

Weight Loss That Stays Off

David Pearson, PhD, CSCS, *D
Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana



David Pearson
Column Editor

THE NEW YEAR BRINGS WITH IT plans for change, which often includes weight loss. This is also the time of year when many high school and college athletes say goodbye to their athletic careers, and with that often comes a closure to training and conditioning. Often this closure is self-imposed but may be initiated by not having access to the weight room. It is sad that many of the athletes whom we have trained to gain weight through diet and strength training are the first athletes we abandon when they can no longer play for us. Furthermore, these athletes are the ones who need the most help in shedding the excess mass because they have always been trained to gain.

Many coaches show a willingness to help these athletes, but few of us feel we have the expertise to help counsel these athletes with weight loss. Although there may be cases where the expertise of a dietitian is needed, many athletes can lose excess weight by following a few straightforward tips on weight loss. This plan requires teamwork and support from you, the coach, and the athlete's peers.

If weight loss were easy, we would all be thin. However, if we begin a program understanding some underlying problems that arise, it gives us a better chance to succeed. First and foremost we need to remember that the excess weight did not go on overnight and that when we make our minds up to lose weight, it will not come off overnight. Therefore, do not set yourself up to fail before you start by setting unrealistic expectations. Second, we are creatures of habit, and if we try to lose weight by radically changing our diet we will soon fail, as this approach works for very few people. Finally, you must stay physically active, although you should begin to train with a greater level of aerobic conditioning. Another point to consider is that there is a psychological factor with many of these “big athletes”—their self-esteem is based on the fact they are big. This is often a bigger problem with college than with high school athletes.

As a coach who would like to help these giants be able to buy clothes off the rack once again, there are several ways to help. Begin by making room for them in

your winter program so they still feel part of the team, but you need to develop a different program for them to follow. The next and most difficult area is to help them adjust their diets. The key here is to work with what they are already eating and help them make minor changes to it on a regular basis. The way I start this process is to have the athlete keep a food log for a week or at least 2 weekdays and the weekend. Have him or her write down everything he or she consumes, including the portion size and the time of day it was eaten. Next, meet with the athlete and look for the following:

1. How much fried food is in the diet? If it is present in every meal, begin by eliminating it from 1 meal. Most people have a “fat tooth,” rather than a “sweet tooth,” and curbing fat is the hardest part because fat adds flavor to food.
2. Instead of eliminating food items, cut back on portion size. The desire for fatty foods is quickly met, so encourage the athlete to have the small fries instead of the largest

ones. Instruct them not to order a pizza by themselves, but rather have pizza when they can go out for it with friends.

3. Quit adding fat to the diet—try mustard instead of mayonnaise on a sandwich.
4. Add a salad to the beginning of lunch or dinner, but watch those low-fat dressings, as they may be high in calories.
5. If the athletes are drinking whole milk, switch them to 2% and move down to skim. They can do this over time.
6. Do not use food as a reward for exercise. Wait at least 1 hour after workouts before eating.
7. Try not to eat alone. This will help them eat slower, and again by sharing food they will not feel the need to eat it all.
8. Try not to have a major meal past 7:00 p.m. A small snack before bed is fine.
9. Finally, be honest about alcohol consumption, because it also must be figured into the plan.

I have had a great deal of success using this approach to weight loss with college athletes. As a coach, it is important that you stay involved in the process. As the athlete begins to see the weight coming off, he or she will be ready to make further commitments to changing his or her diet. In the next column I will talk about those hard gainers and give you some tips on “eating to win.” ▲