Special needs of the elite player

There are no easy games for the elite player whose season includes pre-season tours, domestic league and Cup games and international competitions. Each game is played at high pace, with corresponding physical demands. The elite player’s club will usually provide support and advice, but most meals will be taken away from the club, so players must take some responsibility for meeting their nutrition needs.

Training issues

A demanding endurance training program usually involves daily or twice daily workouts. Inadequate refuelling leads to fatigue, ineffective training, and a risk of injury. Traditionally, many team players have focused on fuelling up only on the day before a match or in the pre-event meal. However, the daily demands of training are best met by a permanent, daily approach to adequate fuel intake.

Competition issues

Competition can be played in weekly league games, or as a tournament with games every day for several days. Recovery must be adjusted according to the schedule. The elite, professional player has competitive demands beyond scheduled domestic league matches including Cup competitions, national team duty in friendly matches or qualifying matches for a variety of international competitions.

Fatigue is largely related to declining glycogen levels as the game progresses. Carbohydrate intake during a match can be effective at delaying fatigue, and although the nature of the game makes it difficult to ingest carbohydrate during a match, it is not impossible. The most difficult players to reach are the central midfielders as they are the most distant from the sides/ends of the field.

Special issues and eating strategies

Many team sports have a large contingent of young players who are “fresh from home”. It is a good team strategy to organise cooking and shopping classes for young players to help them develop the domestic skills and nutrition knowledge that will allow them to reach their full potential as players. Players looking after themselves for the first time can find it hard to juggle the team commitments, as well as work/school. Many recipe books developed for athletes offer quick and nutritious meal ideas suited to the special needs of sport.

The pre-event meal is a good opportunity for a shared meal, ensuring final nutritional preparation as well as an opportunity to boost morale and discuss final tactics. Ideas for the pre-event meal are found in the box below, and are best provided as a buffet, to allow each team member to meet their individual needs and preferences.

An individual approach to fluid and fuel needs during matches is also useful. Undertaking fluid balance monitoring sessions during training or practice matches may help players to adjust their drinking practices to better meet their individual needs. The current rules of football place some limitations on the intake of fluid or sports foods during matches. Players may need to use creative ideas to meet their refuelling and rehydration goals.

Ideas for high carbohydrate pre-event meals*

**Breakfast menus**
- Breakfast cereal and milk, fresh or canned fruit
- Toast and jam/honey
- Pancakes and syrup
- Fruit-flavoured yoghurt
- Baked beans or tinned spaghetti on toast
- Liquid meal supplement or fruit smoothie
- Fruit juice or sports drink

**Lunch and dinner menus**
- Rice dishes – risotto, fried rice, paella
- Pasta and light sauce
- Bread, including rolls and sandwiches
- Fruit and fruit based desserts
- Rice pudding

* A low-fat or low-fibre menu may help to reduce the risk of gastrointestinal problems in susceptible athletes

Snacks for recovery after training or matches

Each choice provides ~50 g carbohydrate and a valuable source of protein and other nutrients.

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<th>Snack</th>
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| 200 g carton of yoghurt + cereal | 1 fruit | 250-350 ml fruit smoothie or liquid meal | 60 g (1-2 cups) breakfast cereal + milk | 1 fruit
| 1 round of meat/cheese and salad sandwiches or roll | 250 ml fruit juice | 150 g thick crust pizza | lean meat and vegetable toppings and easy on the cheese | 60 g sports bar | 250 ml sports drink

Post-match or post-training recovery is another good opportunity for team nutrition. Many professional football clubs have invested in an organised dining room or cafeteria to offer meals or snacks to players after training. This not only provides players with immediate access to the nutrients to promote recovery, but provides an educational message of the importance of nutrition in recovery. The provision of post-match snacks and light meals providing nutritious forms of carbohydrate and protein, as well as fluid options, will help players to recover effective-ly while celebrating or commiserating the results of the match. Alcohol is often a large part of post-game activities but should be discouraged, unless in moderation and after recovery eating goals are achieved.