Winning The Weight War

Athletes who fail to curb their in-season appetites after competition ends could face weighty consequences. Here's how to manage your weight during the off-season.

By Leslie Bonci

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Weight gain, like death and taxes, is something that most athletes will face sooner or later. Typically, athletes' first battles with weight gain occur during the off-season months, when calorie-burning activities are reduced and they fail to curb healthy in-season appetites. Other common scenarios for a battle of the bulge come during rehabilitation, or after one's athletic career is over.

This article discusses several myths and common misconceptions about weight loss and provides some guidelines that athletes can use to maintain a healthy weight, both in-season and off-season.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Before your athletes begin a weight-loss program, they need to understand a few key facts about gaining and losing weight. First, weight loss takes time, consistency, and a strong dose of commitment. If weight loss were fast and easy, then there would be far fewer overweight people on this planet. The truth is that body fat loss does not occur overnight. Instead, weight loss is an ongoing effort that typically occurs in small increments.

Successful weight loss also requires that a person set a realistic goal. The goal of weight loss should be to lose fat, not lean body mass, and the best way to determine how much weight to target for loss is to have a body fat assessment. Body fat assessments use immersion, calipers, or other methods to determine how much of a person's body is composed of fat. Once a person knows how much fat is on his or her body, then he or she can determine how many pounds--if any--need to be shed.

Another key fact that you should convey to athletes is that successful weight loss relies on three interacting factors: physical activity, eating behavior, and food choices. These three factors combine to cause a person to lose or gain weight. Addressing one factor in the absence of the other two typically results in a failed weight-loss effort. For example, scheduling an extra off-season cardio program, but then eating like a hog every day will not cut inches off your waist.

LOG IT

When I advise people about losing weight, I start by encouraging them to maintain a log of what they eat. Just as we need to know how much weight to lose, we also need to know how much we eat--and how often we eat--in order to be able to modify our behaviors. Encourage your athletes to keep a food log for at least three days to get an idea of what their current eating is like, day-to-day.

A log helps your athletes understand their food intake because everything is written down, clear to read. Most of us eat almost unconsciously. Keeping a log changes that. It leads weight-conscious athletes to understand their food and beverage choices, and whether they eat due to hunger or for some other reason.

The log should include everything that goes into their mouths and must contain the following categories:

• When food or beverage is consumed
• Amount consumed
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• Eat due to hunger (mark H) or some other reason (mark O)
• Activities while eating

By reviewing the food log, you will usually see certain eating patterns emerge. These patterns can help you identify undesirable eating habits and create weight-control strategies. For example, if you find an athlete who eats for every reason other than hunger, you may want to focus his or her efforts on eating only when hungry. Or, if there is an athlete who doesn't eat early in the day, but goes on a high-calorie binge in the evening, you would want to recommend a meal or snack earlier in the day.

SOME GUIDELINES
Once you've identified how much weight should be lost and which eating behaviors are less than ideal, your athletes can start planning how to take off the excess pounds. Here are some guidelines that your athletes should follow when they embark on a weight-loss plan:

First, set up a regular eating schedule. Scheduled meals will discourage binge eating and make the athletes more aware of what they eat. If you have an athlete who resists scheduled meals, work with that person to phase in planned eating. For example, for the athlete who eats once a day, the goal might be to eat twice. Or, the athlete who never eats breakfast may want to start the day with a piece of fruit.

Next, tell your athletes that their meals should leave them satisfied, not stuffed. Encourage them to stop eating when they are full. Better yet, work with them to create reasonable portions at meals. Steering clear of oversized portions will go a long way to furthering your athletes' weight-loss goals. And while it probably is unrealistic to cut portions in half, it certainly is possible to start with slightly smaller servings.

Another important guideline is to raise the "fat consciousness" of your athletes. Encourage athletes to recognize and reduce their intake of high-fat, high-calorie condiments such as mayonnaise, salad dressing, cream cheese, and gravy, to name a few. Reducing those extras by even one or two tablespoons per day can add up to a few hundred less calories consumed each day.

When planning a daily menu, include a mix of foods, tastes, and textures. Adding variety to a menu makes the whole process more satisfying and interesting, which is important because a bored eater will sooner or later become a binge eater.

Be sure that your athletes' menus include chewy foods such as fruits, vegetables, and grains. The process of chewing actually makes meals more satisfying. In addition, chewy foods such as vegetables and grains are also high-fiber items, which are helpful in weight loss because the body needs to expend extra calories to break down fiber. Similarly, protein foods can be very satisfying, and the body also expends additional calories to digest them. Lean meat, poultry, fish, eggs, lower-fat dairy foods, soy products, and dried beans are all excellent protein sources, and should be included in every meal.

No menu is complete without beverages, but don't make beverages the focal point of your weight-loss plan. Foods are much more filling than liquids, and diets that emphasize beverages and shakes don't provide the satisfaction of chewing food. In addition, your athletes need to be aware that calories in beverages count just as much as calories in food. A 32-ounce soda contains about 400 calories, for example.

To cut back on beverage calories, recommend that athletes do the following:

1. Add more water. Sparkling water is fine as well.
2. Dilute juices to cut calories.
3. Use sugar-free soda or diet iced tea.
4. Use artificially sweetened beverages to add flavor without calories.
5. Realize that coffee has no calories,
but cream and sugar do.

