



Jack Perkins is back in action in V8 Supercars and successfully dealing with a condition that threatened to end his racing career.

Jack's back

At 20, Jack Perkins was living his dream as a professional driver in V8 Supercars. Then he found out he had Type 1 diabetes... By Liz Swanton

As the son of Bathurst legend, Larry Perkins, Jack Perkins had spent his life around race tracks and planned to continue... or so he thought. Given the fitness level he maintained for his driving, the nasty cold he had developed was niggling but didn't worry him too much. However, the constant thirst and trips to the bathroom that came with it did. When he also noticed some problems with his eyes

and that he was dropping weight from an already light physique, he decided it was time for a check-up. "The doctor told me I would never race again," says Jack, who had only recently 'graduated' to the main game of Australia's premier motorsport category when the diagnosis came. The problem was that the virus had shut down Jack's pancreas [see breakout box] causing type 1 diabetes

which, in simple terms, can lead to a blood glucose imbalance. Not keeping that under control can result in faintness, nausea, even blackouts – conditions that are not conducive to driving at speed or in a tightly-packed group. "Initially I wanted to keep quiet about it, but it just became such a load to bear that I

decided to tell people what was happening, get on top of things and then, hopefully, get back into the main game again." In November last year, Larry Perkins' Jack Daniel's Racing team announced that Jack would step down from his seat, making way for Marcus Marshall to finish the 2007 season and then, in 2008, Todd Kelly.

"Diabetes is a life sentence. You don't know what you've done to deserve it and when the doctor was standing there saying I would never be able to race again it was a huge shock."

"That was definitely the lowest point. Giving my drive away, watching someone else race my car was not easy. It might be the only opportunity I have to race in the main series but it had to be done. It was the right thing for the team." Before Jack could race again, he had to prove to CAMS that he had the condition under control. He has done that and returned to the Fujitsu series, but it hasn't been an easy ride. "Before we made the announcement, I really was struggling. Little things like going out for dinner and having to disappear to the toilet to give myself an injection of insulin, or trying to avoid explaining why you're not drinking soft drinks or eating ice cream or all those sorts of things. That's why I decided to get it out there, talk about it and get on with my life. "Diabetes is a life sentence. You don't know what you've done to deserve it and when the doctor was standing there saying I would never be able to race again, it was a huge shock. Initially I was just trying to deal with the idea of not driving again but then I thought 'I still have arms and legs and



Above: Coping with the step up to the V8SCS while suffering the effects of undiagnosed Type 1 diabetes made Perkins' '07 season with Jack Daniel's Racing a difficult one.
Right, left: Doctors told him he would never race again, but with a disciplined approach and a steely Perkins is now back in action in the Fujitsu Series.

five or 10 minutes a day to ensuring my health is OK. And that's not 10 minutes at one point, that's total time across the day.
"So I check my blood glucose level [BGL] three or four times a day with my Accu-Chek Performa blood glucose monitor [note signage on Jack's car], which has been great. It's so quick compared to some others I've

"If nature wants to take its course, it will, and at such a point I will make a decision, but for now, I'm living my dream."

used, which also weren't so good in the varying temperatures, which is important given the different places we race, so it's good to have one that works with my lifestyle.
"When I'm doing my fitness training, it could be as many as six or seven times a day. The best way to manage this disease is to know what your blood sugar level is. And then for each meal I have an insulin injection – so breakfast, lunch and dinner – and just before I go to bed, I have two."
Jack is determined that being insulin-dependent won't stop him chasing his dream. But he admits it has risks and responsibilities – and it's a difficult juggling act.
"It does take a lot of discipline and management, to ensure everything is safe and sound, especially with the driving. But also with the enormous amount of sponsorship commitments we have, functions to go to. You need to be in control of your health to cope with all of that.

physically I'm fine, so what's the problem?"
"I figured I could continue to race, providing I understood how it all works and learned to manage it. I've chosen to take it in my stride and get on with it. I'm now racing with it and no problems at all."

