

Tyler Campbell: Going for the tackle



Football star Tyler Campbell huddles with his famous father Earl to defeat MS.

by Andrea Sachs



Tyler Campbell

Tyler Campbell is a count-your-blessings kind of guy. The 26-year-old Austin native is given to making upbeat pronouncements in his friendly Texan twang. Still, it is unexpected to hear someone, even a born optimist like him, say earnestly, “Getting MS is the best thing that

could have ever happened to me.” But then again, even Campbell couldn’t have made that statement a few years ago.

Growing up in the Lone Star State, where football is king, the athletic Campbell gravitated toward the gridiron. By 2007, he was a running back at San Diego State University. Hopes for the young player ran high; he was the son of retired football great Earl Campbell, the Houston Oilers’ running back, who was described by legendary Dallas Cowboys coach Barry Switzer as “the greatest player who ever suited up.”

As the 2007 football season ended, the then-21-year-old fell flat on his face as he was trying to get out of bed one morning. “I did not know where it came from, and I’m competitive, so I was trying to get to my feet again. I ended up crawling over to the bathroom. I was terrified,” Campbell says.

At first, the team doctor suspected a football injury, perhaps a concussion. After a neurologist gave him an MRI, Campbell learned that he had multiple sclerosis. Knowing nothing about MS, he said, “How long until I can get full strength and play football?”

After starting on a disease-modifying medication and feeling healthy enough over the summer to work out, take classes and work at a part-time job, he got his doctor’s tentative permission to play another season—all the while deflecting questions from his coaches and teammates about his condition.

“I didn’t want them to show sympathy and I wanted to defeat this disease.” Unfazed, Campbell graduated from San Diego State with a BA in business administration with plans to pursue a master’s degree.

On the offensive

In the spring of 2009, Campbell was preparing for his Pro Day at San Diego State in the hopes of landing a spot in the NFL. He was in the best shape of his life when the big day arrived, but shortly thereafter, he had another episode, worse than the first one. Campbell’s neurologist permanently sidelined him from his beloved sport. While it was devastating for Campbell, his famous father seemed to take it the hardest. “He didn’t know what MS was, but he thought it was something that he might have passed on to me. He also thought this was a terminal disease,” says Campbell, recalling his father’s misconceptions about MS.

It was his mother Reuna, a former ER nurse, who gave him advice that Campbell credits with turning around his life. “She told me, ‘Look at all the people that God has used, and figure out what God is wanting you to use this MS for.’ I started to recognize that football was not the end for me; my MS was the beginning.”

As Campbell was adjusting to the realities of his own illness, his father, Earl, was coping with physical problems resulting from his football career. Both facing challenges, a new relationship emerged. The two former athletes teamed up on the family business. Earl is

currently president of [Earl Campbell Meat Products](#), a business he kicked off when he was no longer able to play. The company is among the largest U.S. sausage companies, selling more than 10 million pounds each year.

A family affair



Family and faith are a big part of Tyler Campbell's life. From left to right: Reuna, Earl, Tyler and Shana Campbell.

Campbell joined the family business as a sales account manager. But their bond went much deeper. "I had to learn how to walk all over again; my dad was learning how to walk all over again, too. We'd go to physical therapy together."

Since then, their joint efforts to help others affected by MS have brought them even closer. Along with the Pro Player Foundation, the duo has partnered with the Society to raise awareness and funds for the Society's Scholarship Program, using creative events such as a gourmet venture called "The Flavors of Austin."

Their efforts have been invaluable, says Debbie Pope, the Society's executive vice president of development. "The Campbells have made it possible for us to reach a new audience and to build awareness and understanding ... in the sports industry."

Two years ago, Campbell married his longtime friend, Shana, who gave birth to their first child, Messiah Christian, in June. Campbell hasn't had an exacerbation since before their wedding, though he deals with symptoms such as fatigue, numbness and dizzy spells. "I'm not Superman," he says. "My body tells me when I'm doing too much, when it's time for me to sit down."

For Campbell, aerobic exercise and riding his horse, Sweet T, are key to keeping in shape. Though he no longer dons a uniform, Campbell is still a man on the move. "I'm able to reach

more people than I ever could have tried to touch running down the field with a football,” he says with emotion. “That’s why I say my disease is a blessing. The way I wanted to impact the world playing football is not even close to the way I’m able to impact the world now.”

Andrea Sachs is a senior reporter at Time magazine. She was diagnosed with MS in 2009.

Read more about [Tyler and Earl Campbell’s story and efforts to stop MS](#).