Fueling the Runner: Breakfast, Lunch and Practice

Arranging your eating to wind up with energy left when you need it most

By Jackie Dikos, R.D.
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Wow has the summer flown by! It is already the time of year where school preparations begin. Getting to know your new teammates is always a wonderful way to enter a new school year. A sigh of relief can be heard since the grueling two-a-days of summer cross country practice have passed, and a feeling of anticipation mounts for the fall season ahead. Dinner table conversation may be changing from questions of being able to cover the distance to a potential top seven berth.

Learning the ropes of a new school routine can be tricky. You have to get down the bus or car-pool schedule, a new lunch hour, and of course get used to the rigorous practice routine following a full day of class. You may even be experiencing the different stresses involved in the pursuit of a running career as a collegiate athlete. With so many things to prepare for, it is easy for nutrition to take a back seat. How can the very thing that will fuel you through your crazy schedule be forgotten?

A major contributor to the highs and lows a high school runner experiences at practice is related to how he eats during the first half of the day. If the diet is lacking in either calories or nutrition it would make sense why a blank look is all a coach may get when trying to gain attention in the middle of a workout. The most common downfalls that affect high school athletes are: 1) Rushing out the door and missing a good breakfast, 2) Dislike of the school lunch thus eating very little or skipping the meal all together, and 3) High consumption of sugar beverages.

Let’s start with breakfast, one of the most important meals of the day after a long overnight fast. It’s understandable why a few more minutes of sleep sounds much better than breakfast at 6am. And no, a jelly donut as you walk out the door won’t quite fit the bill. A simple breakfast of whole grain toast or cereal, a glass of milk, and piece of fruit will provide the energy to start your morning off right. Breakfast will help tune the brain into what the teacher has to say and provide some of the essential energy needed in running a solid workout at practice.

Mom may be tempted to hand off a glass of juice when walking out the door. Even though it is a better alternative to no breakfast at all, juice is not the best option solely by itself. This is because juice alone is a quick burning fuel. We want to be sure to consume energy that will last throughout the morning. The best benefit comes from a meal consisting of carbohydrates, a protein source, and even a little fat. Think through your breakfast meal and make effort to ensure all these components are present.

It’s a good thing you fueled yourself properly at breakfast because for some reason you are really feeling hungry for lunch. This is a very common feeling when you start your morning off right. You may in fact feel a greater sense of hunger having had breakfast versus the mornings you decide to skip breakfast completely. It’s perfectly normal and a good indication you need to keep fueling.

Passing through the lunchroom, nothing seems to look very appealing. So you purchase a soft drink and enjoy some quality time with your friends. Unfortunately this is once again another fuel that burns far too quickly and is a source of empty calories. Stick with the same breakfast concept of carbohydrates, protein, and a little fat at lunch. If a tougher practice is planned, choose foods that are easier to digest and loaded with carbohydrates. The “fat attack” or “super spicy” specials of the day may leave you more than uncomfortable at practice or a weekday race. A simple pasta meal or even mashed potatoes, chicken breast, and a couple dinner rolls would be a better option.

Is it wise to always have a least a few items packed in a small lunch cooler as a backup or to supplement the lunchroom meal. It can be anything from a peanut butter sandwich, bag of granola, and fruit to side items such as animal crackers, cheese sticks, and baby carrots to have with a purchased lunchroom sandwich. This will allow you to always have a plan “B” when nothing else seems suitable.

If for some reason there is an item or two left over in the lunch cooler, it will make for a great pre- or post workout snack later in the day. This should be a planned snack if you were designated with the early lunch hour slot.

Stay focused in the classroom and at practice by properly fueling. Mom and Dad can only do so much. As athletes we are expected to take pride and ownership of our nutrition and fueling regimen. Keying in to what you need to fuel your body will not only make you a stronger runner now, but it will teach you valuable life skills to remaining a healthy individual throughout life.

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Jackie Dikos, RD was a stand-out high school runner growing up in Cincinnati, she went on to a successful running career as a Bearcat at the University of Cincinnati. Check out all of her nutrition articles for runners at [http://runningtimes.com/fuel](http://runningtimes.com/fuel)