As soon as he was diagnosed, Jack started on insulin shots, initially four times a day, but now five. While many people with type 1 diabetes use an insulin pump, which is a pager-sized reservoir of insulin which sends a dose through a tiny tube under the skin, Jack says the ordinary needle-pen style which he uses at given times each day works better with his lifestyle.

"If I wasn't doing anything active, a pump would be great, but the thought of something hanging off my stomach, when I'm trying to get in and out of race suits, it's just not feasible. Also if I was in the car and something was to go wrong with the pump it wouldn't be too good, so for me, for now, the injections work better.

"Generally I just deal with the whole thing by taking the approach that I need to commit



JACK AND THE JUVENILE DIABETES RESEARCH FOUNDATION

When Jack Perkins was diagnosed, one of the first messages of support he received was from the CEO of the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation. He decided to get involved and is very pleased he did.

"For me, it's racing for a different purpose, to raise awareness for something that's so close to me, and to try and raise some money for a charity that's dedicated to finding a cure.

"Any way I can help them which eventually will help me, was something I jumped at. We haven't been able to raise millions of dollars yet, but we've been able to raise a couple of thousand, so it's been great so far."



"But it's not just my health and safety that is the issue. It's also about looking after everyone else who is out there – a lot of the guys I am racing are mates. I wouldn't jump in the car if I wasn't comfortable with my blood sugar levels. And never once has there been an issue because I am so strict about it."

Jack has worked out what 'safe' blood sugar levels are, and that level can be affected by stress, something that can be synonymous with the pressure of racing. In the lead-up to a race weekend, he has balanced his insulin, diet and exercise so he can run with a slightly higher blood sugar level than normal, to avoid having one of the dreaded 'hypos' – the low blood glucose levels which can cause faintness, nausea and worse.

"You can't really measure the impact stress has on your blood sugar level but I try to ensure my blood sugar level is above nine or 10, and I know that won't drop too quickly.

"I've learned to manage it through all the fitness training I do because it is hard to manage if you drop, to get it stabilised again. Your blood sugar levels continue to drop in fitness training and for 24 hours after, so you do need to learn to be on top of it, because when it comes to a race meeting, it's not just about the driving.

"When you have three or four hours of sponsorship commitments and autograph sessions, it's hard. In fact, that was one of the reasons I went public about it all.

"Now I can check my blood sugar level in front of everyone and it's no big deal. And I also have two drink bottles in the car, one water and one sugar-based, so I can top up the sugar level every now and



again, but I haven't had a problem.

"I've spoken to a lot of sports people who have diabetes, like [former rugby star] Steve Renouf and they go about it the same way. They all say it's the way to go. During the week my levels are perfect and on a race weekend, I run a fraction high to be able to do what I want to do."

There can be a risk of health complications at a later stage by running at a higher blood glucose level but Jack is confident he can minimise that possibility because he is so disciplined.

"A lot of people run high because they have no control – I'm doing it in a controlled way. And we're only talking a couple of hours on a race weekend and 14 race weekends a year, so I think in reality, there is

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JACK PERKINS

a risk, but it's marginal compared to a lot of other people.

"Of course, if those problems do arise, I might have to make a choice to walk away from racing, but currently everything that could be an issue is excellent. There are no side effects at all and there's not a lot I can do to make them any better anyway.

"If nature wants to take its course, it will, and at such a point I will make a decision, but for now, I'm living my dream. And in terms of keeping an eye on it all, we're hoping that I might even be able to have my blood sugar level displayed on the dash board so I can tune it even closer!"

Interestingly, type 1 diabetes can be hereditary, but Jack says there is no family history. He's the first to be dealt the card. He says his family and friends – and the team – are very supportive but no-one really understands because they're not in the middle of it. Asked if they know what to do if he's in trouble and Jack's answer reflects his sense of responsibility.

"Yes, and no. A few of the guys know what I need and don't need, but I've never ever had a situation, even at the workshop where I am every day of the week, where someone has had to do anything. If I put myself in a situation where someone else had to do something, to me that would be me being negligent.

"A lot of people might think that's the wrong attitude, but I think if you know what can happen, then you have to be prepared for it. And I am."

