

Spaghetti and Chocolate

What Elite Athletes Really Eat

by Deborah Shulman, Ph.D.

Matt Carpenter still has the plate of plastic spaghetti that Hooker Lowe and Lyndon Ellefson, his training partners in Vail, Colorado, gave him as a joke nearly 15 years ago.

He was fresh out of college and had already distinguished himself as a superior mountain runner. Another, more dubious distinction, was that he ate spaghetti every day for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Was this a personality quirk, a practice born of economic necessity or a pathway to his accomplishments?

Nutrition is an important element in an athlete's success. With this in mind, some of the country's best off-road athletes — adventure racer Robyn Benincasa, trail marathoner and adventure racer Danelle Ballengee, ultra-runner David Horton, and top mountain runners Cindy O'Neill, Dave Dunham and Carpenter — were asked to confess their personal dietary habits.

"EDUCATE YOURSELF ON THE BASICS OF FOOD, VITAMINS AND MINERALS AND THEIR ROLE IN 'RUNNING' THE BODY."

—DANELLE BALLENGEE

Ballengee advises that people should not get caught up in fad diets and gimmicks. She attempts to "eat a balanced diet — with a little extra chocolate — eat a variety of foods, drink a lot of water and eat a lot during training and racing." Benincasa's philosophy about a training diet is that you should eat what you need. Horton tries to eat healthy foods. Carpenter still cites spaghetti as his favorite food, but now balances his diet with other foods.

These athletes generally consume 2,200 to 3,500 calories each day, with most of the group getting an enormous 3,000 to 3,500 calories daily. The nutritional breakdowns of their diets ranged greatly from 40 to 76 percent carbohydrate,

9 to 25 percent fat and 15 to 40 percent protein. The important thing is not the percentages, but the actual quantities of these nutrients and their healthy sources. At the colossal calorie intakes of these elite athletes, their consumption of carbohydrate, fat and protein easily met or exceeded the amounts generally recommended by sports scientists.

These athletes' diets are obviously working for them, judging by their accomplishments and their body mass index (BMI). This measure of weight-height relations also allows comparison between men and women, with indexes of 18-23 common for world-class cyclists and distance runners. For example, cyclist Lance Armstrong has a BMI of 22.7 and 10,000-meter runner Tegla Loroupe has a reading of 19.8. The six athletes I interviewed averaged 20.5, with a low of 18 and a high of 25.

"I TAKE A ONE-A-DAY ONCE A WEEK"

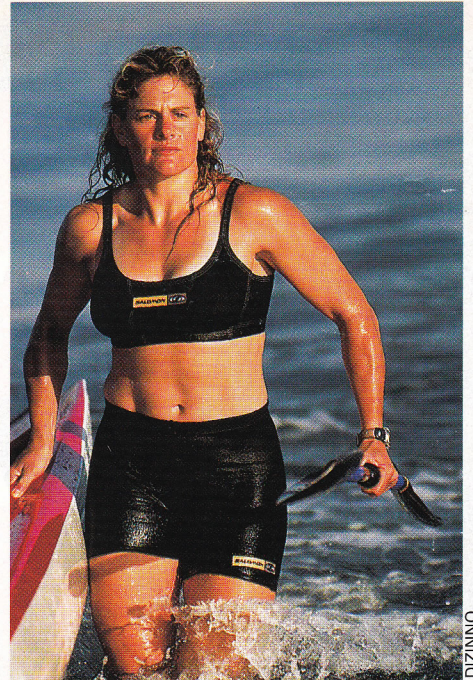
—MATT CARPENTER

Supplements do not play a big role in these athletes' diets. The most popular was a basic multiple vitamin and mineral supplement — "just in case." Ballengee takes them twice a day, while Horton and Dunham take them just one. Extra iron, Vitamin C, calcium and Vitamin E were included by a few during periods of hard training. Horton, who is still going strong at 51, takes glucosamine and chondroitin sulfate for his joints.

Instead of relying on supplements, they eat a variety of good, wholesome foods — dairy, fruits, vegetables, grains and protein foods — and plenty of water.

O'Neill admits juggling work, training and a personal life can make maintaining a good diet difficult. Since every meal can't be perfectly balanced, she tries to pick the healthiest option and makes up for missing food groups at dinner.

Ballengee has faith that chocolate is



ROBYN BENINCASA IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S TOP ADVENTURE RACERS. HER NUTRITIONAL SECRET? "SUGAR, SALT, FAT AND CAFFEINE." AND AFTER A RACE: ICE CREAM.

a performance enhancer. Benincasa concurs. Her friend, Louise, makes her eat chocolate at every visit. So, she says, she visits a lot.

"EAT A LOT MORE CARBOHYDRATES BEFORE AND AFTER LONG OR HARD TRAINING RUNS OR RACES."

—DAVID HORTON

In the days preceding a race, O'Neill makes sure she is hydrated and well-fed by increasing her carbohydrate, electrolyte and fluid intake with sports drinks. The night before, of course, is a ritualistic pre-race carbohydrate dinner.

One and one-half to two hours before a long training session or race, Ballengee eats a large carbohydrate meal. This might include a bowl of oatmeal, bagel, energy bar, sports drink and coffee. On the other hand, Dunham, who often runs three times per day, avoids any food for three hours before training or a race and may just run on coffee.

In the hours following hard training or races, these athletes make an effort to eat foods that will help them recover. If Carpenter is "beat up and sore" after a hard session, he will increase his protein intake by adding tuna, lean ham or chicken to his favorite pasta.

Ballengee will try to get JogMate protein gel immediately after, followed