conclusion is that positive peer pressure and coming up with ritualistic hooks may be the key for less motivated diabetic would-be athletes. The World Fit program is an example of positive peer pressure in action. At its outset, it was targeting middle school kids with a monitored walking program to combat obesity. Olympic athletes are involved as positive role models, and Gary Hall, Jr. is one of the principal organizers. The unexpected benefit was that adults started participating in the program as well because of their kids. What happened here? In one sense, a subculture was created. If we look at how strong that sub-culture can reinforce branding (think about a loyal legion of Harley David-

son riders), it may help us understand how we can create a sub-culture of diabetics as athletes instead of passive patients.

A Clockwork Orange and Compliance

The brutal movie A Clockwork Orange explored how we are wired to do certain things like clockwork without consciously thinking about

them and the limits to which behaviors can be conditioned. Conditioning and association can be so powerful that it they can even affect our memory. There was a study done where people were able to remember a series of playing cards that had normal colors and symbols better than a deck that had a reversed color scheme (red spades, black hearts, etc.) This helps explains why it can be so difficult to change behaviors to new ones when they are completely unfamiliar.

Our routines are also wired. David Armstrong, DPM has reported that "take-off and landing" shearing is the most destructive factor in ulcer formation (he uses the analogy of the most dangerous periods for an airline flight being takeoff and landing). Thus if we can change routines to reduce the number of start and stops, we can improve ulcer healing outcomes. If the routine is to get up and change the channel on the TV because the remote has a dead battery, a series of such routines can profoundly affect an outcome. When I related this research to a patient of mine who was having difficulty closing an ulcer, he began wearing a pedometer to count his steps. At the next visit, the ulcer was closed. To that end, solutions that deal with that take-off/landing shearing would be something vendors could focus on in addition to our patients' lifestyle change.

Merging an Athletic Lifestyle for Diabetics with Technology in Training

Using more appealing athletic equipment may seem like a small thing; however, along with developing exercise networks with peer and family connections, it will be the tipping point to establish an athletic lifestyle. Gary Hall, Jr. recognized the importance of his own training style and being close

Olympic athletes are involved as positive role models, and Gary Hall, Jr., a former Olympic swimmer, is one of the principal organizers.

to family networks in his competition and outside the pool in his daily life. He succeeded on his own, and that made the rigors of training more sustainable. If this attitude can be developed in our patients' minds, it will change everything. **PM**

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Gary Hall, Jr. is a three-time Olympian and a diabetes advocate who has testified on Capitol Hill. He currently is the director of business development at B2D Marketing. The Seattle-based company exclusively represents a medical distribution network in China that services over 6,335 hospitals and health clinics. www.b2dmarketing.com.