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Seasons in the Abyss?

Every year, people gorge themselves over the holidays and derail their diets. Does it have to be this way?

By Emily Beers

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Kim Bellavance

Three-time CrossFit Games athlete Ben Stoneberg is a cheater—a cheater on his diet during the holidays.

In fact, the athlete—whose fans call him “Stone Cold” Stoneberg—allows himself a couple of cheat days each week in the year, making the Christmas season an extreme version of standard operating procedures.

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Christopher Nolan/CrossFit Journal

"I love food." —Ben Stoneberg

"I love food . . . so I take full advantage when it is sitting in front of me," Stoneberg said. "My Christmas cheat meal consists of pretty much everything you can think of: turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, green-bean casserole. And dessert can range from pumpkin pie, cheesecake, cookies, chocolate."

The 27-year-old, blessed with what we can only assume is a turbocharged metabolism, doesn't believe cheat meals affect him negatively. He believes loosening the reins on his diet actually helps him.

"I honestly think having a cheat meal helps your body reset itself. Yeah, the day after eating a ton of very-good-tasting food doesn't make you feel great, but after that day I usually feel fine," he said.

If only the rest of the population could enjoy repercussion-free pizza—Stoneberg's all-time favorite cheat meal.

For most, the unfortunate truth is that throwing back a dozen of grandma's buttery shortbread cookies every other day in December will have consequences. In some

cases, doing so will mean losing the fitness gains of the previous 11 months and finding yourself regretfully singing "Auld Lang Syne" with a soft layer around your waist and a painful awareness that January will be a tough month at the gym.

So although delicious temptations relentlessly dominate the month of December, most coaches try to keep their athletes in check during the holiday season.

Mission Improbable?

To keep his clients on track this December, Kevin Cherrick of Cactus CrossFit in Scottsdale, Arizona, launched a diet challenge at his affiliate in November.

The purpose of the eight-week challenge, which he called Mission Impossible, is to keep people eating well during the holidays. To kick-start Mission Impossible, 44 athletes had their body composition tested with the Bod Pod, a device that uses air-displacement technology to measure lean mass and body fat.

One of the purposes of the challenge is to remind people to cook healthy meals for themselves during the busiest time of year. Participants are expected to learn three to five new make-from-scratch meals that will become part of their regular diet.

"That way if you get home and are hungry, you can cook fast and easy without thinking," said Cherrick, who charged each person US\$100 to join the challenge. "By the time January rolls around, shopping, cooking and eating healthy should literally be a no-brainer."

Participants score points based on how many new meals they cook during the eight weeks.

"The first time you cook a recipe you get one point, the second time you get two points, the third time you get three points. When you have cooked five unique meals, you get three bonus points, and seven unique meals gets five bonus points," Cherrick explained.

He added: "Everyone who joined this challenge has to post a picture of what they cook, plus a link to the recipe in a closed Facebook group so they have lots of recipes and reminders in their newsfeed."

Cherrick decided to launch the challenge due to a personal vendetta with cooking.

“When I get home and am starving, I literally cannot think or make a decision. My brain is out of glucose. So I make my egg breakfast every time. And I want my athletes to have a few easy, healthy meals that they know how to make no matter what,” he said.

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—Kevin Cherrick

Cherrick believes a foundation of home-cooked, healthy meals will prevent diets from falling off the rails during a month of festivities.

“If they have (the foundation) set, they can eat crap at a holiday party and it won’t send the world off its axis,” he said.

At the end of the eight-week challenge, Cherrick will host a potluck to announce the winner. The prize is a free entry into the mobility seminar Cactus CrossFit is hosting in March. Ultimately, the contest isn’t about who cooks the most meals or whose body composition changes the most. The real purpose is to help people create a foundation “so that their default status is healthy eating, and poor choices really are an exception,” Cherrick said.

“We want to be process oriented in what we do, incentivizing what people have control of. And there is no better example of that than what we buy, cook and eat,” he added.

Five Tips for Surviving the Holidays

Sherry Shaban of CrossFit Westmount in Montreal, Quebec, isn’t hosting a challenge, but she’s conscious of the fact that it’s her job to help her clients avoid overdosing on booze, truffles and finger foods at Christmas parties. She offers five simple tips to her athletes.



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If you set firm limits for yourself before a party, you’ll be less likely to unconsciously suck back an entire bottle of wine and write off the next day’s workout.

