

## Eating on the Road

So, what is your philosophy on what your players eat during the season? Does it really make a difference what a player eats during the season, before the game, and maybe even during the game? Do you eat as a team? What do you eat or do, during a tournament, for food? How do you feel about eating on the bench?

Here are some ideas: It takes 3500 calories to gain or lose a pound. Men have a higher metabolism than women, so they will burn more calories just existing day by day. The more weight a player has on them, the slower they will be when running or reacting to a ball. So, with that in mind, if the players are not taught to eat a balanced diet, with low fat/calorie foods as the majority of their meals, then they probably will gain weight during the season. Softball is not a high-calorie-burning sport unless, in practices, there are a lot of aerobic-type drills/exercises.

I have known coaches who do nothing but take their teams to fast food restaurants. That's a lot of calories in each meal that they consume at those types of restaurants. I do not know of any of these teams that have been successful on a National level. Coincidence? Even though the menus are being changed to provide lower-calorie meals, I would have to really check it out before taking any of my teams to them. I cannot control the players when they are on their own time, but I can teach them the differences and the consequences of not eating a healthy diet. But in reality, I have no control over their free time. Another thing to realize is that all players are not created equally and I always had to have a talk with the players about the difference in body types. Some players can eat what they want and never gain an ounce. Others can look at food and gain weight. The players need to be taught healthy choices and they need to know that life is not fair in regards to who gains weight easily and who doesn't.

**Do not get me wrong, I do not agree with coaches who want to starve their players and harass them to be skinny. I totally disagree with the coaches who take percentage of body fat and use that as a criteria to judge talent and choose a team.**

I attended a volleyball clinic, once, when I coached volleyball, and listened to a coach who would not keep a player with over 14% body fat. That leads to anorexia and that is dangerous. Having a healthy diet does not mean starving or trying to have extremely low body fat.

We stress, from the very beginning, to drink water instead of soda, since soda has empty calories with no nutritional value. Plus, drinking caffeinated drinks draws the water out of the players' systems, thus dehydrating them. Dehydration can cause sluggishness, which isn't what a coach wants from their players during practices or games.

We go to Arizona in March, and the temperature change between Missouri and Arizona could be an 80-degree swing. One year, we left Missouri, where it was 8 degrees, and landed in Arizona, where it was 88 degrees. We had to really watch the players with the heat, and we kept Gatorade on the bench at all games. I do not like Gatorade machines in schools or gyms. Very few people in those settings really need them. Buying any type of replenishing drinks not only wastes money but also adds a lot of calories if the exercising does not warrant drinking them. If the athlete is training extremely hard and losing a lot of fluids, I agree with it but not the way it is used in most cases today. People drink them just because they are available, taste pretty good and it's the "in" thing. When we are in Arizona in the extreme heat, we will have those drinks on the bench if we need to have the players drink some before the game or again after the game to stay hydrated. I hiked the Grand Canyon and drank it in a watered down version during the eight-hour hike and the training hikes we had in the heat that were over five hours.

So, on the road, I would seek out the restaurants with healthy choices on the menu. We find places with salads, baked chicken or turkey, lean meats, and vegetables and steer them away from the fried foods, gravy and sweets. Does this mean we never eat pizza or have desserts? No. It just means that we have them in moderation.

Here is a sample of what we do when we go on our week-long spring trip to Arizona and to tournaments.

### **Breakfast on the road:**

We rarely go to a restaurant for a sit-down breakfast where we will have a waitress taking our orders—unless it is

a day off and we are going sightseeing. We will not eat on a game day at a restaurant with a waitress. Normally, it takes a lot of time to get the team dressed and to a restaurant where they order their meals and have to sit and wait for their food. If for some reason it takes a long time, it could throw your whole schedule off to get to your game.

If we stay in a hotel with a breakfast room that has a good variety of healthy options, we will eat there. The players can go down at their leisure as long as they have eaten and are dressed by the time we are leaving for the game. I would rather let them sleep later, relax in the room and eat at their own rate versus going and waiting for their food. Like I said, if the restaurant has a good breakfast that a player can walk in and eat immediately, we will do that.

If the breakfast only has donuts and juice, we go shopping the night before and provide a buffet breakfast that is ready for them in the morning. Most of the time, we have to put it out on tables outside the coach's room or in an area that won't disturb the other guests. We provide for them a variety of foods like: low-fat milk for cereal, whole-grain cereals, whole-grain bread, peanut butter, jelly, yogurt, 100% juices, bagels, low-fat cream cheese, some pastries or donuts (that's the bad part, but a little is ok), oatmeal, fresh fruit, almonds and anything needed in case someone has to have a special diet, especially because of allergies. We keep a cooler or two in the room to keep the food cold. We use the coffee pot in the room to heat water for oatmeal or tea.

We asked the players and they really preferred this to going to a sit-down restaurant and waiting for the meal. It is a lot more relaxing for them before the games.

#### **Lunch on the road:**

If we are traveling to a game, we usually go to a sandwich shop, like Subway, for lunch. There is no way we will go to a hamburger-type fast-food restaurant. If we are at a tournament, we never leave the park to go eat and rarely eat at the park.

We have a person travel with us who goes to the grocery store and prepares a small buffet lunch for the players at the park. We travel with coolers to keep the food cold, if needed, and we buy everything we need. This costs a lot less than a restaurant and it **keeps the players focused on the tournament**. I feel that, if they leave the park, some players will lose the focus they need to be their best for the next game. Again, the players love having lunch this way. The food is out waiting for them, as they walk off of the field, in an appropriate area. The players say they just want to relax and eat instead of getting in the bus, driving somewhere, getting lunch and driving back.

Lunch normally consists of whole-grain breads; wraps; lunch meat like lean ham, turkey or chicken; sometimes, tuna salad or chicken salad; fresh fruit, carrots, other cold vegetables; some snack foods; some type of dessert, granola bars (look for low-fat, high-protein and high-fiber); water; lettuce, tomatoes, condiments, pickles; peanut butter and jelly (smooth and crunchy) and, sometimes, Jello. We try to choose the foods that are lower in fat and calories and higher in protein and fiber. Learn to read food labels and make sure to check the serving sizes. For example, Gatorade-type drinks have everything listed on the bottle. But up at the top, it will list the number of servings in the bottle. Most of the time, it will say 2.5 servings in the bottle. So, you need to then multiply the numbers listed by 2.5. That adds up to a lot of calories per bottle. That's why they should be used only when really needed.

#### **Dinner on the road:**

We try to always eat as a team, no matter what meal. We love having the parents go with us to games, but the team eats together and the parents eat together. We again try to eat at a restaurant with healthy choices. One of the favorite restaurants of the teams has been Sweet Tomatoes, which is primarily in Arizona. This is a great place, with lots of varieties of salads, soups, pastas, and breads. We will do pizza, especially if we have had a hard day and I want to get them to the hotel to rest. We will order pizza or Chinese, and by the time they have showered and changed, the food is there. It is very relaxing for them after a long day. But again, most of the time, if we have the time, we are eating at a restaurant that has a variety of foods with a lot of healthy choices.

I would really consider trying the breakfast and lunch ideas above. I think you will find that the players will really like to eat this way. It really doesn't take a lot to prepare the food for them or find a healthier choice than a

fast-food restaurant. The health benefits will far outweigh the effort.

**Look for Celeste's article next month.**