



WEIGHT AND SPORTS:

Health and Weight Issues for YOUTH AND ADOLESCENTS

By Karen J. Sparks, BBA, MEd, and Julie Janeway, MSA, JD, ABD/PhD



It is discouraging to see the limited number of programs available to the youth of our country to promote healthy active lifestyles. The primary platform for youth activity is organized and/or school sport teams and they are limited to only a small percentage of the youth population.

Organizations, including governments, are doing their best to support and promote activities, provide resources, and support education initiatives and research to keep youth off the couch and on the move, but we just seem to keep failing our youth as the childhood and adolescent obesity rates continue to climb.

Are we helping, or are we just adding to the problem?

A Look back at Obesity and Nutrition in Youth Sports

Before obesity was at the pandemic state it is today, the majority of adolescents who were overweight during their school years generally did not participate in sports to any extent. During the early 1900's there were limited numbers of organized team sports available. Nutrition education for young athletes, either male or female, was almost nonexistent.

Opportunity to participate in these sports came about mostly through physical education classes, but they were not yet truly considered "organized sports." Organized sports teams with mascots evolved in the youth and high school ranks much later than they did at the collegiate level.

Nutrition education for any school athlete was still generally nonexistent outside of "health class" being part of the curriculum, with the focus remaining on the physical education benefits of participating in an active sport. Research on the nutrition needs pertaining to sport remained the domain of adults, and as a scientific or medical discipline it remained largely unexplored.

As nutrition science grew in the academic world and application moved more into professional and collegiate sport, the youth in organized sports continued to be left to their own nutritional devices. For many, their journey into obesity may have originated in disordered and inappropriate eating, weight maintenance issues, self-image and stressful sport-related situations as athletes in middle or high school.

The Physical Demands of Sports

More demands and pressures have been placed upon younger and younger athletes to excel in sport beyond what their bodies are equipped for during pre-puberty and adolescence. Gymnastics is a prime example in which children, who while still toddlers, are brought to gymnasiums and put into strict dietary and physically demanding programs. The stress on their bodies' growth functions is damaging and can have long-term, if

Real Youth and Adolescents and Real Stories of Struggle with Weight and Sports

We talked with several individuals who participated in organized sports throughout their youth and adolescent years to gain some important "insider information" about what really happens.

HEATHER - Gymnastics

Heather began gymnastics at a very young age and participated at the national level until damaging a bone growth plate in her wrist that ended her Olympic hopes. She talked about her experience with gymnasts being publicly weighed-in every day and how the emphasis on weight was emotionally difficult to deal with at a very young age, especially when puberty and growth spurts set in. She watched her fellow gymnasts struggle not only with self-image and self-esteem issues, but body image issues or body dysmorphia.

While some gyms taught seminars on very basic nutrition specifically for athletes, most did not address nutrition but rather saw food as a necessary evil. For many, this resulted in permanent damage to bodies being unrealistically restricted and altered through poor nutrition and excessive exercise that their bodies were not mature enough to withstand. It also resulted in body image issues, disordered eating patterns or behaviors and a severe bias against overweight or obese people once gymnastics was abandoned.

In her experience at a large high school in an affluent community, Heather could not recall a single instance of any athlete, male or female, in any sport receiving nutritional guidance or education. She recounted stories of female and male athletes who were pushed to the point of engaging in dangerous behaviors like extreme calorie restriction, eating only two fruits and drinking water each day, bingeing and purging, or exercising to extreme levels to control weight and size and thereby meet "sport" requirements.

LORI - Volleyball and Basketball

Lori, who played volleyball and basketball in high school, spoke of her experiences with sport drinks and how it has affected her battle with obesity in her adult years. Lori said she never had a weight problem until after she left high school and was no longer active on a consistent basis. Attempting to resolve her weight issues, she reflected on her teen years to try and understand why she might have such difficulty controlling her weight today.

Lori's reflection began by evaluating her eating habits, but found those to be mostly healthy. Lori was lucky to have grown up in a home environment that was supportive of healthy eating habits. She did note that she did not have any information, training or education on nutrition from any coach or physical education teacher the entire time she was in high school. The only information she received was a short lesson on the food groups in a health class.

Lori recalled that during the "season" she was physically active and going to practice, but noted that she drank a lot of sport drinks to replenish her body due to the energy expenditures required of basketball. After the season was over, she noticed her weight increased until volleyball season would begin, at which time she would shed most of the weight, but not all. Not being as intense in terms of energy expenditure, volleyball didn't allow her to take off all the weight gained following basketball. She continued to drink the sport drinks "between seasons" not realizing their high calorie content.

