

## **It's a thing called weight.....**

Weight watching is a universal pastime for non athletes and athletes alike, especially from those sports who have to make weight (boxing, judo, jockeys) or those where there is a culture of thinking thin, dance, figure skating etc.

For those who are training and competing body weight can often be a poor indicator of fatness. Changes in weight can be due to fluid losses, food still being digested from the last meal and changes in the level of muscle glycogen (every gram of glycogen is stored with approximately 3g of water). Since training especially weight training, increases muscle mass, skinfold measurements are a better guide to fatness than body weight.

Although many strive for thinness, elite athletes strive to achieve low body fat levels for competition. There are clear performance benefits to being light and lean in sports like triathlon, marathon running, swimming and gymnastics. However, our body type is also affected by genetics and each person has a different capacity for leanness. In some sports performers are naturally small and light however in others (lightweight rowing, boxing, judo, weightlifting), there is often pressure to manipulate body weight and fat levels to make weight.

In desperation, some resort to rapid weight loss methods prior to weigh in. Such methods include severe weight restriction, excessive exercise and dehydration which can be dangerous and in the longer term can result in poor health, psychological problems and disordered eating or eating disorders. A smart athlete will choose a sport or category better suited to their physique, where they can concentrate more on performance and feeling good rather than being pre-occupied with weight and fat loss.

Dangers of Dehydration

Dehydration is often used as a quick way of making weight. Fluid loss of even 2% of body weight (1.4kg in a 70kg athlete) will decrease performance, especially in sports like rowing or boxing when there is a combination of strength and endurance needed. Other side effects include:

- Fatigue
- Cramping
- Nausea
- Poor co-ordination and reaction time
- Increased body temperature resulting in heat stress / exhaustion

Counting calories??

The emphasis has been to reduce fat intake as a method of reducing weight as there is no doubt that too much fat in the diet increases the risk of being overweight. Fats are energy dense (9 calories per gram) compared to proteins and carbohydrates (4 calories per gram). The fat we eat is also stored more efficiently in the body so by reducing it is an effective method in promoting weight loss. However, this does not mean that we can eat unlimited amounts of low fat foods? Well it depends on how active you are. Most active individuals can eat as much low fat foods as they like and stay lean but the couch potato or those athletes who are injured or out of season may need to adjust their intake. Balancing intake with output is an important factor in weight loss for sedentary or moderately active individuals. They don't need to count calories but they do need to eat moderate amounts of low fat foods rather than large amounts. The same applies to athletes who need to maintain their body weight below what is natural for them.

Ditch the carbs??

Just when most athletes are accepting the importance of carbohydrates to their recovery and performance along come low carbohydrate diets such as the Zone or Atkins diet. These diets usually restrict the choice of foods you can eat and make meal times more difficult because there are some many

rules to follow. The end result is that they are low calorie diets dressed up as something else. At the start you do not notice that you are eating much less, sometimes as low as 900-1000 calories per day. Bingo, weight loss is achieved but there is a cost for athletes. Following any low calorie or low carbohydrate diet, increases the risk of muscle loss and fatigue and increases the recovery time.

Ways to weight loss or making weight.

Choose a balanced diet and focus on moderate fat intake.

Eat less energy (calories) than you burn in training or competition to achieve a deficit and therefore a weight loss. Don't crash diet.

Learn how to handle eating out socially and include treats. You should become less obsessed about or even frightened of the occasional splurge.

Have a training programme that complements your weight (fat) loss programme. If you need to make a specific competition weight, heavy weight training may need to be reduced or balanced with aerobic training.

Be wary of times when weight / fat will fluctuate more, usually while injured or out of season. You will need to adjust your dietary intake and training to suit.

Gradually reduce weight by 0.5-1kg per week or 2-5mm of fat each week if using the skinfold measurement.

Train not more than 2kg away from your competition weight.

Realise the importance of avoiding dehydration and eating well in the days leading up to competition. It's part of the package and as important as other training techniques.

So for those who need to lose weight remember its going to take time. Quick fixes are not the answer as in the long term performance and long term good health can be affected.

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