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You Are What You Eat When It Comes To Off-Season Nutrition

By Dave Ellis

In the previous Coaches Playbook, we touched on the importance of spreading healthy meals out over the course of the full day to improve recovery from strenuous activity. Now it's time to characterize what a healthy meal should look like to nourish hard off-season training.

The off-season is the time to improve balance with a better-conditioned abdomen and trunk (core), foot quickness that comes with agility drills and explosiveness that comes from jumping drills (plyometrics).

It's also a time to work on strength training to improve your ability to come out on the winning end of a check, and interval sprints to build up sprint endurance, which in turn gives you the ability to stop, start, and chop your feet without turning your back on the play, so you can win the one-on-one battles for the puck.

Professionally certified strength & conditioning specialists are the ones who can organize these off-season training programs. They will be the first to tell you that you can't wait until the season begins to work on these performance fundamentals. In-season, we just work on hanging onto these attributes as our time and energy is consumed in practices and games.

Get Color On Your Plate



Step 1) Build up the body's natural defenses and avoid some preventable illnesses by getting color on your plate in the form of fresh fruits and vegetables.

It's important that athletes realize the medicinal powers of natural antioxidants, which we can get from darkly colored fruits and vegetables, notably olives and avocados, along with nuts and seeds.

Fresh produce tends to be the weakest aspect of American diets, especially for those who eat while traveling, so anytime someone in your household takes the time to put fresh produce in front of you, consider it a favor and take it in.

Major colleges usually have training tables stocked with fresh produce, sometimes going so far as to place chefs in the homes of athletes to ensure their antioxidant intake is optimized. Doing so helps athletes cope with free radicals and inflammation, which are the damaging by-products of grinding workouts and a heavy travel schedule.

And while a multi-vitamin can be helpful, it does not begin to compensate for the absence of these important foods in their natural state, so think of fresh produce as preventive medicine.

As athletes move up the competitive ladder, they'll inevitably discover that coaches quickly grow tired of athletes who either miss practice due to illness or fail to keep up their grades in school. Fresh produce addresses both issues, along with the added bonus of reducing the risk of any number of degenerative disease states that are crippling western society today, such as heart disease and Type II Diabetes.



Complex Carbohydrates Fuel For The Body

Step 2) If you want to have energy reserves that can last until the final minutes of a practice or game, increase your intake of complex carbohydrates, especially on active days.

Athletes who fail to restore energy reserves — best achieved by consuming starchy foods like pasta, whole grain bread, cereal, rice and potatoes — are often the first ones to lose a step, which can cost a hockey team a game. Coaches know what a tired skater looks like. More importantly, opposing coaches who spot a fatigued player will immediately match up their fastest player to your team's tired one to gain an advantage.

Carbohydrate is the primary fuel required to restore spent energy. We have a limited capacity, or storage space, to build up and stockpile energy reserves, which come in the form of muscle glycogen. The best way to do that is to fill your plate with complex carbohydrates on active (practice or game) days. Complex carbs are slow-digesting (fiber rich) foods that replenish glycogen stores over a longer period of time.

Simple carbohydrates are usually inexpensive and easy to find, but extra effort is required to find and consume complex carbs, which is what you'll find in whole grain breads versus white bread; or by eating boiled red potatoes with the skin on instead of french fries.

On off-days, athletes should try to avoid fast-digesting carbs, such as soft drinks and desserts, which can turn to body fat if not burned off.



Proteins Help With Muscle Repair

Step 3) Athletes who want to speed the rate of muscle repair after strenuous workouts will want to diversify protein intake from the three main sources: animal, vegetable and dairy.

Male athletes tend to rely heavily on animal sources, specifically lean red meat – to – get their protein. However, those striving for rapid recovery after workouts would be well advised to target dairy (such as yogurt) and vegetable (beans and rice) sources of protein as well.

Conversely, females tend to shy away from animal sources of protein, when in fact lean red meat would help them restore some of the iron loss that results from monthly menstrual cycles. Women should, in fact, make a special effort to consume iron, which enables working muscles to facilitate the air we breathe into muscle reconstruction.

The calcium in dairy proteins is also helpful for both male and female athletes, as is the cholesterol-free nature of vegetable proteins.

Note that proteins range from very lean to very high in fat. Athletes can assimilate high-fat proteins on active days, when they are training. But they need to back off on high fats when inactive, especially when resting for two or more days.

Finally, it's important that athletes can distinguish a lean source of protein (tenderloin) from a high-fat source (fried chicken); and to have the discipline to eat lean whenever possible, especially on off days.

Put these three steps to work and try to eat smaller meals every four hours throughout your day to fuel your body for optimal training. With less down time, more energy, and faster recovery from muscle soreness, you can indeed

outwork the competition.

Dave Ellis is a life-long hockey player and Level V USA Hockey coach who has worked in the collegiate ranks training and feeding athletes at athletic departments of the Universities of Nebraska and Wisconsin. For the last five years, he has been consulting with some of the top professional and collegiate athletic departments on how to out-work the competition using his time-tested Fueling Tactics® sports nutrition system.