

BULLS TALES

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Teaming Up to Slam Type One

Major Leaguer “Super” Sam Fuld Joins Forces With SLAM-Diabetes Creator Jeff Kolok and a Host of MLB Stars to Fight Type 1 Diabetes Saturday at USF – in a Wiffle Ball Tournament

By Dave Scheiber, USF Foundation



Toronto's Josh Donaldson (left) swings for the fences at last year's inaugural tournament. Jeff Kolok (below left) and Sam Fuld.

One man has made a living in big-league ballparks never worrying about crashing into walls, fearlessly chasing down fly balls with his familiar diving and leaping catches.

The other has made a habit of charging into his own walls in life, always looking for a way to transcend any potential barrier.

That first man, Sam Fuld, is known around the country for his electrifying defense and over-all hustle – first with the Chicago Cubs, followed by his three-season tenure with the Tampa Bay Rays that made him a local legend, then by



stints with the Minnesota Twins and his current team, the Oakland A's.

The other, Jeff Kolok, is far from famous. But he's known to family and friends for his relentless and enthusiastic approach to tackling problems – a former rugby player who has enjoyed success in commercial real estate in the Northeast.

That, however, is only a part of the parallel paths of their stories – and what has made them the central figures of a unique and lively Type 1 diabetes event soon to unfold at the University of South Florida: the second annual Wiffle Ball showdown dubbed the SLAMDiabetes Sam Fuld Tampa Classic.

Fuld, as many people know, was diagnosed at age 9 with the life-changing condition, one for which there currently is no cure and that carries dire consequences without vigilant daily management. Yet he has never let it hold him back in pursuing his passion, and has made an equally major impact as a role model to youngsters living with the same issues he faces.



Johanna Kolok and Sam Fuld

Kolok, and his wife, Natalie, have three children and are raising two with Type 1 diabetes (T1D)– an autoimmune disease often confused with Type 2 diabetes and its connection to diet management. The challenge has driven him to work tirelessly for the Type 1 diabetes cause, which he does today through his New England-based, nonprofit business with a baseball twist – [SLAMDiabetes, Inc.](http://SLAMDiabetes.com)

Now, these two men have wound up sharing the same road. And on Saturday, Dec. 12, it leads directly to USF, where they will be joined by a star-studded roster of Major League players. The name of *this* game: raising funds to combat Type 1 diabetes – ultimately benefitting the outreach missions of Fuld and Kolok, and the cutting-edge research of the USF Diabetes Center.

And it revolves around a plastic ball and bat, on a field of dreams where the biggest one of all is to defeat T1D.

An impressive assortment of ballplayers will soon assemble on the most unusual Wiffle Ball venues around – miniature replicas of Yankee Stadium, Fenway Park, and even a field modeled after the Hollywood film, *The Sandlot*.

Consider the players who have committed to the 2015 SLAMDiabetes Sam Fuld tournament. The crew includes current Tampa Bay Rays standouts Kevin Kiermaier, Chris Archer, Matt Moore and newcomer Logan Morrison, a cast of former Rays that includes Sean Rodriguez (now with the Pirates), Toby Hall, Lance Carter, Andy Sonnanstine, Dan Wheeler and Rich Thompson, Toronto's Chris Colabello, the Yankees' J.R. Murphy, and Dan Jennings of the White Sox. Jays slugger Jose Bautista and former Yankees reliever Jeff Nelson will be on hand as special guests.

The present and past big leaguers will pair up with everyday adults and youngsters from the community in the day-long event. The tournament will help raise money for SLAMT1D's awareness and edu-

cation objectives and Fuld's annual Type 1 Diabetes Sports Camp Feb. 6-7 at USF, which also relies on donor generosity to offset costs. The camp, in turn, generates funds for important work of the USF Diabetes Center.

"I just reached out to a lot of the guys and they all said, 'I'll be there' – it was very cool," says Fuld, now a member of the Oakland Athletics. "It says a lot about my friends and former teammates that they're willing to take part and show their support, without any real connection to Type 1 diabetes other than myself. I also have to give credit to the Rays organization for really getting behind it and helping to get some former Tampa Bay players out there – even though I play on another team now."



