Special needs of the amateur player

The vast majority of football players worldwide are amateurs who play for the enjoyment of the game. Their commitment may be purely recreational or they may play in an attempt to improve their game to move up in their level of play. The age range extends from the very young up to older adults who continue as veterans to play for the love of the game. These players often play in organised teams that have no organised support other than setting up a team and alerting team mates of the schedule. More serious teams may have sponsors and some measure of external support.

Training issues

There is a wide range of training schedules for amateur teams. Some teams may only gather for matches while others may train between one or more days each week. These sessions are commonly in the afternoon (youth) or evening (adults). When there might be some emphasis on fitness, most practices focus on tactics and technique.

The intensity and volume of training will be well below that of players at higher, more competitive levels. Attendance at training can be quite variable.

Competition issues

The number of matches per week, month, or year is likely to be variable. The amateur adult will likely compete once per week, but could play multiple, usually abbreviated, games in a weekend at a tournament. Youth teams usually have one match per week, but long travel might mean two or more games on any one trip to save travel time and money. Youth players may play in multiple teams and accumulate a substantial number of matches in a year. There are reports of young players playing 100 or more matches a year.

Matches will be played at a slower pace than in professional games, leading to reduced volume of running. These games, however, are still important to the players and teams, meaning that these players can still benefit from practising sound principles of sports nutrition.

Special issues and eating strategies

The vast majority of research into football focuses on professionals. The mixture of carbohydrates, fats and proteins is the same regardless of the level of play. What is different is the volume of food eaten. The amateur who tries to eat the same volume of food as a professional would probably gain weight. Amateur players can choose foods from the suggestions for professional players, but they may not need to eat the same volume of food.

Amateur leagues sometimes modify the Laws of football for their own circumstances. Primary changes usually involve unlimited substitutions and match duration. This means some players will not play the entire match and will probably not experience the level of glycogen depletion seen after highly competitive matches. Thus, there is probably no need to eat the amount of carbohydrate required by the glycogen-depleted player. This does not mean the player can ignore sound dietary principles. At amateur matches, each player is probably responsible for his or her own hydration because amateurs lack the support a more organized program might have. All players need to prepare for training and matches by bringing their individual fluids and bottles. Sound hygiene suggests that each player should have his or her own bottle and not share with team mates.

The amount of football training and supplemental training is well below that of professional teams. The amateur needs to carefully monitor weight and food intake to minimise changes in weight. The older amateur who has played at a very high level might remember their diet as a professional and eat far more than needed, leading to increased body fat and weight gain.

An amateur’s competitive season is not as lengthy as that of a professional. During the off-season, the amateur needs to reduce food intake during this period of reduced energy expenditure because there is little or no training.