Keeping an Eye on the Ball: Jared Butler's Journey with Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy

Pro basketballer Jared Butler is raising awareness on hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (HCM).

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Usually on ABSOT, we talk a lot about the balls located south of the belt. Today, I had a chance to speak with Utah Jazz basketball player and 2021 NCAA Tournament champion Jared Butler. Jared is going into his first season with the NBA, where he will be the first-known active NBA player with hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (HCM). We chatted about his story, why he's sharing his experience, and what he wants all men to know about HCM. His mother, Juanea, also joined us to shed some light from the caregiver perspective.

ABSOT: Jared, thanks for taking the time. What led you to going to the doctor?

JARED: At the time, I was 18 years old. I just got to college and they do physicals and things of that nature. My EKG came back abnormal and that led to many other tests and then I found out that I had HCM, which was the first time I ever heard of the condition.

ABSOT: Juanea, how did that make you feel when you found out Jared's news?

JUANEA: Oh, I was devastated and confused at the same time, because I was saying to myself, "This boy has played just about every sport – football, basketball, baseball, you name it. He's done it." And I'm saying to myself, "How could this be? How could he have a heart problem?" So that was just very confusing to me.

ABSOT: Jared, I've got to ask, because I had to have a similar talk with my mom when I was diagnosed. I didn't tell my mom until the night before I was going to surgery and she was none too pleased with me about that. How early on in the process did you tell your mom?

JARED: My mom was there in the room when I got diagnosed. And for me, I was just kind of in hysterical shock and didn't know what to do myself. My mom was just asking a bunch of questions like what does this mean for the future? So she was there with me when I got the news. She was there with me through the process and I knew she was concerned just for me.

ABSOT: Absolutely. We'll always be our moms' little guys. How would you say that this diagnosis and going through this together has impacted your relationship?

JARED: I think tough times give people a sense of meaning and purpose, and it allows them to grow with people. With this, it's definitely allowed us to grow through some things. I think the adversity has caused us to grow as people individually first. And then as a relationship with my mom, there's some tough things that we went through and we got closer to each other from that. That's a blessing from it in this case, for sure.

ABSOT: Why did you decide to share your story?

JARED: It's a big part of my life and what's happened to me has changed my life since I've gotten diagnosed and so I wanted to just share my story. There've been numerous other people that shared their story and they helped me along the way once I got diagnosed. That's another reason why I wanted to do the same and give back to other people that might have the same similar situation. And then BMS has also been doing a great job reaching out and doing a campaign "Could it be HCM?" and I just thought it was great and fit together perfectly.

ABSOT: You're definitely starting strong. What do you want all men to know about HCM?

JARED: I think it's a serious genetic heart condition, to say the least. It's a condition that many people go undiagnosed or misdiagnosed because the symptoms can be very similar to other conditions like shortness of breath, tiredness, or dizziness, so I just really want to raise awareness to it. If anybody in your family has been diagnosed with HCM you should probably get checked and speak to your doctor. I know my case is different from a lot of people but I just felt like it's a great need to get the word out there.

ABSOT: Great goals. Why do you think men are reluctant to talk about their health?

JARED: You know, that's a great question. I think you got to call into action their pride. Maybe this false reality of you know, men have to be tough all the time and don't need to share their experiences and things like that. But I think doing things like this, this campaign can, can give people hope and a light to share what's going on in their life and it can help somebody else for sure.

JUANEA: I think sometimes, you know, some people are just naturally private. They're just not the type to let people in on their personal concerns or their medical concerns. And I think that has a lot to do with the two.

ABSOT: It's always interesting to hear how pride affects things so dramatically. So looking ahead, what are your next steps here?

JARED: I'm going to be an advocate first and foremost. I'm also going to be a place where somebody can reach out to speak about their experience and what's going on in their lives. I feel like I'm doing a big part in sharing my story, but this is just something that's going to be a part of

me for the rest of my life.

ABSOT: Juanea, what final message do you want to give to caregivers? What do you want to say to mothers, specifically of sons who may have a condition they're going through or their sons are reluctant to take care of their health?

JUANEA: Well, I think this brings awareness that you really need to take care of your body. If you're feeling something unusual about your body like dizziness or rapid heartbeat, see a doctor. It's always good to get in contact with your doctor. It's always good to get yourself checked regularly. I thought was it so weird because I don't have any symptoms. I don't have any manifestations of HCM, just the gene. It's always good to go annually to get yourself checked in and know what's really going on with your body. If you feel the least little thing, get checked.

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