

# Diabetic Ironman Athlete Jay Hewitt Turns Lemons Into Lemonade

By Sara Thompson

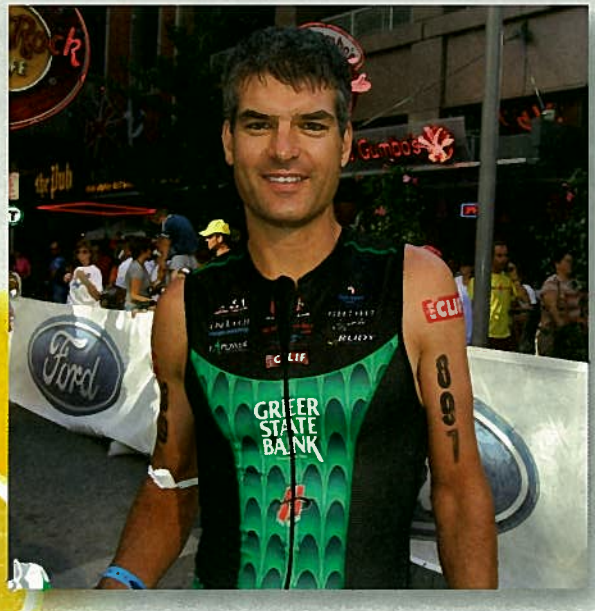
South Carolina native Jay Hewitt wears many hats – husband, attorney, motivational speaker, new father and world-class athlete. Since 1991, he's also been coping with type 1 diabetes. Hewitt, 40, was diagnosed with insulin-dependent diabetes at age 24, but he hasn't let it keep him from success. Since then, he's made tremendous positive lifestyle changes and continually practices turning failures into successes.

"This type of diabetes doesn't care who you are; it doesn't care if you get mad at it or ignore it," Hewitt says. A few years after his diagnosis, he decided to prove that diabetes wasn't going to beat him. In 1999, without a deep history of athleticism – high school varsity basketball but no collegiate sports – Hewitt started training for his first marathon in Kona, Hawaii. The race "was hot, miserable and excruciating, but I was ecstatic," he remembers. "I stomped on diabetes for 26 miles." The experience would propel Hewitt into a new phase of training for triathlons, Olympic distance races, half Ironman events and full Ironman events.

Anyone who participates in long-distance racing of any kind knows how critical nutrition is to a solid program. A person with diabetes has to contend with blood sugar that fluctuates wildly during events, as adrenaline triggers a rise in blood sugar and the body burns vast amounts of calories. Hewitt must be vigilant about nutrition both before and during a race. "I eat the same stuff as other athletes," he says, including Clif Bars, gels, NutriSoda and sports drinks.

Hewitt's nutrition and training program looks a lot like other Ironman athletes' programs, except that Hewitt must be extra-careful about insulin levels. During events, he must manage his blood sugar as well as stay focused on the race. Hewitt's body doesn't automatically regulate itself, as does the body of someone who doesn't have diabetes. He's learned how to navigate the ups and downs in blood sugar during competitions, but it isn't an exact science.

"I have to estimate how much insulin to take based on what and when I eat." Injecting too soon means the insulin peaks



before the digested food sugars (called glucose) reach the blood stream. Injecting too late means blood glucose levels can get too high. "It's a juggling act," Hewitt says.

The key difference in diabetic athletes and non-diabetic athletes is blood sugar regulation. To help keep insulin levels steady, Hewitt uses an Insulet OmniPod insulin delivery system. The two-piece system includes an adhesive pod full of insulin and a hand-held wireless remote, which allow you to program your insulin injections and give yourself a dose when necessary. He must also carry a spare pod of insulin, plus supplies to keep the insulin cool – all in addition to the equipment needed for the race itself such as spare bike tires, clothing and food.

Hewitt has participated in 13 full Ironman events, including the 2007 qualifying event in Louisville. After swimming 2.4 miles, biking 112 miles and barely reaching the eight-mile mark of the run, severe dehydration and hypoglycemia took their toll, and Hewitt bowed out. "You have good days, and you have bad days," he says.

Hewitt takes the saying about lemons and lemonade to the extreme. He's used diabetes as a positive motivating force in his life by training for events and using those lessons learned in his everyday life. Through speaking engagements, Hewitt is able to share his experiences with audiences everywhere.

"Everybody is dealing with something – some burden," he says. "It might be greater than the next guy's or it might be less, but the key is to turn those bad things that happen to you into the best things."

Learn more about Hewitt and his work and life at [www.JayHewitt.com](http://www.JayHewitt.com).

*Sara Thompson is a local writer. Her favorite exercise is ballroom dancing with her husband.*