

An Examination of Coaches' Nutrition Competency

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Abstract

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) limited the number of snacks and meals that athletic departments could provide until 2014. This was partially the policy to ensure that all NCAA members could provide the same amenities to athletes regardless of the financial resources of the athletic department. The change allowing unlimited snacks and meals in 2014 greatly altered the landscape of collegiate sports nutrition and created a need for professional nutrition staff on college campuses. It has now become commonplace for Division I institutions to have at least one full-time registered dietitian (RD) on staff. More than 120 athletic departments have at least one full-time registered dietitian on staff.

This change has greatly impacted the well-resourced Division I institutions, however, not all college athletic programs have the resources for a full time RD. Approximately 10% of college athletic departments employ a full-time nutrition staff member even as the field has been growing. Athletes recognize the competitive advantage to having a nutrition program and seek information and recommendations from those they deem “more knowledgeable others.” Those individuals are either an athletic coach, athletic trainer, or strength and conditioning staff member if nutrition access and resources are not provided by athletic departments.

The role of a coach encompasses many facets, but providing nutritional guidance falls outside of the scope of practice. Coaching certification and training programs do not include much, if any, information regarding nutrition. Many coaches transition from competition to coaching with limited knowledge on providing nutritional guidance.

There has been research examining the nutrition knowledge of student athletes, nutrition practices, and physiological implications from nutrition. More recently the way that nutrition fits into a holistic care approach to athletics has been found in the literature. One topic that has not been examined thoroughly is the nutrition knowledge and recommendation practices of athletic coaches. There are many instances when athletes ask for specific nutrition recommendations from their coaches or others who may not be best equipped to provide that information. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the level of nutrition knowledge college coaches possess and their recommendation practices to athletes.

The instrument used to measure nutrition knowledge of collegiate coaches was adapted from the Torres-McGhee (2012) Sports Nutrition Knowledge questionnaire. The questionnaire contained 20 multiple choice questions pertaining to the four categories: hydration, supplement

and performance, nutrients, and weight loss/gain. A score of 75% was deemed adequate nutrition knowledge.

Results showed that 32% of the coaches sampled had a nutrition knowledge score that was adequate. The average nutrition knowledge score of the sample was 60%, and only 27% indicated they had some form of nutrition training. The resulting scores demonstrated that the majority of college coaches sampled did not have adequate nutrition knowledge or have required nutrition training as a part of either the certification process or continuing education requirements.

When examining recommendation practices of the coaches, 73% reported they give athletes nutrition advice while only 60% reported athletes asking for nutrition advice. These results suggest that some athletic coaches are giving out unsolicited information on a topic that falls outside of the scope of practice and expertise. This is a problematic dynamic as the majority of participants stated they give nutrition advice while only 32% have adequate knowledge of the topic.

RDs are greatly needed in the athletic landscape where nutrition can have the ability to provide a competitive advantage to those who utilize it properly. Coaches may be asked to give nutrition advice or feel the need to disseminate nutrition information to ensure a competitive advantage for their athletes when RDs or other professional nutrition staff are not available to athletes. There can be issues surrounding the accuracy, quality, and value of the information coaches are giving to athletes.

The current research suggests that while an increase in nutrition staff at the collegiate level has been beneficial to some, programs who do not currently have those resources may be overextending their coaching staff and utilizing them in a manner they are not trained or have the expertise for. Coaches should not be providing nutritional guidance to athletes unless they have the proper training and expertise to do so. Coaches could be doing more harm than good in dispensing inaccurate nutritional advice. Collegiate administrators, regardless of resource availability, should be diligent in providing proper nutritional guidance to athletes and providing qualified staff members to provide that information.