Rays' Gold Glove centerfielder Kevin Kiermaier

The tournament is comprised of teams from the area that have raised a certain amount of funds in order to gain entrance in the competition bracket. Each game consists of seven innings, and every team plays two to three games, plus playoffs and a championship. And every SLAMDiabetes tournament is highlighted by a special home run derby. Last year's Classic featured Rays announcers Dave Wills and Neil Solondz calling the action, and they'll be back again on the mics this year.

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"It's all about engaging people in something they feel good about," says Kolok. "We took this crazy backyard game of Wiffle Ball, and added a big-league feel to it with players willing to donate

their time, play-by-play announcers, in-game music and home run derbies – and we subordinate the fund-raising to the fun.

"Raising money is certainly an integral component of what we do, but we're also out there having a blast. The atmosphere we create for the day – whether you're 55 and have had Type 1 your entire life or just 10 and newly diagnosed – is one of celebration. We're celebrating the pursuit of a championship in the tournament, and that – in its own way – is like celebrating the victories that each and every one of those with T1D experience day in and day out."

It is an experience involving multiple blood-glucose checks, frequent injections of insulin or wearing a high-tech insulin pump every day – all to compensate for pancreases that can no longer do the job.

The Koloks were plunged into that uncertain world six years after the birth of their first child, Naomi. Their second born, daughter Johanna (nicknamed JoJo), was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes when she was 4 ½ in 2005. "You're just shocked and it takes you a while to adjust to this new reality. I tell people that it's not life-changing, but life-altering – for the person diagnosed, for the caregivers and the family. It can be difficult at first on the other siblings because there is so much attention given out of necessity to the child with Type 1 diabetes, because as a parent, you're in a constant state of fear and there's natural instinct to protect the child from all the effects of the disease. It's time-consuming,

and psychologically consuming.”

Kolok, true to his take-charge form, immediately immersed himself in all the literature about T1D that he could absorb. He reached out to friends in the medical community to learn about the latest information in treatments and research. In short order, Jeff and Natalie – who works as a Delta flight attendant – began turning their situation into a platform to help others. Their hospital in Vermont asked them to speak to parents of newly diagnosed children, and they gladly obliged. But soon, they wanted to do even more – prompting Kolok to call the local division of children and family services agency about the possibility of giving a family with a T1D child some supplemental care for a weekend.

“We thought maybe we could just take a child for a few days and give the parents some rest,” he recalls. “Or maybe the parents needed some help we could provide.”

But the official who took his call misunderstood what Kolok was offering, after he explained that he and his wife had a daughter with the disease.

**“Jeff is clearly passionate about his charitable work. I feel lucky to have bumped into him and been able to work with him the last couple of years. In addition to his deep commitment to the cause, he’s very innovative.”
– Sam Fuld**

“She said, ‘It’s a miracle, it’s a miracle,’ she exclaimed. Kolok asked what she meant, and the worker replied, “You want to adopt a child with Type 1 diabetes!” Kolok tried to clarify that he only wanted to help out, but listened as the employee explained that the agency, in fact, had such a 6-year-old boy, Nicholas, in its care – a child who had been in and out of foster care and whose chances of adoption with T1D were virtually nil.

Kolok and his wife talked it over, and made a leap they had never anticipated. They asked to meet Nicholas, and decided to adopt him. Amazing-

ly, he was only 36 days apart from daughter JoJo, and following the legal proceedings that made it official, the Koloks had three children – including two with Type 1 diabetes, both of whom would fast become friends from the instant bond they shared.

“In our naiveté,” recalls Kolok, “we thought, ‘How much more difficult could it be? They each can do their tests at the roughly same time, and we can put them on the same type of pump.’ It didn’t take long to learn that it was double the work. But you know what, I can’t imagine our family without Nicholas. Someone at the hospital told us that one day he’ll realize that he hit the mother lode with you. I just chuckled and said, ‘You’ve got that equation backwards.’ We’ve been incredibly blessed having him in our family.”

Fuld’s story has been well documented over the years – how he took his Type 1 diabetes diagnosis in stride as a youngster, learning to handle his own care early on and never letting the condition slow derail him from his active childhood.

He was a top-tier athlete at Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, twice hitting .600 and making up for his lack of size with speed, athleticism and drive. His performance propelled him to baseball stardom at Stanford University, where he became a two-time All-American and attracted the attention of the Cubs, who drafted him in 2004.