“Stick to your training no matter what. Keep your goals in mind. Once your training goes out the window, nutrition does, too. And training reminds you to eat clean,” Shaban said.

Her second piece of advice is about planning in advance. She recommends bringing healthy dishes to potlucks, for example. Her third nutrition tip covers setting a guideline for how much you plan to cheat.

“Limit yourself to a specific goal or a plan. If you plan to drink two glasses of wine, then you’re less likely to find yourself drinking a whole bottle of wine and (eating) three pieces of cake,” she said.

Shaban’s fourth tip: Avoid showing up at a Christmas party already famished. Her final piece of advice covers portion control.

“If you eat a small meal before you get there, you won’t be starving,” she said. “And if there’s finger food, grab a plate



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Eating a few slices at a party represents reasonable cheating for most people. Gobbling many slices each day during the holidays represents a bad pattern.

and put your food on a plate. It helps you put quantity in perspective. Otherwise you can lose track of how much you've actually eaten."

Shaban has found people who are new to CrossFit, and especially those who are new to clean eating, have to pay extra attention during this time of year.

"For people who have been training for a long time and (a clean diet) is part of their habit, getting through the holidays isn't a big concern, and they can even afford to cheat sometimes," she said.

If newer athletes follow her advice, Shaban believes they can avoid losing all their recent gains. And even if they do temporarily fall off, a new year and a fresh start are just around the corner.

Throwing Down in December

Colleen Kolobow is a member of CrossFit South Boise in Idaho. Like Shaban, she found people have an easier time keeping their minds off holiday temptations when they're thinking about their fitness.

She discovered this last year when she organized and hosted CrossFit South Boise's first Christmas Throwdown. All proceeds were donated to the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve Toys for Tots Foundation.

When she hosted the inaugural event, Kolobow had a simple goal: help her community. She volunteered because she had the time and energy to give back to the community, but in the process of supporting a good cause, she noticed the event helped people in her gym stay focused on their fitness goals in December. While she's all for imbibing and enjoying the holidays, Kolobow is also interested in helping those around her stay active.

Because last year's event was such a success, Kolobow brought it back for 2014.

This year's event took place on Dec. 6, and many CrossFit South Boise athletes competed. After the throwdown, grills were set up for a tailgate party featuring nutritious food and some cheat-night staples, Kolobow said.

They raised money and collected toys, and sweating together for a good cause helped people keep their minds on health and fitness instead of rum and eggnog.

Enjoy Your Favorite Cookie

We do CrossFit to make our lives better, and the holidays are a great time to enjoy and celebrate improved fitness and health. People take time off work to enjoy each other's company, and most don't want to be the antisocial person in the corner who refuses to have a drink or a cookie because of a 30-minute conditioning workout they're doing in the morning.

Lindsey Liddiard is the owner of Vantage Nutrition. A certified sports nutritionist, Liddiard works with many CrossFit athletes. Although she doesn't approve of an entire cheat month, her advice to clients is to loosen up and enjoy themselves over the holidays. More importantly, she advises them to avoid personal guilt trips.

"I'm all about letting people cheat a bit and enjoy life, as this life only comes around once. Holidays are about spending time with friends and family and enjoying your favorite Christmas cookie," Liddiard said.

That doesn't mean athletes should undo their belts and gorge themselves.

"It is all about balance, so it doesn't mean eating a dozen cookies, but it does mean eating your grandma's favorite cookie that she only makes once a year," she said. "And always remember if you slip up and have one too many (candies), don't beat yourself up over it. You won't lose all the positive gains that you've made."

Shaban agrees with Liddiard.

"It is all about balance, so it doesn't mean eating a dozen cookies."

—Lindsey Liddiard

"Associating food with guilty feelings should never be the case. If we feel like a piece of cake, have that piece of cake," Shaban said.

She believes sometimes a cheat night can be perfectly healthy.



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If you ate too many cookies yesterday, turn things around by heading to CrossFit.com and biting into the workout of the day.

"The odd celebration is positive and helps balance everything out, and then you're ready to be strict again with your nutrition because you can feel yourself feeling sluggish, recovering less and not feeling as well," Shaban said.

And even if you're left feeling sluggish for a while, Liddiard reiterated that your body will soon forgive you for a damaging night.

"Wake up the next day with a fresh start and a fresh mindset, head to the gym for a great workout, and have a healthy post-workout meal," she said.



About the Author

Emily Beers is a CrossFit Journal contributor and coach at CrossFit Vancouver. She finished 37th at the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games.