Re-Fueling the Runner: Post Workout Nutrition

Satisfying the Specific Needs of the Competitive Runner

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There are so many good times to think back on from my high school and college running years. Among the many memories are all the laughing and joking with good friends after a hard practice. The residual burn of a tough workout always seemed to be eased by an off color remark made by the team clown. Having a good time always seemed so effortless. Nutrition was easy to overlook during the social hour shared with friends after a run.

Most days at practice, a run would always start as a group. As our fatigued bodies gradually trickled one by one back to school, we would guzzle water from the fountain and regroup back in the gym. There were a few last words from coach and teasing with teammates before the phone call for a ride home. Once home, that growling stomach would finally be sated with food almost an hour and a half after completion of the run.

In college, the pace did not vary quite as much between teammates so we would return to the fieldhouse in sets of 4 or 5 for a post-run stretch. Before long though we found ourselves in lengthy discussions over class demands, the latest gossip, or what to do over the weekend. Finally, after a walk to the cafeteria or drive home, a meal is served about an hour and a half after practice.

If recreational running was the goal this type of regimen would not be much of a problem. Someone who runs 3-4 times per week has more time for fluid and glycogen replacement. However the more competitive runner would benefit from keying into a refueling regimen.

First and foremost rehydration is priority. It is common for a runner to replace only a fraction of the fluids lost from a run. This is usually not related to a lack of resources. Poor fluid consumption is often by choice; it is a decision to simply stop drinking for whatever reason.

Ideally the aim should be to replace any fluid lost between each run. Having a flavored drink on hand may aid the rehydration process. A sodium containing beverage may also be beneficial for two reasons. It will help you to voluntarily drink more fluid and it will also help to retain more fluid therefore aiding the rehydration process. Rehydration is not limited to drinking water. Eating watery foods such as soup, watermelon, and citrus fruits will continue the process.

Having a general idea of how much fluid to replace can be useful. Weighing yourself before and after practice is a great way to assess fluid needs. A weight loss of 1-3% is considered normal. If weight loss exceeds this amount, drink more fluid during the workout to prevent potential performance impairment due to dehydration.

Once you know the amount of weight lost in the workout, you will require drinking about 16 ounces of fluid for every pound lost. A sign of the return to a hydrated state is to assess the color of your urine. If urine is a concentrated, dark color with little volume, keep the fluids flowing. Drink until you urinate frequently and a pale color is achieved. This will indicate that you are effectively rehydrating.

A workout can not only lead to dehydration, but it can drain muscle and liver glycogen stores. Resynthesis of muscle glycogen stores occurs at a faster rate over the 4 hours after a workout when carbohydrates are consumed shortly after the workout takes place. This plays particular importance for those who train more than once a day. This includes a training camp of two a days, sneaking in recovery miles, or even heavy weight lifting. Any time there is less than 8 hours between workouts or races a glycogen replacement regimen should be applied.

The goal is to consume a high carbohydrate meal or snack within 30 minutes of the workout or race. Eating a source of protein within this high carbohydrate snack will also help recovery. This may require being prepared with an after practice snack while you wait for a ride or teammates. Examples of great foods to choose for recovery include chocolate milk, fruit smoothie, sports bars, and trail mix -- but any source of carbohydrate is better than no carbohydrate at all.

If your glycogen stores are not particularly challenged, a standard meal routine that supplies adequate daily carbohydrates is sufficient to replenish glycogen stores. It is wise to make effort in structuring your meal to be eaten soon after a run to continue to optimize any potential recovery benefits. Good timing will support efforts to maintaining a desired caloric range for weight management while promoting refueling.

Time passes quickly after a run or workout when socializing or simply getting in daily responsibilities. Be sure to plan ahead and create the best refueling strategy for you, based on your nutritional needs, training demands, and racing goals. Efforts in refueling your body will help you be as prepared as possible in taking on the next workout, race, and rival.

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