

[Commitment to Excellence - The Colette Nelson Story](#)



By [Leigh Penman](#)
for MuscleSport Mag

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By Leigh Penman -

Picture the scene, you are twelve years old, sitting in your doctor's office and he announces that you have type 1 diabetes, a condition that requires taking insulin shots for the rest of your life...

That is exactly what happened to top professional bodybuilder, Colette Nelson, as she revealed

to me recently in a very candid and personal interview, where she not only spoke about her own journey through life with this demanding condition, but also offered some real hope and inspiration to fellow athletes with diabetes.



So Colette, let's start with that initial diagnosis...

“When I was diagnosed with diabetes at 12 years old, it was definitely a shock. As it happens, my father had been diagnosed with type 1 diabetes about two years prior, which is unusual because most people are diagnosed as a juvenile. However, the simple fact is that type 1 diabetes can happen at any age...it could happen to you. It is an auto-immune disease, and we don't know why all of a sudden the immune system decides to pull the trigger.”

Going back to that fateful day, what was your initial response?

“I asked the doctor if I could take pills. He told me that I didn't have that type of diabetes, I had a different kind and I would have to take insulin shots for the rest of my life. I mean, when somebody says that to you, you are like, ‘Oh my god, tell me anything but something for the rest of my life!’ Then I asked him what I had to do to stay healthy. He told me to exercise, watch my diet and take my blood sugar regularly. From that point I never looked back. At thirteen years old I joined a gym and gradually got into working out.”

How did simply 'working out' turn into hardcore bodybuilding?

“It’s funny but I actually see a lot of diabetics in the sport of bodybuilding. In a way it makes sense. I mean a bodybuilder has to eat six times a day...that’s exactly what a diabetic is supposed to do. You are supposed to eat raw meals...just like a bodybuilder. You are supposed to exercise...just like a bodybuilder. It’s weird, but the lifestyle just seems to attract diabetics. So it was just a natural progression for me and it made me feel more comfortable with myself. I mean here was a sport where people could actually understand me. I never drank; even as a kid I never drank alcohol. I knew I couldn’t figure out the insulin with it and I never wanted to be out of control. So when I started getting into hardcore bodybuilding and hanging out with bodybuilders at around 19 years old, I felt like ‘these are my people’, they understood my lifestyle. I went to college in Michigan State and when I went out with friends they would always say ‘have a drink’ but I didn’t feel like telling them that I was a diabetic and making an issue of it. I mean that would lead to them saying things like ‘are you okay?’ and ‘do you need to test your blood sugar?’ So I just gravitated towards bodybuilding. I loved the people I hung out with.”

Taking a leap forward in time, how did you handle your first competitions? I mean this is a time when even a 'normal' person can suffer blood sugar disturbances due to the stress of strict dieting...not to mention the sheer stress of contest day itself...

“Well, I only really started talking about diabetes around three years ago. At the beginning of my career no one even knew. When I first started competing I kept it to myself and would keep a check on my blood sugar secretly by doing it inside my bag or in the bathroom so no one could see me. I mean I had so much more to worry about than most of the other women. I had to make sure my blood sugar didn’t go too low on stage. In addition to this, in my first few shows my blood sugar would end up spiking. Now I manage to keep it below 200 and, ideally, never going above 140. It is a struggle, it really is. I mean my energy is good; it’s just that I have to be so careful. I have to keep checking every fifteen to twenty minutes because I have to take minute amounts of insulin just to make sure my blood sugar stays straight. The last thing I want to do is let it get really high because the next thing that happens is it falls really low, and I don’t want that to happen when I am on stage. I mean, how embarrassing.”

I am sure I am not alone when I say that’s one thing you will never be Colette, embarrassed on stage! As far as working out goes, do you have to put any restrictions on the amount of time you spend in the gym?

“That’s an interesting question, because I love to train! As a diabetic you don’t need to limit your time in the gym as long as you are really aware of your blood sugar. I test my blood sugar before I train, after I train...and sometimes during a workout. It’s a constant battle every day of my life. Usually I test my blood sugar about 15 times a day and it’s annoying but it is the only way to make sure that I keep my blood sugar between 70 and 120.

“Usually your blood sugar will rise when you are working out. It’s weird, but I have actually gone into workouts where my blood sugar was 70 (and medical researchers would tell you never to workout with a blood sugar of 70!) and when I finish the workout I am at 100. Now you are

talking about a two-hour workout. It really comes down to knowing how much food you have eaten and the timing of the insulin.

“On the other hand, there have been times, especially when I am getting ready for a show, that my blood sugar has dropped. When that happens I have to stop and have something to eat and then just sit around until my blood sugar stabilizes and then go back to my workout. Thankfully that doesn’t happen to me that often, just maybe when I am near the end of a contest diet and I’m depleted.”

So what would you say to either a bodybuilder who had just been diagnosed with diabetes or someone with diabetes who wanted to get into the sport?

“I would sit them down and say to them, ‘what you have to deal with is a battle, but as a bodybuilder you are facing battles every day. However, if you are not committed to testing your blood sugar 10 to 15 times a day, then bodybuilding is not for you.’

“It’s really not that bad, you just have to know where your blood sugar is at. You can’t go into the gym and train unless you know this because if your blood sugar is too low, your workout is going to suck. If it is too high then you are going to be burning muscle as fuel. So you have to commit to testing and you have to commit to taking as many shots a day as it takes. That’s where doctors fail, they want to make it easy and tell you to take three shots a day. As bodybuilders, we eat five to six times a day and, guess what, you need insulin every time you eat. That makes a minimum of six shots a day. I take twelve because I take a shot calculating what I am going to eat and then I test my blood sugar after a meal to make sure it doesn’t rise over 140, because if it does I need more supplemental insulin.

“So these are the tools I teach bodybuilders so that they can better manage their diabetes. I also make sure that they are in regular communication with their doctor.”

In fact -as a certified diabetes educator - Colette gives generously of her time when it comes to helping other athletes excel in their chosen sport and cast aside the shackles they may once have believed having diabetes placed on them.

As far as her own personal accomplishments, her impressive history of achievements in the sport further illustrate the fact that the day she received that initial diagnosis may very well have been the day her life really began and that her destiny finally revealed itself.

Her story is one of strength, courage and determination and I hope that you, like me, will find inspiration in its telling.

N.B. You can find out more about Colette Nelson (including her impressive contest history) by visiting her website at www.colettenelson.com.

Leigh Penman, in addition to be a staff writer at MuscleSport Mag, has been writing for bodybuilding magazines, websites and nutritional supplement companies since 1985. Whilst residing in the UK, she earned the reputation of being one of the top female writers in

bodybuilding-related media. Her credits included being a contributing editor on all the magazines in production as well as filling the shoes of Ladies Editor and Showbiz Editor on two publications (the later being on Arnold's sanctioned magazine, 'Bodypower'). During this time she also competed successfully on four occasions (placing in the top four in all contests).

Relocating to New York in the late 1990s she focused her writing attention to crystal healing techniques and metaphysics - however, she still maintained a five day workout schedule during this time and gained her personal training certificate.

Having also studied pharmacology in relation to sports performance, her writing began taking her in that direction until the present day which sees her embarking on a return to the magazine world, as well as extending her web-related work in the bodybuilding and fitness field.

Leigh has been working out for close to thirty years so she is clearly a writer who 'walks her talk.'

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