That preparation is a 24-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week commitment, and intensifies in the lead-up to a race weekend. Jack says the basics don't change, whether he is fronting up for a sprint or an enduro.

"I start a few days beforehand getting the diet for the weekend sorted, and the

Pics: Jack Perkins now wants to raise awareness of Type 1 diabetes and demonstrate to sufferers that the disease need not be a limiting factor in everyday life.

WHAT IS TYPE 1 DIABETES?

Type 1 diabetes, is an auto-immune disease where the body's immune system destroys the insulin-producing beta cells in the pancreas.

This type of diabetes, also known as insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus (IDDM) or juvenile-onset diabetes, accounts for 10 to 15 per cent of all people with the disease.

It can appear at any age, although commonly under 40, and is triggered by environmental factors such as viruses, diet or chemicals in people who are genetically pre-disposed.

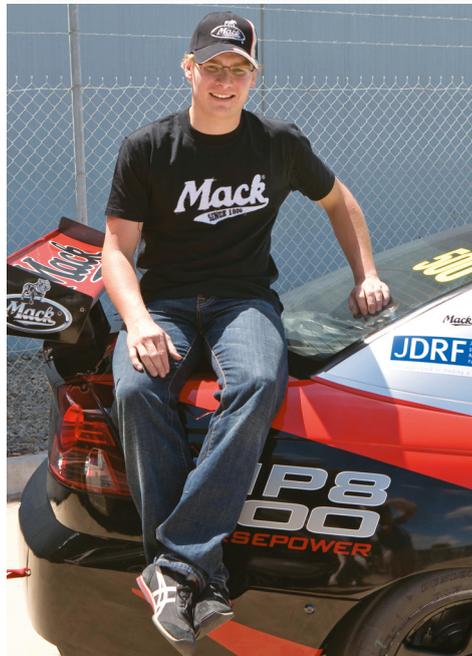
People with type 1 diabetes must inject themselves with insulin several times a day and follow a careful diet and exercise plan, guided by regular monitoring of their blood glucose levels.

If it is not treated properly, serious health complications and even death can result. At this point, there is no known cure.

Common symptoms of undiagnosed diabetes

- ❖ excessive thirst
- ❖ frequent urination
- ❖ increased fatigue or lethargy
- ❖ severe irritation and itching
- ❖ excessive hunger
- ❖ blurred vision
- ❖ weight loss

Type 1 diabetes is different to the more common type 2 diabetes. For more information, please see www.diabetes.com.au or www.diabetesaustralia.com.au or call the Helpline on 1300 136 588.



hydration. In terms of insulin, the night before the first on-track activity, I halve my 12 and 24-hour doses, to allow me to stay on a high blood sugar level.

"Obviously the shorter the races, the easier it could potentially be, but either way I haven't had a drama and I actually prefer the longer races because they're more enjoyable as a driver. It's worked well so far, so there's no point in doing it any other way."

Because Jack is so much in control now, the way he talks can make it all sound easy. It isn't. Initially the difficulty was with his decision to do it all on the quiet as well as learning what he needed to do to manage the disease and keep racing.

"Now, there's just the same problems that each diabetic faces and that's the daily battle that is the management of the disease. You just have to be so strict with what you eat. I love lollies, but I just can't have them! And high carb stuff is off the menu. You've got to stick to low-GI foods, drink plenty of water and not too many soft drinks and just keep control."

Despite the difficulties, Jack says there was no chance he was going to stop.

"As long as I can remember, this is all I have wanted to do. Racing cars is a passion, whether I'm in a race car or a golf cart! I just enjoy it. I just could not comprehend life without it, so straight away I just got back to it, almost as soon as I was diagnosed.

"The drive to keep racing will always be there and I'm doing whatever I can to get back to the top level. I probably have limited opportunities to race overseas now, but I think I've proven I can race V8 Supercars and hopefully I can do it for many years to come.

"The biggest thing is not thinking that life is over. A lot of people are much worse off than diabetics. There's nothing stopping me from doing absolutely anything."



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