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A Healthy Athlete is a Stronger Athlete

by

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It is the day of the big race. The race that decides whether you advance to the NCAA cross-country meet or whether your season gets cut short. The long months of preparation have all come down to the next twenty minutes. Runners from across the nation toe the line with focus and nervous anticipation. The starter shoots the gun. The race goes out fast, but you feel strong and confident. About half way through the race, however, you feel like your body and legs are slowing down. Fatigue has set in and although you finish the race, you know you have not realized your dream as you narrowly miss the last NCAA qualifying spot. Looking back on everything you have done leading up to this race, you realize that one aspect of your preparation and training regimen, which you overlooked, was your diet.

A balanced diet and nutrition plan is critical to athletic success and should be treated just as importantly as any other aspect of training and preparation. Many important factors affect the performance of an athlete above and beyond his or her training. Physical preparation and activity are paramount, but equally important to an athlete's success are nutrition and diet. In the case of the cross-country runner, an added emphasis to the training strategy should have included nutritional management. Focusing on a healthy nutritional regimen is an extremely important aspect of an athlete's overall preparation, as this attention will ultimately improve mental focus, stamina, and increased performance levels both on and off the field.

Food provides the basic fuel for the body, allowing it to function. While everyone should be aware of daily food and nutritional requirements, athletes that compete at intense levels have to be even more concerned with their overall nutrition and how diet choices affect their ability to perform. All athletes, regardless of their specific sport, should try to divide their energy intake to include foods that contain carbohydrates, proteins, and fats. The majority of calories consumed should come from carbohydrates. During the body's digestion process, these carbohydrates are broken down into glucose, which is one of the body's primary energy sources. If carbohydrates are restricted, the athlete's energy levels will be compromised which will negatively affect performance. Furthermore, although an athlete's diet is directly correlated to performance, it is important to also note that depending on the sport, different types of athletes need to make a conscious effort to consume varied types of nutritional compounds. This point is the main focus of an article titled, "What is the Optimal Composition of an Athlete's Diet?" which appeared in the *European Journal of Sport Science*. Authors Elizabeth Broad and Gregory Cox confirm this point by stating, "Diet must be specific to the type, intensity, frequency, and duration of the

training undertaken, and be specific to each individual athlete” (57). As an example, athletes such as football players will require diets rich in proteins to help build muscle mass as opposed to cross-country runners whose diets should be rich in carbohydrates in order to help better fuel their cardio vascular systems.

Food is essential to athletes, but what should not be overlooked is the need for fluids before, during, and after training and competitions. Any amount of dehydration can impair an athlete’s performance, and it is especially important to stay hydrated if athletes are competing for longer than 60 minutes or in very warm conditions. Water is always the best choice of fluid, but there are also many brands of sports drinks that can also provide electrolytes such as sodium and potassium, which can help ensure that cells in the body are able to perform their functions.

Athletes need to also ensure that they are eating appropriately both during their competitive season as well as during their off-season. The article, “How Diet Affects Athletic Performance,” stresses the importance of having athletes’ diets correspond to their yearly training regimen. The author states, “Usually, a well-prepared athlete has his training program broken into three cycles: prep, competition and transition. Many successful athletes also break their diets into cycles that parallel their training cycles” (Viara). Use of a yearlong nutritional plan will help the athlete to maintain consistent body mass, muscle, and stamina. Their bodies will thus become attuned to nutrients needed to perform at a constant yearlong level. Prior to the competitive season, an athlete can then just tweak and fine-tune their diet without any major setbacks to performance.

Along with what they eat, the timing of when to eat is another area that athletes need to be aware of. On a daily basis, the average athlete should eat every three to five hours and try to consume food that is rich in protein, carbohydrates, and healthy fats. On the day of the competition, special consideration should be given to the pre-event meal, which should include carbohydrates and be consumed three to four hours prior to competing. This meal should be easily digestible and actually tested prior to a big competition. Many successful athletes experiment with different types of foods and ultimately settle on those that provide them the best nutrients while not impacting their game day performance. It is necessary to also limit the consumption of empty calories from soda, alcohol, and many snack foods. While these types of calories may make the athlete feel full or hydrated, they more than likely will impair performance.

Understanding how diet contributes to overall performance will definitely help increase any athlete's success, but it is also vital for an athlete to understand how the body utilizes the food that is consumed. At a basic level, the nutrients in food help provide fuel to the body, ultimately increasing stamina and energy levels. For athletes, this process is especially significant. Registered dietician Suzanne Girard Eberle summarizes the importance of an athlete's nutrition base in her book, *Endurance Sports Nutrition*:

Our ability to run, bicycle, ski, and swim, hinges on the capacity of the body to extract energy from ingested food. Your body uses a mixture of fuels during every activity that you do. How hard you work and how long you go ultimately determine what proportion of fuels the body uses. (33)

Thus, an athlete's ability to perform their sport at a high level results from how efficiently their body utilizes the food they consume. With each activity that they participate in, whether it is running, swimming, or even just sitting on the couch, calories are being used up; the more strenuous the workout or performance, the more calories that will be needed. It follows then, that athletes should eat more nutrient dense foods such as fruit, chicken, and even bread and pasta, which will contribute to higher performance levels. At the same time they must limit foods that are high in saturated and trans fat as well as added sugars. For example, foods such as potato chips or fast food supply the body with little to no nutrients and although they may be filling, they are detrimental to athletic success.