Finally, recognize that your athletes are going to snack. Encourage good snacking strategies by choosing foods that are not easy to eat quickly. For example, suggest a bowl of cereal instead of a bag of cookies. In addition, choose snacks that have a finite portion, such as a snack-size bag of microwave popcorn instead of a big bag.

FAD DIETS
No discussion about weight loss is complete without mentioning the many fad diets that abound in the popular press. Many people swear by these diet plans, simply because they are popular. Most popular fad diet plans fall into one of four basic categories:

1. High protein/fat, low carbohydrate
2. High carbohydrate, moderate protein, low fat
3. Food combinations
4. Gimmicks

Let's take a look at these four diet categories and get beyond the hype. Your goal is to make your athletes approach a diet plan the same way they approach the purchase of a used car: if it sounds too good to be true, it probably isn't true.

High protein and fat, but low carbohydrates. These diet programs suggest that carbohydrate-containing foods such as bread, rice, pasta, potatoes, cereal, and even fruits and vegetables make people fat. The truth is, they don't. Remind your athletes that carbohydrates are an essential fuel for the body, especially during exercise, and that inadequate carbohydrate intake results in decreased stamina and delayed recovery. These types of diets can actually exclude foods that are important for the basic health of the body and for athletic performance. Carbohydrate-restricted diets basically result in water loss, yet the rate of fat loss is the same as that seen in other types of diets.

High-carbohydrate, moderate-protein, and low-fat diets. A diet that is high in carbohydrate (55 to 60 percent of the total daily calories), 15 percent protein, and 25 to 30 percent fat is probably the most advantageous for athletes. However, avoid diets that boost carbohydrate intake to extremely high levels, such as 70 percent carbohydrate, 20 percent protein, and 10 percent fat. Also, many high-carbohydrate diet plans restrict dairy foods, which can create problems in terms of adequate calcium. The bottom line here is that these high-carbohydrate diets won't automatically make you lose weight, just as a high-protein diet won't.

Food combination diets recommend certain food and nutrient combinations for weight loss. All of these plans are low in calories, so weight loss does occur--but not because of the food combinations. These plans are not always easy to follow, and the research does not support claims that particular food combinations are essential for weight loss.

Gimmick diets claim that weight loss is based on the "fat-burning"potential of certain foods, particularly fruits and vegetables. However, no food will expedite the body's ability to burn fat. Moreover, the added stress on the gastrointestinal tract from the fruit and/or vegetable overload also can make these diets hard to stay on, as well as socially isolating! Weight loss occurs in these diets because they are all very low in calories.

THE BOTTOM LINE
When advising your athletes about controlling weight, emphasize that weight loss involves setting reasonable goals, then adapting their lifestyles in terms of food habits and exercise. Remind your athletes to be patient--the weight doesn't come off overnight. Remember that all foods can be part of a successful weight-loss plan. It is the exercise and the portion size that make the difference.

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Sidebar:
COMMON DIET PITFALLS

Unfortunately, athletes are as susceptible as anyone else to myths and mistruths about body weight. Here are some common weight-loss myths that your athletes should learn to recognize:

Myth: Dieting is all about will power.
Truth: Simply starving yourself will cut essential nutrients, impede performance, and make you feel miserable.

Myth: Eating after 6 p.m. will put on the pounds.
Truth: The body doesn't know what time it is, and evening eating is only a problem when someone has already exceeded their daily calorie needs and then continues to eat. Many athletes eat late due to their sport and academic schedules. The truth is, eating a late meal is all right.

Myth: Skipping meals is an effective strategy.
Truth: Skipping meals will cause your body's metabolism to slow down, which decreases the body's ability to efficiently burn calories. Moreover, skipping a meal often results in a sleepless night, and a tendency to overeat the next day.

Myth: Cutting out all fats or carbs will make you lose weight.
Truth: Excluding entire food groups creates an unbalanced eating plan, and thus can result in health problems due to a lack of proper nutrition. In addition, this approach most certainly impairs performance.

Myth: Cut all desserts or other favorite foods to lose weight.
Truth: Besides making you miserable, the end result of avoiding the foods you like usually is an eating binge. After that, most people find it very difficult to go back to a rigid eating pattern.

Myth: Cut out fat, but drink all you want.
Truth: Avoiding certain foods while ignoring the fact that many beverages (such as soft drinks and beer) pack a wallop in the calorie department is a self-defeating endeavor.

Myth: The only way diets work is to be perfect.
Truth: There is no such thing as perfection, and nobody can watch what they eat 100 percent of the time. Watching what one eats 80 percent of the time is more realistic.

Myth: You can lose several pounds per week.
Truth: Trying to lose six or eight pounds in one week is ridiculous. Healthy, safe, effective weight loss is more along the lines of one or two pounds a week.

Myth: Get a best-selling diet book and follow it religiously.
Truth: A seemingly magical combination of nutrients will not guarantee weight loss. The only reason why fad diets seem to work is because their calorie levels are low. But not getting adequate calories can severely hamper performance, as well as your health.