

Nutritional Training, Part 2

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An athlete's quality of food intake is just as important as physical training and mental training. Unfortunately, many athletes are not really aware of this concept unless they are diabetic, vegetarian/vegan, gluten intolerant, and/or have food allergies. Food is a major player with exercise to obtain the desired results. While there are individuals who do take eating seriously and watch the quality of food that goes in their body, they are certainly a minority at all levels of athletics and in the general population.

For everyone, making informed and better choices when eating decreases chronic injuries, increases mental and emotional health, and creates career longevity through proper recovery and overall health. The journey toward increasing athletic performance through food is an essential lifestyle factor.

It is only recently that more and more of the general population is becoming aware of the seriousness of the lack of quality of American food. Since the 1970s, the climate has changed, with so-called "natural" foods being differentiated from processed foods. Since then, there have been three major distinctions:

Natural foods: Minimally processed and do not contain refined sugars/flours, milled grains, hydrogenated oils, sweeteners, food coloring or flavoring. Examples would be natural sweeteners such as sucanat, stevia, raw honey, agave syrup and maple syrup. Sea salt is another example.

Whole foods: Unprocessed and unrefined, or processed and refined as little as possible. These do not contain additives such as sugar, salt or fat. Examples would be unpolished grains, non-homogenized milk, fruits, vegetables, and unprocessed meat, poultry and fish.

Organic foods: Foods that are grown without conventional pesticides and artificial fertilizers, free from contamination by human or industrial waste, and processed without irradiation or food additives.

Carbs and Sugars

Carbs are the body's primary fuel source. Most athletes gravitate toward simple carbs as they are fast and easy convenient foods. Simple sugars are found in most refined foods that contain white sugar, honey, corn syrup, cane sugar, white flour (pastas, white and wheat breads) and high fructose corn syrup (HFCS). The latter is also contained in junk foods, and energy bars, drinks and powders, including many canned and packaged foods. Eating habits involving high sugar and refined foods make athletes prone to muscle and joint deterioration and injury. Eating these foods before an event creates quick spikes in blood sugar levels followed by lows.

A current issue in scientific research and a public relations campaign to equate HFCS with natural sugar is the fact that HFCS is so prevalent within food nowadays. It has replaced cane and beet sugar (sucrose) as the primary sweetener in most foods. Food manufacturers prefer HFCS mainly because it is cheap, easy to use and increases shelf life of processed foods. HFCS does not contain

any enzymes, vitamins or minerals; therefore, it ends up taking these micronutrients from the body in order for the body to use them. Fructoses found in fruits contain the enzymes and micronutrients needed for the body to assimilate fructose (a whole food). Another serious issue is that most HFCS is made from genetically modified corn, which has been associated with numerous allergies.

Complex carbs are the preferred energy fuel source. In processed white flour, parts of the grain are removed therefore removing the needed vitamins and minerals. Complex carbs are found in whole grains, fruits, and vegetables. For athletes, simple carbs and excess complex carbs will cause a feeling of sluggishness and decrease muscular strength, therefore decreasing overall performance. Here are some alternative suggestions for athletes:

Two to three hours before training/game: Complex carbs, fats and small amounts of protein will do the trick. Sweet potatoes, brown rice, olive oil, almond butter, flax oil, walnuts, almonds and eggs are all easy to digest and should give you more sustained energy for the day.

Just before training/game: Eat some carbs such as apples, plums, pears, citrus fruit (not juice) and berries. They're great right before a game or workout as they give you a small spike without the massive plummet.

During and after training/game: Sports drinks and bars contain sugary carbs which could replace all those lost carbs immediately following exertion. Weigh your options carefully, as you're still using brands containing chemicals, colorings and preservatives that aren't good for you at all. Instead, sweeteners like honey or maple, cane or brown rice syrup are more natural and can be found in many healthier bars and powders.

Keep it simple

Eat as fresh as possible. A few days a week gravitate towards legumes, soy and quinoa instead of animal products as a protein source. Eat all the plants you can handle and include whole grains over refined carbs. Embrace olive oil and eat snacks like trail mix, and pre-cut fruits and veggies. I carry organic bars with me as an alternative to traditional sport bars.

Almost every nutritional expert agrees that simple carbs are considered useless calories at best and damaging in excess. What started in the 1950s as convenience has progressed into big business, trumping public health and safety for the almighty dollar at all costs. This was cloaked by the lack of evidence-based research to substantiate in a court of law that a problem existed and was manipulated by big business so there would not be any legal retribution. This is a true lack of integrity, responsibility and accountability and seems unfortunately to be the very infrastructure of big business in the United States.

Now, concerns raised years earlier, anticipated exactly what is happening now. In the United States, obesity is epidemic, medical costs have sky rocketed, and our youth are expected to live shorter life spans than their parents due to a very preventable situation; unhealthy eating. Athletes are affected by the very same issues. The difference is that their activity level is higher but the quality of their food is the same as the general population and they share the mindset of convenience.

Bottom line: we need to be paying more attention to what is going in our bodies. Consciously read labels as this is really the best way to know what is going in your body. It only takes a little more time but the benefits are tremendous on so many levels of performance for athletes and non-athletes alike.

Resources

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