

SWIMMER PROFILE: Eran Lotan

By
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If you have been to a Georgia area swim meet over the past eight years, you have probably seen Eran Lotan on deck hanging out with his buddy, Ray Valle. He's the tall, friendly guy with the big smile; although, I didn't realize the "friendly" part until I met him at the Chastain Park meet, last October. I'm on the Atlanta Water Jocks with those two guys, so I asked them if they wanted to swim relays together. After the meet, I regretted letting all those years go by without introducing myself to them before. I'm proud to be their teammates. You will learn more about Ray in a future profile, but first, I would like for you to meet Eran.

Since I had heard him speaking Spanish on deck, I had assumed Eran was from Mexico. What I

learned during our Zoom interview was a huge surprise! First, Eran's name is pronounced **Er-ON**. His Jewish mother was born and raised in Israel, and his Jewish father was born and raised in Argentina. Eran's father moved to Israel and lived on the same kibbutz as Eran's mother, they started dating, and then married. Eran was born in Israel, but the family moved to Mexico to start their professional careers, so he attended elementary school there. When his parents divorced, Eran went back to Israel where he attended middle school. Later, Eran's father returned to Argentina and invited Eran to live with him. This is where Eran attended college and started his college basketball career for five years. He then married an Argentinian woman, and they later moved to Mexico for his job with Hasboro, building a successful business there. In 2009, the company offered him a job in the U.S.A. where he has lived ever since.

As it turns out, Eran not only speaks Spanish and English, but he also speaks Hebrew, and we share the same ancestry. We are both Ashkenazi Jews with our roots in Russia and Poland. Who knows? Perhaps we are even related! We definitely share physical issues that are related to our Ashkenazi roots.

Asked about his swimming background, Eran said, "I started to swim when I was three years old. My grandfather threw me in the pool and said, 'Swim!' So, I started to swim very young. When I was about 13 or 14 years old, I was very tall, so I played high school and college basketball."

When Eran was 28, he had sustained basketball injuries that his doctor said required surgery; however, Eran opted to take a pass on any operations and return to swimming. He has been swimming ever since, and he is now 52.

“In every country I had lived, I had joined Masters. In Mexico, for example, I have a bronze medal for third place at Nationals. In Argentina, I have eight gold medals for a regional championship. Back in 2001, 2002, they selected me to represent Argentina internationally, because we were the fastest. I have always been a sprinter; free and fly, that’s it... Later, I came to the U.S. in 2009 and I started to swim for [U.S. Masters].”

Unfortunately, there was a two-year period when Eran had to quit swimming due to illness. As Eran explained, “I got 11 diseases in six months. I spent one year in Northside Hospital (going through testing and appointments, Monday – Friday). Later, I spent another year at Emory (seeing specialists), and then 3 months at the Mayo Clinic in Florida. (The specialists at Emory were unable to help Eran, so they referred him to Mayo.) They were unable to determine why he acquired so many diseases at one time and told him he had an “immune system blow out.” “I was really very, very upset, because I couldn’t work for 2-1/2 years...” he lamented.

The diseases and conditions Eran acquired include Type 1 diabetes (more on that later), asthma, psoriatic arthritis, fibromyalgia, peripheral neuropathy, thyroid disease, heart arrhythmia, high blood pressure, and others. He also got tuberculosis when he was in the hospital. At one point, Eran had temporarily lost his vision, and he was on crutches for six months due to the neuropathy in his legs. Between the time spent undergoing tests and treatments, enduring the pain of his symptoms, having to take a lot of medication (and almost losing his liver because of it), not being able to work, and having to depend on his father’s help as well as his family; this was a very dark period in Eran’s life.

On top of all that, after recovering and getting back on his feet again, Eran was hit by a car while riding his bicycle, which resulted in a fracture and dislocated shoulder. It took 9 months of healing before Eran was finally able to return to the pool. In all, he was out of swimming for nearly four years.

The process of healing from his diseases and injuries was difficult, but Eran took control. After he had left the Mayo Clinic without the answers he needed, Eran said, “I was really so upset, so I said I am going to take my health in my hands. That’s what I teach my kids; you are your best doctor of all.”

First, he consulted a nutritionist on how to properly eat to manage his Type 1 diabetes, which, he says, is very aggressive. (Type 1 diabetes is an autoimmune condition that can develop suddenly and may be caused by genetics and other unknown factors. Although onset is usually in childhood, roughly 10% of Type 1 diabetes cases are acquired over the age of 65. Eran was

diagnosed at the age of 42. “That’s why they sent me to the Mayo Clinic, because that’s not normal,” he remarked.

“It took me 2-3 years to learn [about] the disease. Diabetes is a very complicated disease. You need to measure how many hours you sleep; you need to measure everything you eat, the stress—everything. It was very hard. I couldn’t train for 2-3 years, because I didn’t know how to handle it,” Eran explained, adding that his glucose levels can swing to the extremes very quickly. When he tried to return to swimming, he said, “I was very dizzy. When I did the flip turns, I almost smacked my head to the bottom.” Eran learned from his nutritionist when he should eat protein and carbohydrates. It was a difficult balance, because he had to cut back on carbohydrates to maintain his glucose levels; however, he needed carbohydrates to fuel his workouts. “It took me 2-3 years to handle the disease in order to get back to the pool and build my training. Even today, my friends always laugh, because every time I come to the pool I have my Coca Cola, my juice; I have a lot of things—I have my [insulin] injection next to me when I swim, because you never know... I have a lot of extra protection next to the pool, and I learned that if I want to swim, I need to have them there.” Eran has taught his training partner, Ray, how to give him his insulin injection and/or other medications if Eran blacks out and is unable to administer them himself.

