



How Coaches Can Talk to Their Female Athletes About Nutrition and Weight Control

by Sean McCann, Ph.D.

Head of Sport Psychology at the United States Olympic Committee

"I try to be sensitive, but it is like walking on eggshells. I know better than to compare athletes in terms of skinniness, but what am I supposed to do if I really believe an athlete needs to lose weight to get better? I feel it is my responsibility to say something, but I'm afraid I will say the wrong thing."

—National Team Coach.

"I saw the video on athletes with eating disorders, and I saw the part where the athlete pretty much blamed her coach for developing an eating disorder, because the coach told her she could be faster if she lost some weight. The whole time I was thinking, 'I've told lots of athletes the same thing.'"

—Endurance Sport Coach

THE INTERPLAY OF NUTRITION, EATING BEHAVIORS, AND EMOTIONS

As this special issue indicates, nutrition is one of the last legal frontiers for performance enhancement. Sport scientists know more about the relationship between eating, drinking, and performance than ever before. However, even as the science and knowledge of sports nutrition improves, the reality is that for most people in society, thinking about eating patterns and weight management are topics that produce emotional rather than rational responses. The world of sport is no exception, and in fact, the environment of

sport can create special emotional challenges that make discussion of eating behaviors and nutrition a loaded issue for coaches and athletes.

Many coaches who have tried to push the performance envelope by focusing on nutrition, body fat, and weight of their athletes find that they have wandered, unintentionally, into an emotional minefield. What may have begun as a search for a performance edge can evolve into something altogether different. The reality is this; for most athletes, discussions of weight gain, weight loss, decreasing body fat, the performance impact of leanness, percentages of carbohydrates in a diet, and other sports nutrition topics are subjects that come at times with a great deal of emotional baggage. This is especially true for female athletes.

THE WORLD OF YOUNG WOMEN

To understand young female athletes, you need to appreciate the special challenges of being a young woman in today's world. These issues are discussed well and fully in other areas (an excellent but sobering read for any coach of young women, is "Reviving Ophelia"), but a partial list of the challenges for young women today include:

Life has sped up. Everything arrives earlier including puberty and exposure to adult topics. Italian researchers recently found evidence to suggest that increased television watching impacting melatonin levels, contributing to the earlier onset of puberty today. Whatever the cause, earlier onset of puberty is well established in the literature. In addition to the physiological realities of adolescence, children today are being forced earlier to deal with the psychological impact of discussions of and direct exposure to sexuality, in movies, television, and in the schools. "Hooking up" with classmates is happening earlier and earlier.

Body image pressures are increasing—clothes and culture. Ask any parent of a girl today, and they will tell you that trying to buy pants that aren't cut low, shirts that aren't cut above the bellybutton, and anything that isn't skin tight, is getting harder and harder. The horrible question for high schoolers; "Do I look fat?" is now being asked by 8 and 9-year olds! A study of 6th graders found that 70% of them first became concerned about their weight between ages 9 and 11. An athletic but larger-framed adolescent girl trying to squeeze into today's fashions can feel awkward, exposed, and can be acutely sensitive to comments about her body, even well-meaning comments from family or friends (or coaches!).

"Ideal body" stereotypes are more distorted than ever. Ironically, even as childhood and adolescent obesity grows as a major problem in the U.S., the body ideal gets skinnier and skinnier. A study of Playboy magazine centerfolds has found that the breast size of the models has stayed the same or increased since the 60's, but that the waist size has gotten smaller and smaller. Plastic surgery has had this impact on the models



in women's magazines as well. In other words, our society's definitions of beauty are becoming more and more unrealistic, and more and more unobtainable for young women who care greatly about how attractive they are.

Discussions of diets are everywhere, while discussions of health are absent.

Ask most teenage girls about the body's energy systems, and you will draw a blank. Ask them about what is "bad to eat," however, and they will provide you with a long list, including virtually all carbohydrates and fat! Teenage girls are exposed constantly to diet discussions, including partial truths, misinformation, and advertising endorsements from famous actresses. Go online and you will find websites that actually endorse eating disorders and "teach" girls how to become more "successful" at them! Misinformation like this produces some bizarre beliefs about eating, health, and food. For example, many young female athletes do not understand that there is a minimum necessary amount of body fat for health. If it is body fat, they reason, it is bad, and is the enemy. For many young female athletes, a coach who measures "body fat" is opening up a Pandora's Box of buried fears, self-doubt, and dangerous thinking.

EATING DISORDERS

The rates of childhood and adolescent obesity are growing in the U.S. On the other end of the spectrum, however, rates of adolescent eating disorders have grown over the last 30 years, and almost every teenager knows someone with an eating disorder. The problem may be even more pronounced in sports. Studies in the last two years have found eating disorders and disordered eating (problematic behaviors that don't meet the strict criteria for eating disorder) in college-age athletes to be evident in over 50% of participants in some sports. Helping female athletes stay healthy and avoid the "Female Athlete Triad" (amenorrhea, eating disorder, and low bone density) is a major performance factor for coaches of endurance sports, sports that emphasize leanness (including judged sports), and weight category sports. Many elite coaches have lost extremely talented athletes as they developed eating disorders, and gradually lost the ability to tolerate training loads, resulting in season and career ending injuries.

PERFECTIONISM, AND DIETS—AN UNHEALTHY MIX

Perfectionism has both healthy and unhealthy components. On one hand, it helps generate high standards and a strong work ethic, on the other; it can cause people to worry too much about making mistakes, and strive towards unrealistic ideals.

