

Family support for league star 'living with diabetes'

Video shots show Brisbane Broncos player Steve Renouf bursting tackles to score yet another try, with a jingle "Hi, now you're an all-star..." Delegates at the IDF Western Pacific Region Congress in Wellington were enthralled to see this athlete move to pulsating music.

Steve and his wife Elissa Renouf, parents of five children – four boys and a girl aged between 15 and 6 – were at the Congress to share their story. Steve, now 37, having retired as a professional league player some five years ago, has Type 1 diabetes, as do three of their children.



Steven Renouf is considered one of the best centres in the history of rugby league. He holds numerous records for the Brisbane Broncos club and arguably is one of the greatest footballers to have played for it.

After spending 12 years with Brisbane, he played for the Wigan Warriors in the English Super League

for two seasons before retiring from the top level of rugby league competition. In 2000 Steve was awarded the Australian Sports Medal for his contribution to Australia's international standing in rugby league.

Steve has a trade as an electrician and has also worked in sales and marketing. He currently works for the Queensland State Government as Indigenous Sport Ambassador.

In February 2006, a biography *The Pearl: Steve Renouf's Story* was released, detailing his career as a rugby league player. It also covers his early life, including his family heritage and his childhood in the Queensland town of Murgon, but also portrays how he, as an Aboriginal, had to overcome prejudice from people around him.

Steve tells how he was able to sustain his long playing career with diabetes. He signed with the Broncos at 17, making his debut in the first grade side in 1989, playing 4½ seasons before being diagnosed in 1993 with Type 1 diabetes at age 22, not long after their first child Sam was born.

In 1992 Steve was having one of the best playing years of his life representing the Broncos, Queensland and Australia.

"Before I was diagnosed in 1993 we (Queensland) had won the Winfield Cup and I had played for Australia at Wembley Stadium and in the World Cup Challenge. Within weeks we had won everything that could be won."

Returning home from England after the three-week World Cup tour and World Club Challenge game he started losing weight, was very thirsty and had an infection in a wound after an operation.

Getting back to training in the off-season he was initially happy to lose 8kg until he found he couldn't lift weights.

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Steve took up the challenge. "It was a personal attitude thing. I could let it beat me ... or get on top of it and keep playing. I took up the latter... it's something (diabetes) you can live with."

He went on to play in four winning grand league finals, nine tests for Australia, including one super league test, and 11 State of Origin games for Queensland. He retired from playing in the National Rugby League competition in 1999 after signing a two-year deal with English club Wigan Warriors.

He made his test debut for Australia on the 1993 tour of New Zealand when he replaced the suspended Australian captain Mal Meninga. Injury meant Steve played only one of the tests against New Zealand in 1993, but he bounced back to score three tries in the one-off test against the touring French side.

By keeping tight control of his blood glucose levels through diet and insulin injections he was able to achieve his goals, and survive many bone-crunching tackles along the way.

Steve believes his attitude, the ongoing support of Elissa, and the involvement of all members of his cohesive family unit have been critical factors in his being able to sustain such a long and successful playing career.

Important too was acceptance of his condition by his mates. "I thought, how do I handle it with the team?"

We were spending a lot of the time on the road, travelling everywhere together, so I decided to let them know.

"The guys were great. It's important for them to know there is someone with diabetes. And there comes a time too when you might need them (to help)."

Steve and Elissa went on to have another two children Billy and Sunita. Elissa recalls that when Sunita was 6 months old, she (Elissa) developed Graves Disease (over-active thyroid) which also is an auto-immune condition.

"I treat this with tablets which keep my levels under control. We often wondered whether the children had a risk of getting one of the diseases but were told that they had only about 5% chance."

Steve and Elissa had another two children Charlie and Freddie. All the children seemed healthy until May 2002.

Just after Charlie's third birthday one night when he was going to bed he asked his mother to fill a drink bottle with water. The first thing he asked for when he woke the next morning was for her to fill the drink bottle again.

"As we had tested the children on Steve's meter every now and then and they were all fine, I was not really alarmed but asked him if I could test him on Daddy's tester.





Steve with eldest son Sam.

"He didn't want to do this so I thought that I would just test him when he went to sleep that night. When we did test him his level was 21mmol/L. We phoned the hospital and they asked that he be taken in right away."

Charlie started on insulin injections the next morning. "We were very lucky that we had knowledge about diabetes and diagnosed it before he got very ill."

"Charlie accepted the insulin injections and everything that goes with having diabetes very well. We put this down to the fact that he had always seen Steve do everything so it wasn't as scary as it is for children who have never seen the needles before."

By early January 2003 Elissa and Steve felt they had everything under control with Charlie's diabetes but then noticed Billy, 8½ years old at the time, was showing symptoms of diabetes.

"We tested him all that day and by afternoon knew that he too had developed diabetes. He accepted this very well and already understood a lot about diabetes because of Charlie."

Billy was also diagnosed with coeliac disease in May 2003, which means he can't have any foods that contain gluten.

Over the next few months Elissa and Steve kept on testing the other children and by October 2003 noticed that Freddie, their youngest child, was showing early signs of diabetes.

Elissa found this a particularly hard time. "Freddie was

still producing insulin but this was slowly decreasing – why can't I stop this from happening?"

By March 2004 Freddie started on insulin injections just two months before his third birthday. "He also accepted this very well because he was going to be like Dad and his two other brothers." Freddie, like his brother Billy, went on to develop coeliac disease in November 2005.

Elissa says that throughout all challenges faced as a family they have tried to keep positive. "We don't blame anything on diabetes."

Their children with diabetes are learning to make choices, deciding for example whether to eat cake at certain times because this also involves an injection. "The 3-year-old will choose the cake and the needle," laughs Elissa.

At the Congress the Renoufs displayed a range of diabetic products which they developed to provide compact consumables for all people living with diabetes.

"As a lot of the diabetes companies are not living with diabetes on a day to day basis I feel that we have the knowledge and practical experience of what is needed to make our lives and yours just that little bit easier." ●

If you are concerned that a family member may have diabetes or is experiencing symptoms of diabetes please seek advice from your family doctor.

Article: Lance McEldowney, Editor *diabetes*