

FAMILY

The New Performance Enhancer in High School Sports? Nutrition

By Donna De La Cruz May 12, 2016 6:00 am

Jordan Burg, 18, who plays varsity football and baseball and runs track, never used to think about what he was eating. But after he learned at school that nutrition was as important to his athletic performance as attending practice, he changed his diet.

Before, “I figured that I worked out so hard, it didn’t matter,” he said. “I ate ice cream whenever I pleased, cheese on everything and soda every day.” Now, he said, “I find myself at the salad bar having grilled chicken salads,” and on game days “I eat chicken breast and fish, and I make sure I drink as much water as possible.” He also avoids processed foods and red meat.

Jordan, a senior at the Windward School in Los Angeles, a private co-ed school for grades 7-12, said, “I am experiencing far fewer muscle cramps as well as less muscle fatigue.”

He credits this change to Windward’s heavy focus on nutrition as part of its athletic program, something that appears to be a new trend in high schools, said Molly Wong Vega, a dietitian who provides her services to three public school districts in the greater Houston area. Long a standard part of professional and college programs, the emphasis on diet is shifting to the high school level.

“Schools are starting to bring in dietitians to discuss the importance of nutrition with young athletes to complete the circle,” Ms. Wong Vega said. “Suggesting a snack of bell peppers with hummus may be a way to help increase vitamin A and C intake and give a little zinc as well,” which she says can help with muscle and tissue repair.

Ms. Wong Vega said public school districts often have tighter budgets than private schools, making it harder to hire specialists in sports nutrition. She is not employed directly by the schools but works with their athletic trainers through the Houston Methodist System, a network of hospitals. She said it took her and another dietitian a full semester to talk to all the coaching staff members and 900 athletes at just one high school.

The Chandler Unified School District in Arizona, a public district in the suburbs of Phoenix, has three dietitians on staff. One is Wesley Delbridge, also a spokesman for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, a trade group representing some 75,000 registered dietitians and other nutrition professionals.

“By hiring a dietitian, districts receive that extra skill set that can improve their meals and increase health,” said Mr. Delbridge, a registered dietitian who directs the district’s food and nutrition department. “I have been advocating for school nutrition departments and food service departments to hire dietitians for some time, and I’m happy to see more and more schools incorporate nutrition not only into their athletic programs but into its core programs.”

Mr. Delbridge and his team developed “peak performance packs,” boxes of food that students in the district’s high schools can buy in the cafeteria for \$5. There are three choices: endurance, muscle building and rapid recovery packs, each aimed at giving student athletes solid nutritional choices for their sport.

The endurance pack, for example — for sports like soccer, cross country, track and wrestling — contains whole-grain pasta salad, fresh fruit, string cheese, vegetables, hummus and a beverage high in electrolytes, intended to help prevent cramping and muscle fatigue. The muscle-building pack contains foods that are high in lean protein, both plant- and animal-based, to encourage muscles to repair and build up again.

Sports nutritionists concede that getting kids to eat healthfully remains a struggle.

“We don’t say ‘don’t eat this, don’t eat that,’” said Kermit Cannon, who heads the Windward School’s program to incorporate healthy eating into its curriculum.

“We emphasize that good nutrition, along with sleep and exercise, will not only benefit you as a student athlete, but those habits will benefit you for a lifetime.”

Tackling eating disorders is also often part of the nutrition programs, with some dietitians providing one-on-one sessions with students. Mr. Delbridge is sometimes asked by a coach or a counselor to talk with student athletes who have eating disorders, and their parents.

“We would discuss their current weight, exercise activity and intensity, and I would show them what the final amount of calories they need in a day to maintain that activity level,” Mr. Delbridge said. “This can sometimes shock the student, because it seems like a lot of calories. Then we discuss how to meet these needs with healthy choices.”

Roberta Anding, a sports dietitian at the Kinkaid School, a private school in Houston for pre-kindergarten to 12th grade, said both boys and girls can struggle with body image. “How we provide these young men and women the life skills to navigate food choices, a college cafeteria, see how alcohol plays a negative role in your performance, how to recover properly — that’s truly focusing in on wellness for life.”

Robert Bach, the principal of Stillwater Area High School in Minnesota, said for several years now, students have had access to individual sessions with a nutritionist to help them make smart food choices. “It’s about lifelong health so that our students can lead a healthy lifestyle they carry beyond their classes,” he said.

Sela Kay, a sophomore at the Windward School, said that learning about nutrition at school has made it easier for her to make healthier food choices.

“Even after I am done with organized sports someday, I want to continue leading this healthy lifestyle,” said Sela, 16, who plays varsity basketball and runs track. “I know now that will start with my food choices.”

Related:

Odds Are, Your Sport-Playing Child Isn’t Going Pro. Now What?

How Not to Be ‘That’ Sports Parent

For Serious Training, Hold the Carbs at Dinnertime

Interested in more Well Family? Sign up to get the latest news on parenting, child health and relationships with advice from our experts to help every family live well.