

Michael Slater's Greatest Test

It was 1989, the ideal beginning to what was to be a groundbreaking cricketing career and Slats, as he is affectionately known, had just been accepted into the Australian Cricket Academy. At 18 years of age, the young gun was at the top of his game.

Yet within weeks of moving to the Academy, Slats had a bicycle accident. While a hip injury sustained as a result improved over time, a young Slater was experiencing brutal spinal pain.

“I felt an intense pain in my lower back...and also in the tops of my legs. It was worse in the mornings...(and) really hampered the way I walked...not a cool look!”

As a sportsman under scrutiny, Slater knew he couldn't afford to waste any time when it came to his health and went in search of advice from healthcare professionals around Australia.

It was a doctor at the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) who asked Slater if he had had a blood test.

“I asked: ‘what for?’. It was the first time I had heard about the HLA-B27 gene, which I tested positive for. People who are positive are much more likely to have ankylosing spondylitis.”

Ankylosing spondylitis (AS) causes inflammation and pain in the spine and other joints, including the shoulders, hips, knees, ankles and the joints between your knees and breastbone. If left untreated, AS can lead to permanent stiffening of your spine and in severe cases, the bones in the spine can fuse together, stopping movement and causing a permanently stooped-forward posture.

For the young talent, the AS diagnosis was “gut-wrenching”.

“Here I was, living out the dream and the opportunity of a lifetime but I wasn't sure what one day would bring to the next.”

Thankfully, the Academy allowed Slats to continue playing yet it was anything but smooth sailing. Like most AS sufferers, Slats had his good days and his bad days.

During the Ashes in 1993, Slater suffered from severe AS flare-ups, however, he still managed to score the first half-century of his career in the opening match. It didn't come easy and Slater admits he was lucky to even be on the field.

“The pain was constant and I knew if it got any uglier I’d have to pull out,” he admits.

Now retired, Slats is a Channel 9 cricket commentator and host of 2KY’s *Big Sports Breakfast* program. For years his AS had gone into remission as Slater changed his lifestyle to manage the disease. However, in recent years, due to his sedentary daily routine, Slats is starting to experience flare-ups once again.

“One of the positives in my cricket career was that I was always active, which is crucial in fighting AS. It’s very much, ‘you use it or lose it,’” he explains.

Today, Slats is tailoring an exercise program to help fight his latest AS flare-up. This time he’s keeping up surfing and is looking to build yoga and Pilates into the mix.

“Rather than just doing exercise I want to do, I am doing activities with a real purpose knowing that it will allow me to be running around with my kids in 15 years,” he explains.

Slater puts his AS management down to a strong network of healthcare professionals and the ongoing support of his family and friends, and says picking up on the pain early was critical to his ability to continue playing the game he loved.

“For young guys, if you’ve got spinal pain that is constant and always rumbling, and particularly if it eases as the day goes on, but is there the next day, get it checked as soon as you can – ask your GP for a referral to a rheumatologist. The quicker you get on to it, the easier it will be for you down the track.”

[Read more](#) personal stories from people who are living with AS