After high school, Lori continued to drink sport drinks. Along with a radical decrease in exercise in college, sports drinks helped her to pack on the pounds. Learning to properly read labels and attempting to lose weight is where she discovered the high calorie content of the sport drinks and came to understand that they were significantly contributing to her weight problems.

not lifelong, effects. Pressures to perform to perfection and meet unrealistic performance levels and weight requirements at a time when their bodies are at critical cell building stages for normal growth and development can be devastating if not dangerous.

Drawing toward a Conclusion

The general consensus from those who were willing to share information with us is that much more needs to be done in terms of nutritional training for coaches, young athletes and their parents. They believe that their issues with weight in their adult years is related to their inexperience with the nutritional requirements necessary during their adolescent years and not understanding the full importance of healthy eating habits and the effects on their bodies during critical periods of growth and development.

Additionally, student athletes receive no education about the appropriate and inappropriate use of supplements, vitamins and sport drinks as part of their athletic training, and they have no idea what effect these substances have on their current or future health and welfare.

In researching the issue, we found that some state athletic associations provide coaches and student athletes with basic nutrition information on a minimal basis (at best). There was minimal information on the NCAA Web site, which was disappointing as we believed that would be where we would find the best information. The general consensus held by these associations is to encourage good nutrition and hydration for student athletes, but for the most part gives few specifics, and didn't address healthy lifestyle and attitude at all.

What we did not find, however, is school level programs that have mandatory nutrition training outside of a few school systems that provide a one (1) hour nutrition seminar for students and parents - some seminars mandatory, some not.

Unlike adults, nutrition for young people must provide for physical growth and development, especially during the years up to age 19 during which peak bone mass occurs, setting the stage for strong bones for the rest of our lives. Researchers are adamant in cautioning coaches, trainers and other athletic personnel NOT to apply adult dietary, nutrient, and training requirements to young and adolescent athletes, and to educate themselves, the parents and the athletes on proper dietary requirements during sports program participation.

Development of Eating Disorders

Although most young people have enough protein in their diets, attention needs to be given to those who curtail their food intake to maintain or lose body weight due to "weight dependent" sport participation. Curtailing food intake restricts access to appropriate body building nutrients resulting in the loss of body protein and lean body mass.

JAY – Football and Wrestling

Weight gain and nutritional issues are not unique to female athletes. We interviewed Jay and Jerry who spoke to us about their sports-related weight issues and experiences too. Jay and Jerry both participated in high school football and wrestling. Jay remembers being overweight for as long as he can remember. Jay had strong relationships with his peers and said he was not chastised about his weight. He also indicated there was always strong family support and he was not ridiculed about this weight by family members either.

While participating in a given sport, Jay stated he would lose weight, but when the season was over he would immediately put weight back on, very quickly, and always more than he had lost. Once the next sport season began, he would lose some weight, followed by the regain and more. Jay said as he got older, it became more and more difficult to lose weight as he felt his weight become more and more out of control after each regain and additional pounds. The obese child became a morbidly obese adult who fights the disease and its co-morbid conditions every day.

Jay told us his gains and losses were most prevalent once he began wrestling. Football was not so bad since being "a big guy" was looked upon as a positive thing. In wrestling, however, staying within specific weight classes was demanded. In contrast, being "big" in wrestling meant being muscular and lean with as low a body fat ratio as possible. Being overweight, Jay wrestled in the "heavy weight" division where it was not as difficult to stay "at weight" as in the lower weight classes, but his weight did impede his athletic performance. Time and again, he would lose a bit of weight preparing for the season, but regained it, and more, once the season was over.

Over the years, he indicated there was little information provided on nutrition outside of statements to "eat healthy, drink lots of water, and "carb load" before games or matches. There was a general health course he was required to take as part of his curriculum, but he told us that was not available to him until the latter part of his senior year.

During critical growth and development states for youth and adolescents, this practice of nutrient restriction can compromise not only athletic and academic performance, but damage their health in the immediate, as well as later in life.

If bodily systems are being compromised through restrictive diets and other unhealthy acts such as "binge-eating" and "purging," the behaviors can lead to additional physical and psychological health problems. Anorexia, bulimia and obesity are all resulting health risks and problems from this type of behavior and environment, and the behaviors can move with them into college and adulthood.

JERRY – Football and Wrestling

Jerry's experience, although a participant in the same two sports of football and wrestling, was quite different than Jay's but still resulted in unhealthy behaviors. Jerry attended a highly competitive, sport intensive, upper middle class high school and upon graduation was provided a football scholarship to a medium sized independent college out of state.

