



Weekly Coach Note: Athletes' Nutrition



We encourage our children to participate in sports for a number of reasons. Hopefully the #1 reason is to provide children an opportunity to have fun and just play. But finger-painting, playing video games, and building snowmen all do that. The power of youth and high school sports is that participating in these activities also builds healthy habits for young people as they grow into adults. Among those habits is a balanced diet to support sustained physical exercise.

The word diet gets thrown around a lot in our culture, and usually refers to a concerted effort to lose weight. But whether you feel like you are or not, we are ALL on a diet! Whatever we eat is our diet. Young people are at a critical point in their lives when the habits they are forming will determine the kind of nutritional patterns they will follow in their adult lives. As coaches, it is important to coach the whole athlete, which includes making recommendations for healthy eating habits. In addition to the plethora of nutritional resources available on the internet, we recommend the following measures targeting young athletes' nutritional habits:

- Young people are still growing, and should eat accordingly. Eat a diet rich in vitamins and minerals that foster healthy growth.
- Athletes require more calories than

"Moderation in all things; especially moderation."

~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

non-athletes. Make sure athletes are eating enough, and gaining energies for complex carbohydrates, lean protein, and unsaturated fats.

- Optimize athletic performance by preparing for competition with a balanced, energy filled meal.
- Encourage healthy snacking. Smaller meals help maintain a sustained energy level.
- Be wary of athletes who are taking "healthy" nutrition to an extreme. Be on the lookout for excessive talk about food, or accelerated weight loss (especially in girls).

A healthy "relationship" with food is crucial in young people. It is important to emphasize food as the fuel for a healthy lifestyle, rather than something that needs to be feared or taken in excess. Emphasizing the utilitarian nature of food will help children respect food as a means to an end, and not as a vehicle for indulgence or as a foe in the pursuit of healthy living.

Coaches must also recognize the extreme power that an over-emphasis on food may have. Putting too much stress on nutrition may cause athletes to over-analyze their own eating habits, and possibly acquire eating disorders. Stress that food can and should be a good thing that your body needs, but a healthy relationship with food should be able to self-regulate. Athletes who eat healthy should ideally be able to listen to their bodies and give them the good nutrition they are craving!