The number one trigger for eating disorders in adolescents is going on a diet. One of the most useful but difficult personality traits for athletes is perfectionism. Control of weight by means of a diet can trigger a variety of destructive thinking for perfectionists. One frequently occurring thought for perfectionistic athletes is a search for things they can control. Controlling what they eat may be easier than developing a difficult technical sport skill. While only a very small percentage of people who go on diets end up developing an eating disorder, a coach needs to consider with the characteristics of the athlete he or she is working with when broaching the topic of restricting diet.

If you have a driven, perfectionistic young female athlete, and you suggest that they need to lose weight, you may unintentionally set off a series of unhealthy behaviors. Many may attempt to skip meals, for example, which research shows can induce the body to hold on to body fat. The athlete who tries to avoid eating all day may be also be pre-disposing themselves to bingeing when they do eat. At the Olympic Training Center, I have seen a number of other athlete responses to non-specific advice to lose weight, including; using "recovery time" to do more aerobic exercise, eliminating fat from diets, diet pills, using saunas to sweat off weight, vomiting, and "fruit and veggie only" days. Usually, these responses are secretive, and the coach has no idea what the athlete is up to. In any case, discussions of weight loss with young female athletes should always be thought through carefully, with plenty of professional guidance on healthy eating strategies.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

Many athletes associate fitness with skinniness. Many athletes will compare weights, without considering body type, sport demands, or even height! Unfortunately, many coaches are also guilty of ignoring individual differences when they talk about body weight. Frequently, coaches assume that a more muscular endurance athlete would perform better with less bulk. What if the athlete in question has exactly the right mix of muscle mass to body mass for them to tolerate training loads, recover quickly, and perform at their personal peak? This point was driven home for me at the Athens Olympics where I saw a much more powerfully built mountain biker pass leaner and lighter riders while climbing into a very high finish at the Olympics. Could she have done even better if lighter? Or would she even have made her Olympic team?

In your sport, how many times have you seen great athletes defy the stereotypical assumptions about ideal body type

needed for greatness? If this is true at the very elite level, why would coaches of young developing athletes ignore individual differences and try to remake an athlete's body? It is an easy and dangerous trap to fall into.

YOUNG MEN AND YOUNG WOMEN

This article has focused primarily on young women, in part because research shows that women are more likely to develop self-destructive eating habits and full-fledged eating disorders than men. This doesn't mean, however, that many young male athletes don't have similar issues. For example, in a sport such as ski jumping, where leanness is a performance advantage, the international federation had to develop minimum body mass standards to deal with a rash of eating disorders among the males competing internationally. Wrestling, another weight control sport, has had several male athlete fatalities from unhealthy, severe weight-cutting practices. From my perspective as a sport psychologist for elite men and women, however, I have simply seen many more women respond to nutritional issues in ways that hurt themselves and that surprised and confounded their coaches.

DO'S AND DON'T'S WHEN TALKING ABOUT NUTRITION

"When I actually had women crying in a team meeting, I realized putting everybody's body fat on one sheet and passing it out was not the brightest idea I ever had."

—National Team Coach

1. Don't talk about weight loss, body fat, or diets, without first thinking through why you are doing it and what you hope to achieve.
2. Don't wade into these waters without a strong multi-disciplinary team to support you. Such a team should include a nutritionist, psychologist, and physiologist.
3. Don't assume that athletes will treat discussions of fat in a rational, unemotional way.
4. Don't treat weight loss and gain as a matter of personal character ("If you had some discipline, weight wouldn't be an issue!")
5. Don't verbally jump on athletes every time you see them eating poorly. ("You'll never be any good if you keep on eating hot dogs.")
6. Do consider the potential costs along with the benefits of doing body composition tests or regular weigh-ins. Some coaches have decided that the potential down-side outweighs the benefits for developing athletes.
7. Do provide lots of good information about healthy eating, nutrition, energy systems, and strategies for maximizing performance through nutrition.

8. Don't do group weigh-ins, or discuss individual body composition results in a group.
9. Do expect athletes to have some strange, uninformed ideas about food.
10. Do expect "if a little is good, a lot is better" thinking to be rumbling around in athletes' heads when you make nutrition recommendations. This can mean "reduced fat" is interpreted to be "NO FAT," and "less than 1500 calories" is interpreted to mean "less than 500 calories if I am really good".
11. Do be watchful with athletes held out of training for some time due to injury. In the weeks they are out, they may be developing guilt about not burning off calories, or they may develop unrealistic weight goals based on loss of muscle mass secondary to injury. One elite gymnast I worked with developed an eating disorder during the recovery period from an ACL tear. As her weight dropped from constant riding on the exercise bike, she grew resistant to the idea of getting back to her pre-injured weight, and she resented her increasing muscle mass as she came back to her sport.
12. Do expect your athletes to be significantly influenced by people without sophisticated understanding of nutrition. I have seen national team athletes torn up by comments from parents, boyfriends, and teammates. One woman successfully eroded a teammate's confidence simply by asking "is it those pants, or is your butt a lot bigger these days?" It took that athlete six months to realize that her teammate just wanted her spot on the team.
13. Do get everyone on your nutrition team on the same page. Discuss your goals for the team and individual athletes, and make sure everybody agrees, before talking to athletes about any individual goals.
14. Do prohibit certain kinds of language when talking about weight. "Jokes," nicknames, sarcasm, and insults should never be allowed when talking about weight loss or gain.
15. Be knowledgeable about who you might refer an athlete to if you suspect he or she is developing an eating disorder. 

ADDITIONAL READING

Pipher, Mary. *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. Ballantine Books, 1995 ISBN: 0345392825

Thompson, Ron A. and Roberta Trattner Sherman. *Helping Athletes with Eating Disorders*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1993. ISBN: 0873223837