



After a health scare, TV's *Hardball* dynamo goes head-to-head with type 2.

By Dan Gilgoff PHOTOGRAPHS BY GARY LANDSMAN

U O W N I N G P

CHRIS MATTHEWS's super-high-octane style has earned the MSNBC host the honor of being parodied on *Saturday Night Live*, but make no mistake: It's not part of some made-for-TV shtick. He's the same way off air. On his Washington, D.C., set for a recent broadcast of *Hardball*, his nightly political show, Matthews frequently pauses while rehearsing his opening lines to chide his producers about his script. "Don't use the word *claim*—that's Associated Press style!" he growls into his lapel-mounted microphone. "This is so flat!" he barks a few moments later. "Change 'Fred Thompson'" —at this point an undeclared presidential candidate— "to '*Law and Order* man.'"

Over the next hour, a dozen different guests, from *Newsweek* chief political reporter Howard Fineman to a pair of Iraq war vets, circulate through the studio or appear via remote camera to participate in Matthews's live inquisition. *Is religion driving Bush's belief that he is somehow messianic? Should young American men be drafted to fight the Iraqi war?* Between interview segments, Matthews refuses to let the energy level sag, sounding off to guests on matters ranging from the Democrats' attempts to woo religious voters (he's skeptical) to the current state of the *Washington Post* ("It doesn't have a slant to its front pages, which makes it boring").

Until recently, his in-studio bombast was fueled by the party-sized bag of M&Ms and cupfuls of coffee that Matthews knocked back before the show. Not anymore. Between placing a call to Nancy Reagan and prepping his producers for an interview the next day with Democratic presidential candidate

John Edwards, Matthews—looking slimmer than in many of the photos gracing his office walls—tells *Diabetes Forecast* about finally owning up to having diabetes after being hospitalized late last year.

You knew for years that you had diabetes but did very little about it.

I was basically ignoring the situation. I was told I was diabetic, but I guess we all grew up with the fact that if you weren't actually taking insulin, you weren't diabetic. The metformin didn't seem to be evidence of being diabetic. I'd been taking it for a couple years. I had malaria after coming back from a trip to South Africa in 2001, but what I kept [hearing about] from my doctor was my high blood sugar levels. And I said, "What does that have to do with anything?" And that's when he began the process of teaching me to stop taking sugar and to start drinking clear drinks and stop drinking Coke.

But you more or less ignored your diabetes until even more recently, right?

My problem was I was taking metformin, but I didn't recognize the importance of taking it every day and that it could actually reduce your blood sugar level. I also wasn't doing any kind of dieting. I was aware of a general need to skip some things. The toughest habit is going to an airport in the morning when you haven't had breakfast and seeing the pastries there. Hunger is the best chef—you see a couple pastries and have that and a cup of coffee for breakfast. There was a time when I'd have a hamburger and French fries for lunch with a beer or white wine, and I'd have cheesecake for dessert. It was pretty outrageous. When I was in high school, I'd get 10 jawbreakers and five candy bars and a Coke just to study with and then fall right to sleep—it never bothered me. And I never really gained any weight in those days so I developed these really sugary habits.



Matthews with *Washington Post* columnist Eugene Robinson.



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Did you consider reforming your diet after learning about your high blood sugar levels?

I had no idea what that meant ... the doctor kept saying it to me, and I resisted. I didn't say, "Wait a minute, this is something I can reasonably deal with." I didn't understand the importance of it or the doability of it—that I could solve this problem, that it would be over, and I would be just like everybody else.... I remember my wife Kathleen and I having a big argument at a restaurant about two or three years ago. I went in and ordered some French fries, and she said she would walk out if I didn't give them back. Kathleen knew French fries were sugar, and she knew I wasn't supposed to have them because I was a diabetic. I was putting it off and not wanting to face it. I was in denial, I guess.

And that changed last year?

Right after Thanksgiving last year I went to the hospital and it was a serious situation, complications from diabetes. I had a blood sugar level of 350. It's supposed to be 80 to 110. I had a 6-month A1C of 11-something. It's supposed to be 6-something. I don't know if it accumulated that weekend, when I had a big Thanksgiving. I finished off a whole cherry pie by myself. Then Monday night we went out to [a restaurant] in Georgetown, and I had fettuccine Alfredo. I went to bed with chest pains and other pains. And early the next morning I sensed something was

coming on. We went to the Washington Hospital Center, and I was given dietary advice and since then I've been taking metformin. I've been taking Januvia. And I'm taking about 5 units of Lantus now.... I stick to my diet and very small doses of insulin, which I hope I can get over if I can drink a little more water, do a little more walking.

You stayed in the hospital a few days. How scary was it?

