
THE CrossFit LIFE

Food for Thought

Nutrition is a key part of CrossFit, but many trainers shy away from discussing eating habits. Chip Johnston thinks that's a huge mistake.

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All images: Chip Johnston

We often say in CrossFit, "Nutrition is the foundation."

Everyone—even people who don't do CrossFit—has experienced a situation where nutrition positively or negatively affected his or her physical or psychological performance.

We ask our athletes a host of questions when they enter our affiliates. Do you have any injuries? What is your previous athletic or fitness experience? What are your perceived strengths and weaknesses? Why did you join a CrossFit affiliate? What are your goals? It only makes sense that we would ask some questions about our athletes' eating habits.

Two Extremes

I grew up in a situation that represented extremes supported by archaic, unfounded assumptions about nutrition, and it showed through my eating habits. My mother grew up as one of the middle children in a family of six children, and she watched as her two older sisters grew obese during adolescence and into adulthood. Terrified by the physical prospects presented by her older siblings, she quickly developed anorexic habits as a teenager and has continued them even to this day.

Some view food as pleasure, others as fuel, and she grew to view it as something bad. When I was a child, I remember her going weekdays without eating very much at all and then sleeping through an entire weekend to recover from exhaustion. I knew it wasn't right, but I was too young and uninformed to understand why.

The other extreme I witnessed came from my father, who viewed food and other poor health habits as a source of pleasure and thus indulged as often and as much as he could handle. He smoked, he drank, and more than anything he ate what he wanted when he wanted it, and he ate as much as he wanted. The effects of these habits were delayed because when he was younger he led a very active lifestyle and for much of his career he worked in jobs that had large physical components. When I was a child, I didn't even think his eating habits were bad because I saw my father as a man with many active hobbies and a job that included manual labor.

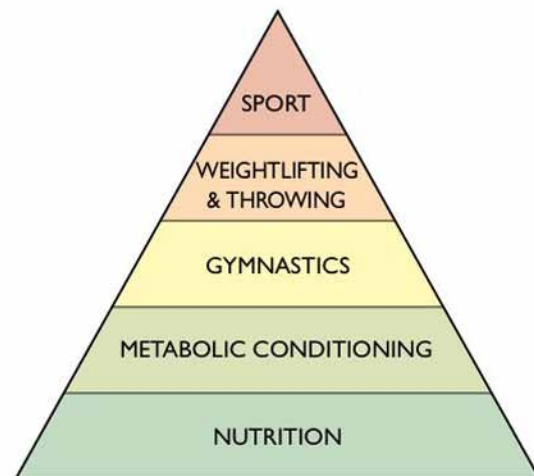
The eating habits I developed from watching my parents were a combination of theirs: a steady mix of starvation and gluttony. Unless I was hungry, I ate and drank nothing, but if I was hungry, it was a feast every single time. In addition, there was no critical awareness as to what I was putting in my body. Like my father, I viewed all food as equal in nutritional value. It made no difference what I was eating just as long as I was eating when I was hungry.

The effects were subtle at first, most likely due to the fact that I was young and an athlete, but as I grew older they slowly became magnified. Having had no education with regard to diet, I still lacked the understanding that my nutrition was likely having a significant effect on performance in many aspects of my life. Then I found CrossFit and an introduction to nutritional awareness.

Start the Conversation

There are so many different analogies that can be used to explain the importance of nutrition in terms of performance: fuel for a car; soil, water, or sunlight for a plant; or memory for a computer. But it remains that seeing a pyramid with nutrition as its base—with metabolic conditioning, gymnastics, weightlifting, and sport all stacked on top of it—makes it even clearer. Even more impressive is how much it makes sense after you've experienced it.

After participating in CrossFit for an extended period of time, my progress in terms of performance reached a plateau. It wasn't until I made adjustments to my nutrition that progress resumed. What happened next is a repeat of what thousands of athletes and average individuals have already experienced: I looked better, I felt better, I had more energy, and my performance improved. I'm sure you're not surprised, and I am aware that you knew this is where this story was going. But my point is something slightly different.



Everything comes back to nutrition.



Nutrition is an essential part of health, but many CrossFit coaches avoid discussing it with their athletes.

We understand that “nutrition is the foundation,” but we need to make nutrition one of the foundations to our approach as coaches. We all understand that nutrition lies underneath performance in all the movement modalities and sport itself, but the problem is it remains secondary to people when they begin CrossFit, or any form of athletics for that matter. I understand that nutrition is a sensitive subject, and I understand that it can be controversial, but it should still become one of the entry points for those beginning to train and compete as athletes.

Making nutrition a foundational component to our approach to coaching athletes can be as simple and straightforward as other introductory components of CrossFit. Furthermore, these questions can be free of controversy and not a marketing scheme for any specific diet. Regardless of your nutritional approach, it will be helpful from a performance and nutrition standpoint to know how much a person eats a day, what percentage of that food is processed, if he or she drinks soda or other soft drinks, or how much water is consumed. This

information provides us with enough information to begin a non-confrontational discussion with our athletes about nutrition and how it might benefit their training and help them reach their goals.

Basic information about an athlete’s nutrition can provide us with the opportunity to create something as little as nutritional awareness or something as grand as a complete diet overhaul.

The amount of time you spend with your athletes will normally range from two to seven hours per week, which means you can’t monitor their eating habits during every waking moment. For this reason, the size of the nutrition base for any athlete will depend on motivation. Even if athletes lack motivation to make changes to eating habits, just asking the questions and teaching nutritional concepts will help athletes develop an awareness of the quality of the things they are putting into their bodies. Those questions will reveal small opportunities for an athlete with some motivation to make positive changes to his or her nutrition.

Eliminating a single poor nutritional choice can be the first step in creating a larger and more comprehensive change in the future. For the athlete who is highly motivated and completely invested in making a lifestyle change in terms of nutrition, the same information that is used by the less and moderately motivated will be used to create a path of nutritional change. You can recommend many resources that can help improve nutrition.

After placing your athletes in categories of low, moderate or high motivation for nutritional focus, you can begin to gather, organize and apply resources to help them build awareness or make the appropriate level of change.

For those athletes who are less inclined to make changes, have them keep a record or log of everything they eat and drink and then review it with them regularly to help build some awareness of the quality and quantity of their consumption. For those more motivated to make some changes, you can use the food log to identify low- or no-quality nutritional choices, such as soft drinks or processed foods, and have them start to incrementally eliminate them. Finally, for those who are completely invested in a change in their nutritional habits, you can recommend or provide them with the books, websites and other resources that are the core of nutritional discussions at most CrossFit courses and seminars.

In order to remain sensitive and free of controversy with those wishing to make more dramatic changes, you can use these resources to provide them a range of appropriate nutritional options to choose.

A Part of Every Class

The most practical way to regularly include nutrition as part of your coaching is to make it a part of the conclusion of your classes or sessions. Having short, reflective discussions about the efforts of your athletes surrounding their nutrition is a very similar discussion to reviewing technique and points of performance for movements. This can be entirely voluntary in order to respect your athletes' right to keep those efforts as private or public as they would like. Also, given this order, it logically places the discussion surrounding nutrition closer to when they are going to have their next meal, just as we discuss technique and points of performance before we have athletes work out.

If "nutrition is the foundation," we should strengthen our efforts to truly make nutrition one of the foundational components to our practice as coaches. Starting this practice doesn't require a coach to start teaching entire courses on nutrition but rather to consistently include at least some focus on nutrition for every level of athlete.



As your athletes are stretching and cooling down after class, spend a few minutes asking them about their nutrition.

