

Olympic athletes need to gorge to get enough calories

By Gretchen Reynolds, New York Times

Endurance athletes, unlike the rest of us, have the unusual problem of having to work hard to keep weight on. “In your super-high-calorie-burning sports, like distance running, cycling or the triathlon, elite athletes can burn 15 or 20 calories a minute,” says Michael Joyner, a researcher at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., who conducts studies of endurance athletes. At the peak of training, these athletes are working out four or five hours a day, he continues.

These workouts can burn 4,000 to 6,000 calories, which “have to be replenished,” he continues, “if you want to train again the next day.” Refueling can resemble an episode of “Man v. Food,” with dinner consisting of things like a pound of pasta drizzled with olive oil (about 800 calories), a dozen eggs (840 calories), an entire cheese pizza (perhaps 2,000 calories) and a pint of Ben & Jerry’s cheesecake-brownie ice cream (1,000 calories). These foods (although not this exact lineup) were described to me by dietitians and officials who work with Olympians as common training-table choices for elite endurance athletes, particularly men. Plus beer (about 150 calories a bottle).

One of the biggest issues, they told me, is that these athletes, in their quest for fuel, often turn to high-calorie but less nutritious processed foods – Snickers bars, store-bought chocolate-chip cookies, Pop-Tarts. Even an athlete who intends to eat healthfully can be defeated by nutritional realities. “You can only eat so much oatmeal and tofu,” Joyner says. A typical bowl of oatmeal contains about 150 calories, a cup of tofu about 175. You do the math.

“Dietary fat provides nine calories per gram, whereas carbs provide about four per gram,” says Kerry Stewart, an exercise physiologist and a professor of medicine at Johns Hopkins University, meaning that fat is “energy dense” and desirable for famished athletes – but less so if you want to shed pounds. And even on a pizza-and-ice-cream diet, some athletes drop weight during peak training periods.

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