Although highly talented in multiple sports, he struggled due to his smaller physical stature as compared to his fellow teammates. Under constant pressure from his coaches, to "increase his physical presence," "make weight" and a self-induced pressure to "be the best," he developed an unhealthy attitude and approach to achieving those goals.

The high school football program pushed him to "add weight" and "bulk-up." To accomplish this he was encouraged to workout with weights, eat high fat content foods, carb load before games, and supplement his diet with high level protein and amino acid products – anything to increase his size and presence on the field.

Conversely, in the wrestling program they pushed him to increase his strength, stamina and muscle mass, and constantly monitored his weight to ensure that he became stronger and leaner, but still maintained his weight class.

Moving on to college, and an even more intense and competitive football program, Jerry was put under more and more pressure to "get bigger" or lose his position and playing time. He did receive some nutritional information, but in limited amounts, and there was no "formalized" nutrition education for the football program.

The continued pressure from coaches and peers was the tipping point for Jerry to take the next step to an even unhealthier lifestyle. In addition to the excessive weight training, overuse of protein and other supplements, and obsessive worry over his size and weight, he was introduced into the world of steroids. Ultimately he achieved his goal of getting a bit bigger, but he also ended his football career by his second year of college, and further damaged his health, perhaps irreparably.

These behaviors can spill over into adulthood, as in the case of Kelly, a nationally ranked figure skater, who was scrutinized for years about every ounce of her weight. After she left skating, she developed compensatory eating behaviors that led her to obesity.

To conclude, Jay, our former football player and high school wrestler said it best: "To the coaches out there, please do all you can to properly educate your student athletes about appropriate nutrition throughout the sport season. To the student athletes of all sports, learn about what is appropriate nutrition for your age and do not engage in risky, unhealthy behaviors. Ask your coaches for nutrition education, demand it of them."

Tips for Parents of Student Athletes

- Talk to your sons and daughters about the importance of good nutrition and how it affects their bodies as they choose to participate in any organized sport activity.
- Talk to your family physician about sources of nutritional information or seek a recommendation for a dietitian.
- Make healthy foods and snacks readily available to the athlete, and do your best to model a healthy lifestyle.
- Be supportive of your child's athletic endeavors, encourage them to do their best, and do not place expectations upon them that they may never be able to achieve.
- Become involved in booster clubs and organizations.
- Organize nutrition programs for the student athletes if none exist.
- Coordinate a rotation schedule among parents for bringing healthy snacks and bottled water for the athletes at games or matches.
- Get involved in your kids' health and make sure that their sport involvement and experiences don't have serious negative medical and health consequences that could last a lifetime.

Tips for Student Athletes

- Listen to parents and coaches when it comes to proper nutrition and stay away from supplements and performance enhancing drugs.
- Keep yourself well hydrated with pure water.
- Remember, sports drinks are great when used appropriately, but they can do you more harm than good if not used properly.
- Unless you are working out, you don't need sports drinks, soda pop or "energy" drinks. Just drink lots of water.
- Listen to your body and look to your parents, coaches and trainers for support and guidance.
- Advocate for yourself and your peers and demand nutritional education in your sports programs if you do not already receive it.
- If you are not getting the help you need, seek out a school counselor who might be able assist you in addressing your issues and concerns.

About the Authors:

Julie Janeway, MSA, JD, ABD/PhD, is a gastric bypass patient and co-author of the best-selling book The REAL Skinny on Weight-loss Surgery: An Indispensable Guide to What You Can REALLY Expect! – 2nd edition. Ms. Janeway is a college professor and public health and bariatric educator who teaches patients and medical professionals all over the country.

Karen J. Sparks, BBA, MEd, is a gastric bypass patient and co-author of the best-selling book The REAL Skinny on Weight-loss Surgery: An Indispensable Guide to What You Can REALLY Expect! – 2nd edition. Ms. Sparks is a college professor and public health and bariatric educator who teaches patients and medical professionals all over the country. Ms. Sparks is a member of the OAC Advisory Board.

For a list of resources used in this article, please see the online version of this issue at www.obesityaction.org.



ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



VIBRANT COMMUNITY



NATIONAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS



ANNUAL CONVENTION



ADVOCACY



PUBLIC EDUCATION

LEARN, CONNECT, ENGAGE

The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
 - Community Discussion Forum
 - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



JOIN TODAY: GO TO OBESITYACTION.ORG/JOIN

info@obesityaction.org

(800) 717-3117 | (813) 872-7835 | Fax: (813) 873-7838



@ObesityActionCoalition

@ObesityAction