

SportsNutrition

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The Athlete's Kitchen

What do dogs and athletes have in common? Lots! Both love to exercise and love to eat. Both are also created in differing sizes and shapes. What do dogs and athletes NOT have in common? Dogs are content with their natural physiques, while too many athletes try very hard to change the way they look. These athletes might be better off being like dogs. That is, a massive St. Bernard has no desire to look like a lanky Greyhound. Nor does the barrel-chested Labrador want to look like a sleek Setter. Each dog is very content and proud to represent his breed.

Wouldn't life be easier if each athlete could be just as proud of his or her heritage and corresponding physique? As a sports dietitian, I spend too many hours helping my clients find peace with their bodies. Most of these active people take the outside-in approach. They think if they change their body from the outside by losing undesired body fat or by adding some muscular bulk, they will be happier on the inside. Unfortunately, not true!

No weight will ever be good enough to do the enormous job of creating happiness. This story, told to me by a cyclist, proves that point: "I once weighed 124 pounds and was unhappy with that weight. I started exercising and dieting rigidly. I got to 99 pounds but I still wasn't happy. I ended up binge-eating and gained to 160 lbs, where I was miserable. I sought help from a counselor, stopped eating emotionally, and with time, got my weight back to 124—and was happy! Why couldn't I have been happy at 124 pounds in the first place? Because happiness has nothing to do with weight."

Finding the right balance

Granted, some people do have excess body fat they can appropriately lose to be healthier as a person and lighter as an athlete. They can rightfully feel pleased when they accomplish the goal of attaining an appropriate weight. But other athletes just think they have excess fat to lose; they have distorted body images. Even elite athletes wistfully believe they will perform better if they are leaner. Surveys of successful collegiate female athletes, as well as top women runners report the women yearned to lose about 5 pounds, on average. Unfortunately, the struggle to attain that "perfect weight" often costs them their health and happiness. Restrictive diets with inadequate protein, iron, zinc, calcium and a myriad of other health-protective nutrients—to say nothing of carbs for fuel—easily contributes to injuries and impaired performance.

So what can you do if you are discontent with your body? First of all, you should get your body fat measured to determine if you actually have excess fat to lose. You may discover you have less body fat than expected! A sports dietitian can measure your body fat; use the referral network at www.SCANDpg.org to help you find a local sports RD.

Body Image and Athletes

What to do when you are feeling fat

It's easy to understand why so many athletes have a distorted body image. When you put on skimpy running shorts that expose your "flabby things," or a bathing suit that shows every bump and bulge, you can very easily "feel fat."

One solution to the "I feel fat syndrome" is to remember "fat" is not a feeling. That is, you don't feel "blond hair" nor "freckled." You also do not feel "fat." Yes, you may be feeling uncomfortable with your body. But you are really feeling imperfect, inadequate, insecure, anxious—and any number of other feelings that get described as "feeling fat."

I encourage you to explore those real feelings, and figure out where you got the message that something is wrong with your body. The media is a good start, but it could also be a parent who lovingly said at a tender age "That outfit looks nice, honey, but if only you'd lose a few pounds..." What you hear is "I'm not good enough" and this can create a downward spiral of self-esteem. Weight issues are rarely about weight. They tend to be about feeling inadequate and imperfect.

So how can a discontent athlete feel better about his or her body? One tactic is to stop comparing yourself to your peers. *To compare is to despair.* Rather, pretend you live on a island where your body is "good enough" the way it is. (You likely will never have a "perfect" body, so the second best option is to enjoy a body that is "good enough.") If you step off your island and start comparing yourself to your peers, please notice: Do you end up being too fat, too slow, too ugly, too dumb? Do you ever let yourself rise to the top and be better than others? Doubtful. You are better off staying on your island, and calling yourself a *Gorgeous Goddess* or *Handsome Hulk*. With time and practice, you can change the way you see yourself and come to believe perhaps you are, indeed, good enough the way you are!

Granted, changing the way you feel about your body is a complex process. The following resources can help you in this journey to find peace with your body:

www.nourishingconnections.com -free e-newsletter

www.findingbalance.com - videos to resolve weight issues

www.adiosBarbie.com - insights into the media; resources

www.gurze.com- an bookstore with helpful resources (*The Body Image Workbook* and *The Don't Diet, Live-It Workbook*.)

Life is more enjoyable when you can love and appreciate your body for all it does. If your drive for thinness comes with a high price, a lower weight is unlikely worth the cost.

Nancy Clark, MS, RD, CSSD (Board Certified Specialist in Sports Dietetics) counsels both casual and competitive athletes in her practice at Healthworks, the premier fitness center in Chestnut Hill MA (617-383-6100). Her NEW 2008 *Sports Nutrition Guidebook*, *Food Guide for Marathoners*, and *Cyclist's Food Guide* are available via www.nancyclarkrd.com. See also sportsnutritionworkshop.com.