

Diabetes not sidelining young Middletown athlete: Appoquinimink soccer star, 17, achieving goals regardless of diagnosis

baytobaynews.com/stories/diabetes-not-sidelining-young-middletown-athlete-appoquinimink-soccer-star-17-achieving-goals,97103

By Matt McDonald

BAY TO BAY NEWS

Member Exclusive

SPECIAL REPORT: DIABETES IN DELAWARE



SUBMITTED PHOTO/Yasim Brisbane

Posted Tuesday, December 20, 2022 8:01 am

By Matt McDonald

MIDDLETOWN — T.J. Hastings, 17, plays soccer at Appoquinimink High School and recently received regional All-American honors from the U.S. Collegiate Athletic Association. Next year, he'll be playing for the University of Virginia on a partial scholarship.

On the weekends he isn't on the soccer pitch, T.J., a 6-foot-1 Middletown native with a crop of wavy brown hair, can usually be found on the green instead, as golf is a favorite hobby. T.J. also enjoys the beach and hanging out with friends. When he visits their homes, they often have candy set aside for him, just in case.

That's because of one other facet of the teen's life: He has diabetes.

He was diagnosed in May 2020.

"For, like, a month, I just wasn't feeling right," T.J. said. "I had to pee, like, a lot. I was drinking like 10 bottles of water a day. I just didn't feel like myself."

He eventually got his blood sugar (or glucose) tested, and it was high. Right around his 15th birthday, he went to the hospital and found out he has Type 1 diabetes.

The disease, which used to be referred to as juvenile diabetes, can be developed by people of all ages. It is a condition where a person's pancreas produces little to no insulin. Insulin is an important hormone, as it allows the body to turn glucose broken down from carbohydrates

into energy.

Type 1 diabetes is thought to be caused by an autoimmune reaction that damages the pancreas. Having certain genes can make a person more likely to develop the illness, while certain environmental factors, like a virus, could also play a role.

While at the hospital, T.J. was shocked by the diagnosis. But staff explained diabetes to him and offered advice on how he could manage it.

“I was really scared at first,” he said. “I was, like, stressed out. I didn’t know what to do with myself. It was a lot to take in.”

He is thankful his mom, Aimee Hastings, a nurse in the Appoquinimink School District, has been consistently there for him.

With her help, he had to get used to taking shots all the time and being constantly cognizant of his blood sugar levels.

“If he takes insulin and doesn’t eat, that affects it. What he eats affects it,” Ms. Hastings said.

Two years on, the regimen has gotten less difficult.

“I’ve gotten better at it,” T.J. said. “Now, it’s still a struggle, but it’s much easier.”

Before eating each meal, he needs to receive the right amount of insulin to cover the amount of carbs he will eat. That usually means looking up nutritional information on the internet and doing the math from there.

If the math is off, he has to correct his blood sugar levels. If his blood sugar is too high, it can be managed with more insulin.

But a low blood sugar level could be deadly if left untreated.

Fortunately, T.J. wears a glucose monitor manufactured by DexCom Inc., which makes his condition significantly more manageable. The device measures his blood sugar every five seconds, sending the data to his and his parents’ phones. He also uses an insulin pump, which saves him from having to inject the metabolism-regulating hormone.

Because exercise can affect glucose levels, diabetes presents additional challenges to athletes. However, T.J. said his monitoring device has proved invaluable during games.

For example, if his blood sugar level trends too high during a match, it can affect his performance, causing muscle cramps and fatigue.

When that happens, his monitor can tell his insulin pump to bring his glucose level down. Conversely, if the level starts to fall too low, his parents will be alerted, and they can notify T.J.

“During games, my parents can check my sugars even though I’m not on my phone, and I’m playing. So, if they see a bad trend, like my blood sugar’s dropping, they can say, ‘Hey, T.J., eat some candy real quick,’” he said.

One especially frustrating thing about living with diabetes, he added, is just how much control insurance companies can have over his day-to-day life. Recently, a component of his monitoring device failed, but because the equipment is supposed to last three months, his insurance wouldn’t provide another one right away.

“It was pretty scary,” T.J. said. “You’re just looking at the possibilities, like, ‘I’m going have to go back to the fingerstick,’” referring to the method of measuring glucose that requires drawing blood.

There has been one bright side, though.

The same year as his diagnosis, T.J. started attending Diabetes Training Camp, a program primarily for adult and teen athletes with Type 1 diabetes. In 2022, he became one of its teen ambassadors, mentoring others through some of the same trials he has experienced.

He recently gave advice to a young soccer player, whose blood sugar levels were going low during athletic activity.

“I’ve enjoyed helping the kids,” T.J. said. “I’m always there for them if they need to ask any questions.”

And, while he was a little reticent to tout his accomplishments, his mom was quick to share them.

On top of his All-American honors, he was also the Elite Club National League’s Northeast Conference Player of the Year for his age group in 2021, Ms. Hastings said.

“Living with diabetes is difficult, and the way that he has handled it has just been so amazing to watch,” she said. “He has a gift that he can take to others and make something good out of this ... and help others thrive.”

Even though, at one point, T.J. briefly feared he might have to give up soccer, his goal now is to go pro.

“At college, I’m going to give it my all, and hopefully, I have that chance,” he said.

His message of positivity for anyone living with the disease:

“Diabetes is hard. Like, it’s hard. It’s a struggle at first, ... but you can live with it.”

Members and subscribers make this story possible.

[You can help support non-partisan, community journalism.](#)