

Ravens: Pericak pushing for roster spot while dealing with diabetes

By Matt Zenitz Times Staff Writer | Posted: Monday, August 19, 2013 12:00 am

OWINGS MILLS — Will Pericak has set pregame and postgame routines: Load up on carbohydrates before playing and immediately replenish once the game is over.

The goal is to maintain a normal blood glucose level.

Pericak is a football player, one pushing for a roster spot with the Ravens as a rookie defensive lineman, but he's also a Type 1 diabetic responsible for managing his condition and the daily tasks and challenges that come along with it.

"Diabetes in itself is a challenge because you're constantly monitoring your blood sugars and giving yourself insulin," Pericak said. "Just that by itself can be a challenge. And with other everyday challenges — whether it's school or football or athletics — everything changes your blood sugars and has different effects on how you react to your insulin.

"Always having that in the back of your mind is something that you get used to, and it's pretty second-nature to me now, but it's definitely an extra step in your day always — and not just one extra step, but an extra step every hour or so."

Type 1 diabetes is a chronic condition characterized by the inability of a person's body to produce insulin. Insulin is a hormone that helps turn sugar and carbohydrates in your body into energy.

Carbohydrates increase a person's blood glucose level. Physical activity — especially activity as demanding as football — typically decreases a person's blood glucose level.

Symptoms of a high blood glucose level for a diabetic include fatigue, increased thirst and blurred vision. If a diabetic's blood glucose level becomes low, the person could experience fatigue, anxiety, weakness and/or trouble thinking clearly.

"The challenge is that you've got all this football to memorize and learn how to play, and you've got to be focused on how you perform out on the field," Pericak said. "But if you're not paying attention to your blood sugars and how you're eating and what you're giving yourself for insulin, it doesn't matter what you do to get ready to play because you won't be able to play well."

Tackling the disease

Type 2 diabetes is the more common form of the disease. Type 1 diabetes is much more rare. It's often referred to as juvenile diabetes because it's typically diagnosed in children and young adults.

In Pericak's case, he found out he had the disease when he was 15.

His older brother was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes at an early age, so when Pericak started exhibiting some of the classic symptoms of diabetes — excessive thirst, blurred vision, weight loss and having to urinate frequently — he assumed he had the disease, something a diagnosis later confirmed.

“I was definitely kind of pissed off at first,” Pericak said. “But once the diagnosis came and I started taking the insulin, I felt a ton better. And then having my brother — he got it when he was 7 — so I grew up with it and grew up with the regimen, whether it was testing, insulin, eating right, all that.

“So, it wasn’t too hard for me to pick it up.”

Pericak is far from the first professional football player to deal with diabetes — or even Type 1 diabetes.

Chicago Bears quarterback Jay Cutler was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes while with the Denver Broncos in 2008. Michael Sinclair, a former Pro Bowl defensive end with the Seattle Seahawks, is also a diabetic. So is Kendall Simmons, who was a starting offensive lineman for the Pittsburgh Steelers from 2002 through 2007.

The New England Patriots released defensive lineman Kyle Love after he was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes during the spring. But, at least for Pericak, he says the diabetes has never affected him during a game, whether in high school, in college at Colorado or during his brief time with the Ravens so far.

“Will does a great job of managing it,” said Jon Embree, who coached Pericak at Colorado and is now the tight ends coach with the Cleveland Browns. “If he was ever struggling with his energy level in practice, he would pull himself out for a few plays, get it taken care of and get back in. And the way he managed it allowed him to go out and have success every day.

“And that’s just the kind of person Will is. He’s a very driven person, whether it’s academics or athletics. He does everything one way, and that’s full speed with a maximum effort. And he’s tackled this disease with that mindset.”

Overcoming the disease

As a player, Embree compares Pericak to another former Colorado defensive lineman in Justin Bannan. Embree was a part of Colorado’s coaching staff when Bannan was in college.

Bannan, like Pericak, has never been flashy, but he’s regarded as a hard-nosed, high-motor, lunch-pail-type player with a high football IQ. Bannan was a fifth-round pick of the Buffalo Bills in 2002 and has been a productive player for much of the last decade, including for the Ravens from 2006-09.

Pericak was a four-year starter at defensive tackle at Colorado and was selected honorable mention All-Big 12 during each of his final three collegiate seasons. He had 62 tackles, six tackles for a loss, two sacks and four forced fumbles as a senior last season.

“He’s similar to Justin, especially as far as the motor, the effort and the intensity that they play with,” Embree said. “Without a doubt, I think Will will be able to have a career in the NFL. I don’t think the diabetes is a factor at all.”

Pericak wasn’t picked during the NFL draft in April, but Baltimore reportedly gave him the biggest signing bonus it gave to any of the players it signed as undrafted free agents (\$13,500).

Pericak appears to be a long shot to make the Ravens’ roster because of Baltimore’s depth along the defensive line, but teammates and coaches have repeatedly praised both him and fellow undrafted defensive lineman Cody Larsen since the spring.

Ravens defensive line coach Clarence Brooks was asked what he’d seen from Pericak and Larsen through the beginning part of training camp.

“Just the same that we’ve seen of them through the spring — tremendous work,” Brooks said. “Really, really tough, hard-nosed kids. They both work their butts off. They are both very, very smart football players, and they are both physical football players. We really, really like what we are seeing in them.”

Yes, Pericak is a diabetic. But he’s also a football player. And whether it’s with the Ravens or another team, Embree is confident that Pericak will eventually become a contributor for an NFL team.

“He’s a guy that will always be one of those guys that will be in your rotation,” Embree said. “He plays really good against the run. He’s smart. He’s really instinctive. He dissects plays rather quickly. And it’s rare to find big guys with great motors, especially when you have guys double-teaming you and cut-blocking you and doing all that stuff. Not a lot of guys have a motor like Will.

“Whether you’ve knocked him down or double-teamed him, as soon as he gets off the block or gets up off the ground, he is chasing full speed to the ball. Having coached the defensive line for four years, that’s what you want in your defensive line meeting room.”