Since regaining control of his diseases, Eran has been working hard towards his goal of winning gold medals again. This year, he will be competing in the World Masters Pan-American Games, USMS Nationals, and a competition in Mexico. “I would also like to go to Argentina to bring back the gold.”

To prepare for competition, Eran swims for two hours per session, averaging 4-5000 yards, Monday thru Saturday, each week. Half of his yardage is spent concentrating on working his upper body, and the other half is dedicated to working his legs with fins and a water parachute. He also returns to the gym in the afternoon, 3-4 days per week, to lift weights and work his core. “Sunday is my vacation,” he added.

Monitoring glucose levels is crucial for a diabetic, so Eran wears a diabetes adhesive arm patch that continuously monitors his glucose levels. “Every meet that I go to and prepare to jump [off the blocks, the referees see the patch] and say, ‘So, you have Diabetes Type 1? What are you doing here?’ I say, why not?” Eran wants other swimmers with disabilities to know that they shouldn’t let their disabilities stop them from swimming. “There are people that have asthma [or other diseases]. I tell them, look, all [those diseases]; I have [them]. Listen, watch me; I go and compete. I use that as an example, because I have all those diseases. Sometimes, when [my diseases] come together and grab me, it’s very difficult; I have hard days. What I learned with the mind is that you can always keep moving. [I say to myself,] ‘You will not do 4,000 (yards) today, but you can get in the pool and do 2,000.’”

“I don’t let the diseases take possession of me,” says the determined swimmer. Eran’s positive mindset and dedication to his health, as an athlete with Type 1 diabetes, resulted in him being asked to give motivational speeches. “2018 was my first motivational speech that I did in front of 1,000 kids and 60 teachers [at my kids’ school]. The principal was very amazed at my story. That was one of the most amazing things that I have done in my life... The day after I did the speaking, the principal called me and said, ‘Eran, can you come to the school? I have something for you. I told her that I didn’t want anything, [but she said I needed to come.] She came with a big box and said, ‘Open it.’ There were 200 letters from the kids!” he said, proudly.

Eran continued being called to speak and was asked by the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation (www.jdrf.com) if he could give speeches in English as well as Spanish. “My work/task with them is to motivate people across the globe with diabetes to come and swim. I also explain, based on my personal experience, how even with such a complicated disease, you can keep moving forward in life and chase your dreams... When I give my speeches, I tell them, ‘Look, don’t let the disease handle you, you need to handle *it*.’ Eran resolved to not give in to diabetes and his other diseases, because he never again would want to experience the depression and pain that he battled when he first became ill. “It was very bad for many years, until one day I woke up and said, ‘No. I have four kids, I’m young, I really want to live, I want to choose my dreams... I still have dreams to fill.”

This past summer, at the Jewish Community Center, Eran spoke at a conference for parents and children with Type 1 diabetes, and then followed it up with swim lessons in the pool. In March, Eran, along with other athletes, will be speaking at another conference, in New York that is sponsored by JDRF.

Another project is in the works as well. As Eran explained, “Now, I am working with them to do a program that’s called, ‘Diabetes is my Friend,’ along with Univision, the TV channel, to help the diabetic community. I really like to get involved with that, because I really like to help people.”

“I really want to get more involved, because I feel very bad for the people. When my daughter got diagnosed [with Type 1 Diabetes], I went to the family [JDRF] meetings with many kids,” he said, adding that it was difficult to see the parents suffering along with their children.

Eran explained that doctors are not giving their patients enough information about managing Type 1 diabetes. The care ends after the prescriptions for medications are written. JDRF fills in those gaps, providing information and support—something Eran feels strongly about, and the reason he is passionate about representing the organization and doing the TV show.

Although Eran never thought he could return to his previous level of swimming after the diagnoses of his disease or the nine-month recovery from getting hit on his bicycle, Eran swam his fastest 50 free at the age of 45. At the 2017 Atlanta Rainbow Trout SCY Meet at Georgia

Tech, his time was 23:82. This ranked him at #47 of 440 in his age group and inspired him to keep swimming, work hard, and try to achieve more. It was also his favorite Masters memory, because doctors told him he wouldn't be able race any longer, and this proved them wrong. "For me, it was remarkable."

Those fast swims inspired Eran to set future swimming goals. "I'm trying to break records. I want to be the first Diabetic Type 1 to reach the [high] goals... I want to get gold medals; I'm chasing recognition... I love to swim, but I love to compete. Competing is my main thing. I cannot just swim for fun. I'm not built that way... Every sport that I do, I am always competitive. In swimming, I know that I have the skills, I still have the power, and my body still responds; so, I am trying to chase as many records as I can. But, most important, to get this recognition that a Type 1 Diabetic can reach to that higher level," the motivated swimmer explained.

It's not just the records and recognition that keeps Eran returning to the pool. It's his passion. "Once I'm into the water, it's my world. I love to be in the water... Swimming is a good way to find out which are the dreams you want to chase. It's a good way to know yourself. It helps a lot to know yourself... It helps me to find the best in me, and to bring it [out]."

Eran's advice to others with diseases and/or disabilities who may be reluctant to swim is this: "Tell me one sport that can mentally and physically get [you] relaxed, other than swimming. Besides, swimming is a very easy sport on the body..."

As for swimming in Masters, specifically, he's hooked. "The community, the friendship, the people, the gathering; I love that. It's a really nice environment."