

THE STEPPING STONE TO A CAREER IN SPORTS NUTRITION

Professor Clyde Williams recounts the development of sports nutrition into a well-established discipline in its own right and the role that the Sport and Exercise Nutrition Register (SENr) plays...



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Interest in how foods may enhance physical performance is as old as the athletes of antiquity. For example the Olympians of over two thousand years ago ate the foods that were identical to those prepared for their many gods in the hope that what was good for the gods was good for them.

Meat was a central nutrient of their diets because they believed that there was a strong link between meat, muscle and strength. Elements of this age-old belief still linger on within ill-informed groups of strength athletes. Much of the early information on the impact of the 'right diet' or of 'special foods' on physical performance was anecdotal and part of the folklore of individual sports.

In the early part of the last century a more systematic approach to 'sports nutrition' was adopted and documented. The stepping stone to the birth of modern sport and exercise nutrition was probably the publication of studies by Krogh and Linhard (1939) who showed the relative contributions of fat and carbohydrate to energy metabolism during sub-maximal exercise. The next major developments were the discovery of post-exercise 'glycogen super-compensation' by Bergstrom and Hultman (1966) and subsequent studies demonstrating that dietary carbohydrate-loading improves endurance capacity during exercise.

THE BIRTH OF SENr

As the information from these laboratory studies filtered through to athletes, interest in diet and exercise increased exponentially. As a result, sports nutrition was developed as a stand-alone subject; no longer simply offered as a few lectures within human physiology and nutrition undergraduate degree programmes.

Graduates interested in pursuing a career in sport and exercise nutrition applied for postgraduate diplomas in dietetics. However, their backgrounds and more importantly, their motives were largely unacceptable for postgraduate programmes in dietetics. The increasing role given to nutritional preparation by sport was accompanied by a demand for relevant expertise. As a result, graduates in sport and exercise sciences with a variable amount of knowledge of sports nutrition had opportunities to forge careers by offering 'nutritional services' to sport. Among these graduates there were outstanding individuals who continued to increase their nutritional knowledge through postgraduate study and advanced level research. They are now leaders in their field and many occupy senior

positions in elite and professional sport.

To provide professional recognition for those graduates who wished to pursue careers in sport and exercise nutrition but were not dieticians, we developed the concept of professional registration. The initial discussions about acceptable qualifications for registration took place over twenty years ago between representatives of the Nutrition Society (NS), the British Dietetic Association (BDA) and the British Association for Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES). Initial funding was provided by UK Sport for a 'needs analysis' and then a preliminary draft of guidelines registration. For a variety of reasons the tripartite partnership didn't survive the twists and turns of internal events that occur over time in many professional organisations. Fortunately, the BDA held fast and offered to host the fledgling and now successful Sport and Exercise Nutrition Register (SENr).

In many ways sport and exercise nutrition is a new profession in that it requires an in-depth knowledge of both human nutrition and sport and exercise sciences. The sport and exercise nutritionist (SENr) will prescribe and adjust dietary recommendations to meet the needs of athletes at various stages of their preparation for participation in and recovery from sport and exercise. The SENr practitioner will be as comfortable analysing the training records of athletes as analysing and adjusting their food intakes to match their daily energy expenditures.

However, a knowledge of the culture of the sport and a trusted relationship with coaches are also essential for a successful career as an SENr practitioner. Unfortunately, in some cases the relationship with a coach is often more important than the knowledge and experience of the sports nutrition professional.

Currently there are 40 full/high performance registrants and 75 graduate registrants. Several universities are adapting their degree programmes to provide their sport and exercise nutrition graduates with the necessary background to prepare them for graduate registration.

SENr registration provides a formal peer-reviewed and professional acknowledgement of fitness to practice in the field of sport and exercise nutrition. In addition its aim is to provide quality assurance for clients and employers helping to avoid unwitting malpractice by unqualified practitioners. Registration includes a professional commitment to work within the SENr code of conduct which also offers protection of the practitioner. The register now provides a formal stepping stone to a career in sport and exercise nutrition and introduces professional regulation for a growing workforce that was, until now, largely unregulated. ●

