

John Harrison, Franklin & Marshall College football player and an adult with PKU

The NPKUA had the opportunity to speak with John Harrison, a football player for Franklin & Marshall College and an adult with PKU. He gave us insights into how having PKU has positively impacted his football skills and his life.

1. NPKUA: When did you start playing football?
John: I started playing when in the fifth grade, so about age 10 or 11.
2. NPKUA: Did football have an impact on PKU treatment at that age?
John: Once I started, we were always talking to dietitians about treatment, but it didn't change. I just had to find extra ways to add more calories to my diet without adding protein. Around that time, I started adding more special low-protein snacks.
3. NPKUA Did you ever have any weight issues as child?
John: I was undersized for football. Medically speaking, I was right where I was supposed to be. For football, I always wanted to get bigger.
4. NPKUA: Were there any particular challenges due to PKU that impacted playing football?
John: As I got older, the off-season workout would become more intense, so I always needed to find more and more ways to eat without going off-diet.

In high school and college, I had to work with the head coach to make sure I could eat something when we had team meals. I never had any issues, though.

5. NPKUA: How did people react when they found out you had PKU?
John: They would find it surprising more than anything else. Being open about PKU helped. Overall, the reaction was more curiosity than anything else.

Close friends would sometimes joke about it—just how friends tease each other. They'd tease other guys about something else. It was fun.

6. NPKUA: How did you take your medical formula with your football schedule?
John: When we were on road trips, I would have to bring Phe-free formula. I would get asked what that was. I just explained that this is a supplement to my diet.

I made medical formula out to be not a big deal and then people don't make a big deal about it.

7. NPKUA: What was your formula intake like?
John: I would have formula with my pre-game breakfast. I would also bring formula to the locker room to take an hour before the game. I thought it benefited me because I was getting some form of nutrition in my body closer to the game than the other guys. I thought it helped.

In the off-season, I worked with my dietitian a lot. I have my formula intake spread throughout the day with meals, but I also worked with her about getting an extra daily

PhenylAde packet right after working out as my own form of protein shake that the other guys had.

The extra formula gave me some extra nutrients to help my body through off-season workouts. My body always felt 100%.

8. NPKUA: Did teammates know that you have PKU? How did they find out?
John: I approached it that if the situation arose that we were eating, or if it came up, I would talk about PKU. It was never something that needed to be addressed.
9. NPKUA: How was it for you transitioning to college—going from living with parents where your mom probably prepared your meals to being away from home. How did that work? Do you have any tips to stay on diet for seniors who are going to college?
John: When I was looking at college, my family always took a particular interest in the dining services and what they had. Before college, my mom made most of my meals. The most important thing for me was that summer before going to college, I spent a lot more time paying attention to what my mom did and how she prepared meals, so I would know what I was doing to make a meal. I focused on estimating the portions.

By the time I got into college, I was able to get pretty good at estimating in the dining hall. I didn't bring my scale, just estimated what serving I was taking, what portion.

As a freshman, I ate mostly at the dining hall, so when we were on campuses, I paid closer attention to whether they had a vegetarian section that would have something for me. Mom would make low-pro rolls or pizzas. The dining hall would let me keep it in the freezer so I could get it any time if I was looking for something I wanted to eat.

Make sure the dining hall has something available at all times—a vegetarian dish, pasta dish, something like that.

Make sure the dining hall is aware of your requirements.

Let the dining hall know that you would like to bring some of your own food.

Everyone has so many dietary restrictions now, colleges are sensitive to that and willing to work with you.

[callout: "I think this is advice I would give seniors: pay attention to what college offers as far as dining services go." – John Harrison, football player for Franklin & Mitchell College, adult with PKU.]

10. NPKUA: Was football a motivator for staying on diet?
John: Absolutely. Understanding the connection to staying on diet and how that affects physical ability was a very good motivator. I wanted to get as much out of football as I could, so being physically able to perform was important part of that. It made me want to be on diet.
11. NPKUA: Do you think that because you have PKU you may have developed self-awareness earlier than other friends or teammates about the connection regarding what you do to your body and put in it to get peak performance in athletics?

John: From the time you are born with PKU, there's emphasis on how taking care of yourself and what you do to your body impacts what you do. How you take care of your body influences how well you do in sports. For other kids when they start playing sports, that may be the first time they make that connection between how they do on the field being affected by how they take care of their body. For someone with PKU, you've made that connection your whole life.

12. NPKUA: What would you say to a teen with PKU who asked you for advice about managing PKU?

John: **Don't look at PKU as a burden. Look at it as another opportunity to help learn important life skills and it might seem like less of a hassle.**