After making Chicago's big-league roster in 2007, Fuld thrilled fans with his steady display of diving outfield catches and sparkling defense. That same style made him a fan favorite when he was traded to the Rays in 2010, when his off-the-charts offensive and defensive play early on earned him the nickname of "Super Sam" and his exploits gave birth to the phrase, "The Legend of Sam Fuld." But his impact was felt beyond the playing field.

Fuld wanted to find a way to raise awareness about Type 1 diabetes, and gladly accepted an invitation from the USF

Diabetes Center of the Morsani College of Medicine, in 2011 to learn about state-of-the-art work being done there. That started a relationship that has continued to flourish ever since, and gave rise to the first "Sam Fuld USF Diabetes Sports Camp" in 2012, giving youngsters a chance to play an array of sports and learn more about their condition, taught by Fuld and former pro and college athletes with T1D.

The camp has grown in numbers and popularity each year, supported by the generosity of USF donors. And last year, another key form of funding materialized – thanks to the partnership of Kolok and Fuld. Kolok had reached out to Fuld after coming up with the idea for SLAMDiabetes and enlisting the help of current and former major leaguers to make the Wiffle Ball games more exciting – players such as retired Red Sox stars Bill "Spaceman" Lee, Dennis "Oil Can" Boyd, Brandon Morrow (who has Type 1 diabetes) and Luis Tiant. Fuld contributed by offering some free baseball tickets and a chance to meet him on the field during batting practice.



Sam in action with kids at his T1D camp at USF

But after the 2013 season, Fuld approached Kolok about trucking his modular stadium replicas to Tampa and staging a SLAMDiabetes tournament – as a fundraiser for the 2014 camp in early February. "He's just a great guy, and I love that he's so motivated to make a difference in the lives of others," Kolok says. "That's what we share in common. Beyond that, Sam is just a great example of someone who has gotten to where he owns the disease, rather than letting it own him."

Fuld clicked immediately with Kolok and his passion for finding a way to help, which also includes a Web site to offer insight and information for parents of Type 1 diabetic children, ParentingDiabeticKids.com. "Jeff is clearly passionate about his charitable work and, of course, intimately connected with T1D," says Fuld. "I feel lucky to have bumped into him and been able to work with him the last couple of years. In addition to his deep commitment to the cause, he's very innovative. His Wiffle Ball diamonds and tournaments are incredible, and it's because he's always looking to improve upon the event. Much like my camp, it's all about getting kids and others comfortable with Type 1 – and that's

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The tournament fell into place quickly and was resounding success last December, with more than a dozen big-leaguers taking part as a show of support to Fuld, including Toronto superstar Josh Donaldson (this year’s AL Most Valuable Player) and four-time Colorado All-Star Dante Bichette, a healthy contingent of past and present Rays – and support of the Tampa Bay franchise.

“One thing about Wiffle Ball, it’s a great equalizer,” Fuld says with a laugh. “The pitches twist and spin unpredictably from a short distance away, and the swing is totally different. So a 14-year-old boy can be just as good as a Josh Donaldson.”

Last year, a major league atmosphere permeated the air at USF’s Magnolia Recreational Complex, where the tourney will take place again, with games starting at 8:30 a.m. and running all day through the championship game.



Jays star Josh Donaldson with a participant last year at USF

“The tournament is a great way to support Sam’s camp and our mission, which is all about empowering families and patients to better control their diabetes, and ultimately working toward a cure,” says Dr. Henry Rodriguez, Clinical Director of USF Diabetes Center. “And it’s a really fun day – whether you’re participating or simply watching.”

In the end, having fun is the name of the game at each event, Kolok echoes. “Type 1 diabetes robs some fun from people’s lives,” he says. “And even if it’s just for a day, this goofy game of Wiffle Ball returns some of that fun to those lives.”

With the help of two men who are doing their best to slam T1D, never worrying about running into some walls to get the job done.

The 2nd annual SLAMDiabetes Sam Fuld Tampa Classic – a Wiffle Ball tournament to combat Type 1 diabetes and featuring an array of major leaguers – takes place Saturday, Dec. 12 at USF’s Magnolia Recreation Complex. Games begin at 8:30 a.m. and last all day. Admission is free. For more information contact Kate Rodi at carodi@usf.edu or (813) 974-1930.