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# diabetic

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U.S. Swimmer Gary Hall Jr.



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# Champion for Diabetes

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by JULIA MARTINUSEN

When Gary Hall Jr. splashed his way to an Olympic gold medal in Athens last fall, the olive laurel wreath crowned him as the fastest swimmer in the world for a second time. He'd won the 50-meter freestyle event, in Sydney in 2000, just a year and a half after being diagnosed with type 1 diabetes.

Repeating an Olympic gold medal performance is a remarkable feat for any athlete, but it's particularly amazing for someone with type 1 diabetes. "Winning the gold is more than the dream of a lifetime coming true. And realizing you're the best in the world when you've dedicated your life to something is very humbling—with or without diabetes," says Gary. "Having diabetes does affect me, but it isn't an excuse. It just means making some sacrifices along the way."





### **Filling Big Flippers**

Gary did not set out to be an Olympic swimmer, even though the branches of his family tree bowed in that direction. His grandfather, his father, and his uncle had all competed on the United States Olympic swimming team. In fact, Gary and his father, Gary Hall Sr., are the only father-son duo to have each competed in three Olympic Games.

Gary admits, "Swimming is something I've always loved, but I was reluctant to start swimming competitively because I felt I had some pretty big flippers to fill. When I finally joined the swim team at the ripe old age of 13, I was the worst one." He remembers his first meet as a high school freshman. "I was going to swim the backstroke but hit my head on the bottom of the pool. That was the last backstroke race I ever swam." Gary persisted, worked hard, and eventually wound up with a full swimming scholarship at the

University of Texas. When he was a sophomore, he qualified for the 1994 National Swim Team, which led him to the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta.

### **The Quest for the Gold**

In Atlanta, Gary earned a silver medal in the 50-meter freestyle event and resolved to fight his way to the top in 2000. But in March 1999, as he was training for Sydney, he noticed something wasn't right. He attributed his extreme thirst and fatigue to the heat, until he collapsed. The unexpected diagnosis of type 1 diabetes meant that Gary needed to reevaluate his future. "Swimming was not just my job and my livelihood; it was part of my identity. And here were doctors telling me my swimming career was over, that I could just give up my dream of going to the Olympics."

As Gary was dealing with the depression that often hits people newly diagnosed with diabetes,

his girlfriend, Elizabeth (who is now his wife), began bringing him armloads of information. "I soon realized that educating myself was crucial to accepting diabetes," he says. "I could run from it, but not very far."

While Gary was evaluating his future, his father, the former-Olympic-swimmer-turned-eye-doctor, discovered Dr. Anne Peters, an endocrinologist specializing in diabetes. She helped Gary formulate a game plan to manage his diabetes, and also encouraged him to keep swimming competitively. "Anne never let me use diabetes as an excuse, nor did I want to. I'm willing to do what I need to do to manage my diabetes because I think the sacrifice is pretty small. At the same time, I'd trade in my gold medals for a cure."

With Anne's help, Gary not only returned to win the gold in the 2000 Olympics, he stayed on top of his training to win again in the 2004 Olympics in Athens.

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“I would trade in my Olympic Gold medals for a cure.”

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—Gary Hall Jr.

### **Training and Timing**

When Gary is at the peak of his training for Olympic competition, he's working out for five to eight hours a day. His demanding schedule includes not only miles of swimming but also weight training, boxing, sprint running, and even deep-sea diving. "The diving is good hypoxic work. It really helps my breathing," he says. But throughout his workouts, Gary has to be conscious of his diabetes. "I'll get out of the water every 45 minutes or so to test my glucose levels," he says. "It's a lot of trial and error, but I'm learning my limits." To him, the sky seems to be the limit. He's planning to compete in the 2008 Olympics. At age 33, he'll be the oldest American Olympic swimmer ever!

But even if he weren't competing, Gary would still be swimming, because he loves it. "You don't have to be an Olympian to enjoy exercise, and physical activity is so important in preventing or controlling diabetes. The key is finding what you like to do," he says.

### **The Training Table**

Learning how to balance the number of calories he needed for Olympic-level training with the restrictions of diabetes was one of the most difficult challenges for Gary. He admits, "I was so into junk foods before being diagnosed, but now the foods that I used to like don't make me feel so good."

Elizabeth was instrumental in finding foods that she and Gary could enjoy together. She says, "I've learned there is so much you can use for seasoning that you don't need sugar, like citrus juices and caramelized onions."

At home, Elizabeth cooks with vegetables, fish, and low-fat dairy products. One of his favorite dinners is a low-fat moussaka that she makes with yogurt and ricotta cheese.

### **Swimming with a Cause**

After competing in the Olympics with diabetes, Gary realized he could help others who had diabetes. "I figured if I could be successful, I could make having diabetes less scary for kids. Since the 2000 Olympics, so many parents have told me their diabetic kids are not only swimming, they're playing soccer or volleyball or studying ballet."

Until the 2008 Olympics, Gary has a busy agenda. He speaks at diabetes fund-raisers across the country and has started his own. His annual Circle of Champions brunch features a sports hero.

He's also a member of the Diabetes Dream Team—a team of specialists who help people with diabetes realize their dreams and goals. He says, "The team approach in diabetes is very much like the team approach in swimming. At the pool, I have a strength trainer, a swimming coach, a nutritionist, and so on. In diabetes, there are dietitians, endocrinologists, nurses, and others. All those people help you get to the starting block. But once you're on the block, it all comes down to you."

One exciting new venture for Gary debuts on CNBC this month. He's the exercise and sports correspondent for *dLifeTV*, a weekly television show that focuses on how people with diabetes can improve their lives through exercise, cooking, and other lifestyle choices.

And in the midst of the fund-raising, working on the dream team, and filming, Gary will be getting ready to take another plunge—from the starting block and into the pool, with an eye on the gold in the 2008 Olympics.

**(coming soon...)**

You'll learn even more exercise and sports tips from Gary Hall Jr. if you tune into *dLife TV*, a new television series that focuses on health-care news and information for people with diabetes, Gary is the exercise and sports correspondent for the 30-minute program. Watch for him on the show, which is scheduled to air on Sundays at 7 p.m. EST on CNBC, beginning on March 20.