

PROFESSIONAL ATHLETICS: WHAT IT TAKES

The football season has officially begun and many young athletes watch their football heroes take to the field and dream that they too will one day make it to the professional level. Some will succeed, while many others will fall short of achieving their goals. What makes the difference for those athletes who go all the way to the top and achieve a peak level of performance? As a former professional football player I am often asked by young athletes what the secret is to reaching an elite level as an athlete. One of the most important factors is the ability to stay healthy. As one of my old trainers from Winnipeg told me, “You can’t make the club in the (ice) tub!”

How does an athlete stay healthy? Below is a list of the things an athlete must do to get and stay healthy. This includes:

Excellent Conditioning: athletes should be careful to avoid overtraining and know when to taper their intensity and volume of training as the in-season gets closer. Seeking a professional trainer who specializes in your specific sport is also recommended.

Stretching Properly: there is growing evidence showing that stretching after a training session or game is more beneficial than stretching before working out. In fact, stretching before competing has shown to have detrimental effects on performance. A better way to warm up is with a light jog followed by going through the actions of your sport moving from lower to higher intensity.

Nutrition: since every cell in our bodies is completely recycled after one year, including muscle and bone cells, it is extremely important for athletes to follow a healthy nutrition plan. Food supplies our cells with the nutrients that are necessary for training and competing. Athletes should eat a natural food diet consisting of organic fruits and vegetables, free range eggs and meats, wild fish, whole grains, nuts and seeds, and small amounts of dairy products and sugars. Limit those foods containing trans fatty acids, preservatives such as nitrates, artificial colouring and artificial sweeteners.

Supplements: supplements that I usually recommend include salmon oil, multi-vitamin, vitamin B complex, anti-oxidant formula, protein supplement and an anti-inflammatory formula containing bromelain, turmeric, chymotrypsin, papain and trypsin.

Visualization & Mental Preparation: the mental side of sports is often neglected by many athletes even though it's probably the most important factor in determining the success of an athlete's performance. Athletes should search out books and tapes on visualization and guided imagery for improving sports performance. This will allow the athlete to visualize the many aspects of their sport which includes staying healthy.

Goals: an athlete must have short, medium and long term achievable goals. Staying healthy should be near the top of the list. Goals should be written down and reviewed on a regular basis. Goals also need to be modified as they are achieved and should be as specific as possible.

Following the above guidelines increases the chances that an athlete will achieve his or her maximum potential in a healthy way. In my experience that it's not always the person with the most athletic ability that makes it to the elite level. It is usually the athlete who has set clear goals, eats a healthy diet, maintains a positive mental attitude and finally stays healthy, that becomes the best in their sport.

Dr. Sean Graham is a doctor of chiropractic with a special interest in sports injury prevention and rehabilitation. He is a seven year CFL veteran and co-director of Satori Integrative Health Centre. He can be contacted at 604 274 7224 or sgraham88@aol.com.