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An injection of hope

by Garf Collins

“What, only five jelly babies,” I heard Gill say as she answered a call from Emily.

“That’s all he had during the first half of the race.” Gill told me as we returned to watching the live finish of the Mont Blanc Marathon. “Apparently Emily met him halfway and he stuffed a couple of sandwiches there. But he should be through by now.”

The top 25 elite runner had finished many minutes ago. There was a pause with and then a burst of activity and we saw Alex come through in 32nd place out of about 2,500 entrants. The delay had been caused by the downward path turning into a torrent by a downpour.

Alex knew the terrain well. He had spent five days running and exploring the area a month before the race – often sleeping in remote mountain huts.

He had always been a keen runner and was mad about the mountains around Chamonix. He was also in the Guinness Book of Records as the fastest fully clothed animal in the London Marathon (Tiger 2 hr 48 min). So he might have been expected to do well but the outstanding feature of this achievement was that he is a Type 1 Diabetic.

I remember the year he was diagnosed. In just a few weeks he had degenerated into a gaunt shadow of himself. He was worried that might have cancer. After much wasted

Googling, he consulted his doctor. Many tests later he called us, "I've had some good news."

"Fantastic. What is it?"

"I've got Type 1 diabetes."

"You call that good news!"

"I certainly do. I can deal with that. I thought I had cancer."

The Consultant tried to reassure him. "With care you'll be able to live a fairly full life but you'll have to give up serious running. Particularly in mountains as the insulin mustn't get too cold. And you'll have trouble keeping track of your blood sugar levels," he then looked at Alex and with a sigh added, "but you're not going to take a blind bit of notice of me. Are you?"

After this Alex made his body a subject of detailed study. The carbohydrates in all meals were weighed and frequent blood samples were taken followed by injection of appropriate amounts of insulin. He also discovered that vigorous physical exercise was a great way of keeping blood sugar down and it was easy to keep an insulin supply warm by body heat alone.

His first real test of this his new regime was an ultra marathon in the Brecon Beacons. The course was 60 kilometres with many hills. He tested his blood sugar regularly to verify that his calculations were correct. As he ran he enjoyed once more the freedom of the hills. He thought of his wife, Emily, and young Felix waiting for him at the end of the race. Running felt good and his energy level was high. He was going to finish well up the field. Alex suddenly realised he had overcome the apparent constraints of Type 1 diabetes and tears of joy flooded down his cheeks as he plunged onwards.