

TIP OF THE MONTH

Nutrition

By Coach Tony Ackerson

The best pre-swim meals are things that trial and error show not to upset the stomach. For example, one big mistake swimmers often make is that they'll eat some "health-food" type of meal (lots of fruit that they may not normally eat, for example) on the morning of an important meet, instead of the tried-and-true cereal and toast that they may have every day. Then, they get to the meet and have stomach issues from something that they thought would improve performance!

Every meal should have some protein, some carbs, and a small amount of fat. I think most swimmers should eat a minimum of 45 minutes before practice, light meals if they have issues with their stomachs during practice. They can, and should, eat another light meal/snack after the workout, and always be drinking plenty of water throughout the day and evening.

A decent breakfast would be something like a non-sugary cereal with some cut-up fruit added, along with skim milk and a piece of toast with peanut butter. A glass of orange juice chased with a big glass of water is a good idea as well.

After practice something like a bagel with more peanut butter, a piece of fruit, and another glass of milk. And keep the water coming constantly. Gatorade gets associated with being the ultimate fluid replacement, and it isn't. Despite what Gatorade says, the single best fluid replacement is water. Gatorade is higher calorie and more concentrated. A sensible alternative is to water it down. But it tastes good, and Michael Jordan did all those commercials, so people buy it like crazy. But water is better.

Some sports nutritionists actually recommend a do-it-yourself sports drink of water with a small splash of orange juice and a pinch of salt. Me personally, with all of the hot weather cycling and running I do, I just am in the habit of always diluting any fruit juices that I get out of the fridge. I'll take cranberry juice and fill a glass about 1/4 to 1/3 full, then top it off with water and ice. And now on the rare occasion that I actually drink "straight" cranberry juice, I have a hard time, it tastes way too sweet and concentrated. And the diluted is so much better for you, especially in Florida where athletes need so much water to perform well.

The athletes should all have a large water bottle with their name on it (you can get them in bike shops) filled with ice and the kind of fluid replacement that I've described above. It needs to be by their lane at the beginning of practice, and they should nurse it after every set. Unfortunately, some swimmers play the "water card" during workout--they'll stop in the middle of a hard set to get a drink. The problem here is three-fold:

1. The entire set is wasted as soon as they stop.
2. They hurt team morale by stopping and resting while their teammates are working hard.
3. They likely don't drink enough water (8-10 large glasses throughout the day) to begin with, so their dehydration, if real, is actually of their own doing.