Equally as important as the choice of foods is the amount of food that an athlete requires to perform at their highest level. Eberle stresses why athletes should be concerned about how many calories they are eating by stating, "Consuming enough calories, or fuel, each day is key if you want to support and enhance your training and racing, or if you simply want to feel good while working out" (11). Calorie counting is a common practice for athletes to optimize performance. Football players, for example, will require more calories per day of certain foods than distance runners because in order to be successful in football, athletes must have a high muscle mass to block, tackle, and sprint across the field. On the other hand, distance runners require lean muscle mass in order to promote efficiency in running long distances; therefore, the amount and type of calories consumed will be different than the football player's. By understanding these nutritional values, athletes will make more informed diet choices based upon their sport and what is required of their bodies in order to compete at an advanced level.

Although a nutritionally focused diet is the cornerstone to improved performance, many athletes also choose to augment their nutrition plan by incorporating supplements into their diet. A critical question arises, however, on whether or not supplements are truly helpful or harmful to the body. The International Olympic Committee, which is considered one of the preeminent authorities in the field of athletics, offers this counsel to those considering supplement use. “The International Olympic Committee frowns on the use of performance-enhancing drugs. Still, athletes mistakenly look to the needle to inject their success, rather than ingesting it on their forks” (Graham 3). This advice points back to the consideration that food and nutrition are the best means of enhancing performance. If considered for use, an athlete must be aware of which supplements and vitamins are legal and can actually produce scientifically proven benefits. With the advent of random drug testing at the collegiate and professional levels, athletes are under extreme scrutiny. If selected for testing, a positive result could potentially end their career. Eberle cautions athletes to do extensive research before subscribing to a supplement regimen by stating that, “Your inherited talent, mental attitude, training methods, eating habits, and equipment choices all play a far greater role in your success than could any dietary supplement” (124). Athletes know their bodies more than anyone, and they must evaluate the risk versus reward when it comes to the use of supplements. Those looking for a competitive edge should consider focusing first on tweaking their training plan rather than relying on artificial means to improve performance.

While not only providing the fuel necessary to sustain the physical demands of an athlete’s body, food also affects an athlete’s thinking process and mental focus. These areas are also paramount for success. For example, certain foods have been known to promote healthy brain functions. Daniel Amen, author of *Change Your Brain, Change Your Body: Use Your Brain to Get and Keep the Body You Have Always Wanted*, points out which foods are most beneficial to the brain by claiming, “A healthy diet includes lean protein, fruits, vegetables, nuts, and healthy fats like olive oil. Studies show that your brain works better if you eat nine servings of fruit and vegetables a day” (27). These foods and nutrients can help boost blood flow to the brain that, in turn, helps an athlete’s mental focus. All sports in today’s highly competitive world require mental toughness and strategic planning. Those athletes at the top of their game know how important certain foods can be to healthy brain function and have incorporated them into their daily nutritional plans.

Diet and nutrition are critical building blocks to athletic success, so what happens when an athlete consumes too little food? High performance athletes are extremely competitive and most often obsessive about their training. Athletes are often perfectionists because any slip up in their training plan could be costly down the road. These traits can often contribute to the development of an eating disorder such as anorexia or bulimia. The athletes that are most susceptible to these eating disorders on average are those involved in gymnastics, running, dancing, as well as crew, wrestling, and figure skating. These sports are known for being weight conscious, and deviating from a certain weight can adversely affect an athlete's performance. Using running as an example, Eberle warns of the risks of poor nutrition with her statement, "Inadequate dietary intake over time compromises all body systems, leaving runners prone to stress fractures, infections, and other problems" (141). Contrary to common belief, male athletes are just as susceptible to developing eating disorders as females athletes are. Just as you would treat a physical ailment if you were injured, athletes must seek treatment for eating disorders in the form of nutritional counseling or therapy if they want to maintain a high performance level in their sport. If an athlete's eating disorder goes undetected for too long, the consequences may be dire and could put him or her out of competition forever.

For an athlete to be successful, many elements need to be taken into consideration. A perfect training plan that addresses just the physical aspect of a sport will only take them so far and not guarantee effectiveness. The correct nutritional and diet components will ensure that their mind and bodies have the essential elements for the physical and mental stamina they require to be successful. Noting when to eat, the amount to eat, and how often to eat are critical, so a balanced diet should be the focus for any athlete during the entire year and not just the competitive season. Additionally, abstaining from harmful supplements such as alcohol, drugs, or simply junk food will also allow an athlete to maintain a healthy mind and body. In order to achieve the ultimate in physical performance, athletes must take personal responsibility over every aspect of their preparation. Just as an athlete would never subject themselves to a detrimental element in their training, they should also never compromise their fitness with unhealthy diet habits.

One year has passed and once again you are at the qualifying meet for the NCAA's. You have put in a year's worth of training that has consisted of running many miles and completing rigorous strength training. The major difference from the year before is that you have

incorporated a focused diet and nutritional plan into your training strategy. The gun goes off and the race begins. You feel stronger and more energized because of the diet changes you made, so you easily pass the point in the race where you started to falter the year before. A comprehensive training and nutritional strategy has ensured your success. As the finish line approaches, you begin to sprint with confidence and ease, knowing that you have achieved your goal. And to think it was all because of a few simple diet changes.

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