



GASTRONOMY, A MODERN DISCIPLINE



Although food alone cannot turn an athlete into an Olympic champion, there is a general consensus that in order to achieve good results in competition, an athlete's diet has to be appropriate from a nutritional point of view.

Serious nutritional errors

Athletes are the sector of the population with the greatest concern to follow an optimum diet that will enable them to

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achieve maximum performance. Paradoxically, however, they also comprise the sector which has made some of the biggest and most serious errors in terms of the nutritional guidelines to follow. For this reason we all, beginning with the International Olympic Committee itself, have a great deal of work ahead. Back in the era of the first modern Olympic Games, held in Athens in 1896, one

of the participating countries took the precaution of travelling with its own cooks and sending along a shipment of national foods, a custom which has become fairly common among many sports ambassadors today. The Games in Athens were not bad from a culinary point of view. Emmanuel Mavrommatis describes a typical lunch for the Greek delegation that took part in the first Olympic Games, consisting of "green beans, cooked vegetables, meat according to the way they went to be held and olives on the



Serve yourselves.



days of major competitions”, as well as local cheese, bread and *retsina* wine.

It was as true then as it is now that food played a fundamental role in any programme for an aspiring elite athlete, giving us yet another reason to consider gastronomy as one of the great modern disciplines. The entire sports community currently agrees that understanding and improving the energetic value of nutrients contributes to achieving maximum performance during the “moment of truth”.

Appreciation of the role of nutrition in athletic activity has been enhanced thanks to our increased knowledge of the physiology of exercise. Nutrition must, however, be taken in context, for an athlete with inadequate training or physical preparation will not break records no matter how irreproachable his diet may be. Nevertheless, the effects of an inadequate diet will quickly be felt.

Positive effects on health

A careful attitude towards eating has positive health benefits, regardless of the activities an individual chooses to pursue, and these benefits are applicable across the social spectrum.

For many years there has been intense debate about which nutrients are the most important for athletes. Today, finally, there appears to be a consensus among specialists, although for a long time many erroneous ideas were given currency. Since ancient times, athletes' eating habits have been dominated by the consumption of large quantities of meat (see the menus for the Olympic Games in Athens), with the aim of building up the muscle which was supposedly lost during physical activity. This theory has been proven to be completely unfounded, but it appears not to have been abandoned, as meat remains the mainstay of many athletes' diets, sometimes to excess.

However, there are other foods which are rich in high-quality proteins, such as milk and dairy products, which until recently tended to be overlooked, despite



the fact that they play an important role in human nutrition, and they contain all the elements the human organism needs for growth and development. We will come back to them later.

The great gastronomic Olympiads

As early as the Games of the XXV Olympiad in Barcelona in 1992, prestigious dietitians and experts in nutrition were called upon to prepare menus that would fit in with the habits of the different athletes and also with the requirements of the body. This coincided with a meeting of the highest officials of the International Academy of Gastronomy held in Madrid. At this meeting, the Academy emphasized the need to combine health, culture and pleasure at dinner time. The conclusion was that this combination was also valid for athletes. The Games in Barcelona, perhaps the best in history from all points of view, were also the best in terms of nutrition and gastronomy, possibly because they were held in the capital of Mediterranean cuisine. The most recent Olympic Games, held last summer in Atlanta, only served to confirm this theory, particularly if we remember the number of complaints from all the participants concerning the food.

In Barcelona, culinary culture triumphed above everything. However well thought out from a nutritional point of view, a diet will fail if it does not give pleasure and is not varied - two of the basic tenets of gastronomy. Perhaps for the first time, the menus in the Olympic Village took this universal rule into account. For example, the menu served on the terrace of the Restaurante del Espigón overlooking the Olympic harbour provided ath-

letes with probably the best introduction to Mediterranean culture, with paella, fish, combinations of meat and fish, tapas, pizzas, salads in which colour, taste and smells combine to form a refreshing and highly nutritious dish, fresh fruit and other local produce, such as sandwiches made with *pan de payés* and Spanish ham, or with tomato and anchovies.

The first axiom of proper nutrition for an athlete is that his diet must include as wide a range of foods as possible to ensure that there is no danger of boredom. Diet can be very strict in terms of the amounts of protein, starch, fats and mineral salts that make up a particular menu, but it must also avoid monotony at all costs, for this is the enemy number one of culinary art.

Added value in the Mediterranean diet

The Mediterranean diet is characterized by the variety of foods it offers: there is a high level of fruit, vegetables, fish, pulses, milk and vegetable oils, which contrasts with the modern consumption of meat and the staple ingredients of saturated fats and sugar. Although the fat consumed by an athlete might be of excellent quality, it is an ingredient which should be monitored closely, although not eliminated entirely.

Another fact which speaks in favour of the Mediterranean diet as far as its connection with athletes is concerned, is that in the countries where Mediterranean cooking is prevalent, death from cardiovascular disease is much less frequent than in others. Combined with the practice of physical exercise, a necessary feature of athletes, it has the potential to produce the most fit and healthy individuals.

Maintaining the ideal calorie profile and paying careful attention to the variety of different food groups are the two essential rules of nutrition for all human beings, including athletes. For the latter group, an optimum diet is also one which helps them maintain their ideal body weight.

Nevertheless, in order to replace the energy burned during exercise it is necessary to increase the quantity of food consumed, being careful not to overeat, because energy expenditure due to physical activity is less than is commonly believed. It is also important to note that, when the intensity of training decreases or stops, food consumption must be adjusted to the new situation. In this way it is possible to correct the tendency of professional athletes to put on a significant amount of weight during holidays, because sometimes it is difficult to control without a well-structured diet programme.

Eating absolutely everything

Various studies by the Spanish Nutritional Foundation (FEN), and notably a study conducted by Sonsoles Ysart Álvarez de Toledo who, with the patronage of Campofrío, analysed the nutritional status of a group of young athletes, highlight the fact that athletes can and must eat everything, although they should avoid an excessive or frequent intake of sweets and animal protein. They are also in a position to tolerate a diet with a high fat content better than people with a sedentary lifestyle. But one thing that should never be left out of an athlete's daily diet is milk and dairy products to cover calcium requirements and improve the amino-acid balance. Skimmed or semi-skimmed products may be chosen, depending on the sport in question.

As far as physical performance is concerned, there are no "magic" foods, and no "evil" foods either. Performance is heavily influenced by good eating habits, and not so much by specific products. Although no food can compensate for a lack of skill or training, among athletes of a similar level correct nutrition can be the deciding factor at competition time.

Tradition and modern cookery

We fine food lovers, however, are not satisfied to leave it at that. We believe that there is still much work to do if athletes are to be freed of their slavery to

repetitive and monotonous diets, however controlled their ingredients may be. We are all committed to the need to include in our menus recipes from different culinary traditions as well as elements of modern cuisine, which is an enriching experience for everyone. Contrary to popular opinion, athletes can be gourmets. In fact, despite the precautions required by their activity I believe that, as long as they maintain the necessary controls, they can quite safely risk venturing into the enticing terrain of lo-

cal gastronomy in the places where they compete. As long as they and their coaches use common sense, the athletes of the late 20th century can forget the old-fashioned notions that almost made them culinary illiterates. There is no reason, at meal times, to push aside those excellent recipes that are part of our culture, and which help to make our life happier.

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