When you have three doses of morphine and it still hurts, you begin to worry.

And what are your numbers now?

My numbers tend to be under 110 on a good day, and I keep an average of four tests a day. There are surprising spikes now and then, but generally I don't think I've seen a 200. I've found a good way to live.

You've certainly lost a good bit of weight in the past year.

On my scale at home I've gone from around 235 to about 205, and I think I can lose some more if I do a little more exercise. I really haven't done any exercise to lose all this weight, just changing what I eat. Now it's potatoes, corn, rice, wheat bread. I do take dessert once or twice a week. I've learned that if you're discreet and actually have just one dessert, it's OK. It's the grazing that kills you: sitting at a party where there's a spread of blondies and brownies in front of you.

How difficult was it to reform your eating habits?

I quit drinking about 14 years ago. I've learned how to deal with decisions like that.

Was changing your diet as difficult as giving up alcohol?

It's harder because it's more complicated. It's easy to give up something. It's hard to decide when and how much without becoming a fanatic. I didn't become a fruitarian or a vegan. If I'm at a big event, some big celebrity dinner, I still have the dessert. I know I shouldn't, but I check the blood sugar the next day, and it doesn't have much of an impact if I limit myself to those situations. If I go out and buy ice cream or real Coke or French fries, I know it would be disastrous. I don't do that. The big question is Starbucks. The biggest size is basically just more milk, not more caffeine, so you're basically getting more sugar. Why do you want to waste calories on milk in your coffee? Black coffee is pretty good.

In retrospect, do you have regrets about your old eating habits?

It doesn't do any good. I never even think about regretting candy bars. But I do tell my kids about booze and sweets: The best reason not to drink too much is you get to keep drinking. The best thing about being restrained in your sweets is you get to keep eating them—maybe.

During your M&Ms and full-on cherry pies phase, was there a part of you that knew you had diabetes and that you might be making matters worse?

Maybe. I have no idea. I mean, there's no doubt that the realization that [diabetes] could hurt your heart, hurt your liver, that it could cause you to have the amputation of your legs was definitely a dire prospect for me. I'd never want to be on dialysis, never want to have an amputation. I have a relative, my mom's brother, who I believe had all these complications at the end. And I've seen what happens when it goes all the way with people.

Have there been more health scares since being hospitalized late last year?

I did get hypoglycemic once, and that was scary. It's like your whole body is going through some sort

of volcanic water eruption. I was driving home from my doctor one night, and all of a sudden I started sweating like I'd never sweat before. I finally get home and my son's taking care of me—I'm drinking a lot of orange juice and eating a turkey and rice dinner. I called my doctor, and he was very calm. He knew exactly what it was. It's pretty scary because you don't know what it is the first time. You almost black out.

How do your fears about having diabetes square with your experience of actually dealing with it?

I was fearful of having to deal with the shots, the blood tests, which turn out to be nothing. It's very important for everyone to understand that—it's nothing. I have a little Moleskine book, and I have the numbers all the way back to November. Some things will make them go up, like stress.

Why your aversion to exercise?

Don't have any time. When am I going to do it?

Have you taken steps to reduce your stress, like curtailing hours at work?

Are you kidding? I just finished writing a book. The thing about my world is if you're going to do television and give a good number of speeches—I give most of the money to charity—and you also [want] to have your career mean something in an enduring way, you want to write. My [1988] book *Hardball* is still used by a lot of college and high school political science courses. This new book is called *Life's a Campaign*. I hope it's going to be a big success, but it's just what I do.

Your hospitalization and your coming to terms with your diabetes overlapped with writing *Life's a Campaign*. Do those experiences make it into the book?

I didn't bring it in. But the whole book is about dealing with what you have to deal with. The idea is that I had written *Hardball* 20 years ago, and I always thought a book about the rituals and rules of politics and the way politicians do their thing would be useful to other people. This book's an application of the ways politicians deal with rivalry—you grin and you fight. Or that the best gift you can give a stranger is an audience—you listen.

As a public figure, do you feel obligated to send a message about diabetes?

What people ought to be told about diabetes is that if they have it in the family or sense that they're on the road to it, they should go to their doctor and ask him what he thinks and actually listen to the doctor like they would use [their] financial advisor. Maybe it's an Irish thing—we like to think we can talk our way out of things or that we can avoid them. But I've come to respect doctors a whole lot through this whole thing because they know what they're talking about and they're telling you to do something for your own good. ▲



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BORN: December 17, 1945, Philadelphia

JOB: Host of MSNBC's *Hardball* and NBC's *The Chris Matthews Show*

NEW BOOK: *Life's a Campaign: What Politics Has Taught Me About Friendship, Rivalry, Reputation, and Success* (Random House)

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