**Jon-Sel Gourkan: ‘’When a new day starts, a new chapter beckons’’**

*Actor, singer, professional footballer and now ambassador for Diabetes UK, how has Jon-Sel lived with Type 1 diabetes with unwavering confidence?*

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*by Grace Dembowicz*

There’s a presence that an actor, a good actor, captures when they enter a room. There’s power behind their words, strength in their step and desire to be heard.

42 year-old professional footballer turned actor Jon-Sel Gourkan, who, with his shoulder length jet black hair propels this energy with full force as we sit down.

Diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes aged 12, Jon-Sel has dabbled in many industries. Kickstarting his career playing professional football for Turkish team Altay F.C, his sporting career was cut short when he suffered a hypoglycaemic attack in the changing rooms before a home game, resulting in his manager sacking him for appearing drunk. Turning his hand to singing, Jon-Sel became part of the pop band *Word on the Street* which supported artists such as *Westlife* and *911* performing at Wembley Stadium. When the group disbanded, Jon-Sel took himself to drama school and landed a leading role in the West End’s production of *Fame: The Musical*. None of this however, seems to be as rewarding to him as raising awareness for diabetes, his ‘’one true passion’’, a condition he’s never been scared of having grown up with a diabetic mother. Jon-Sel remembers the moment he was diagnosed thinking: ‘’that’s alright, I can deal with that, I can live with that’’.

Jon-Sel puts his positive mindset down to being an ‘’avid sportsman’’ growing up. ‘’I was never flustered about injecting myself and eating the right foods because I had to look after myself. I saw my mum inject herself and thought: ‘If my mum can do it, I can do it’’’. A healthy lifestyle that he admits disintegrated when his career in the arts began. Drama school saw Jon-Sel drinking and partying, ‘’things started to change with my mentality towards type 1 diabetes and how it affected me, I wasn’t eating correctly or sleeping right, suddenly I was given this freedom with this new lifestyle, one void of structure’’.

When acting work was sparse but bills were still shoved through the letterbox, Jon-Sel turned to everyday jobs to make ends meet such as café work. ‘’It’s the normal jobs where people understand diabetes less, people don’t understand that I need to take time out to take sugar, they don’t understand how to cope with hypoglycaemic attacks’’. The actor’s incurable condition has led to being sacked from jobs and has had serious effects on his mental health which prompted the creation of his one man show in 2017: *Keep calm, I’m only a diabetic.* Interspersing elements of his football, singing and acting life to show a no-holds barred account of life as a diabetic, ‘’it was the reality of my life, it was to show: yes I am going to drink, I am going to party and mistakes will happen’’.

Created over a 10 year period, Jon-Sel wrote a book entitled: *Diabetes won’t defeat us*. This self-help guide for young children led to his ultimate goal of creating a short film about diabetes entitled: *Hypo*: ‘’creating awareness through film meant people understand it more’’.

After the highs of playing at Wembley, appearing on television and a career in professional football ended, Jon-Sel admits to suffering with poor mental health: ‘’I’ve always used my confidence as a defence mechanism, I don’t want people to know I’m suffering’’. Feeling judged for not securing concrete acting work, at a similar time when the actor’s long term relationship came to an end, Jon-Sel describes how ten years ago, the same period as drama school, his mental health was ‘’at its worst, it was awful, I was drinking, doing drugs, I went off the rails’’. Now however, he feels ‘’grateful for being a diabetic, if it wasn’t for this condition I wouldn’t have done the things I’ve done with my life, you’ve got to embrace it’’.

As our chat draws to a close I sit wondering what profession Jon-Sel will turn his hand to next, Astronaut? Lawyer? The possibilities seem endless.

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