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Nutritionist helps UNC athletes eat right

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CHAPEL HILL - Ryan Houston knew he needed to drop weight when he arrived at North Carolina.

Everything on the field was faster than in high school, and the UNC running back wanted to get smaller and faster.

Through hard work, dedication -- and the help of the school's nutritionist -- Houston lost 15 pounds and is down to 255.

"My nutritionist helped me out -- a lot more fruit, and not eating after 8 [p.m.]," Houston said. "She said I actually needed to eat more ... I wasn't really eating all day until after practice. I'd go all day with an empty stomach, and then after practice just eat. She said that overall, that would make me gain more weight, because I was more hungry."

Houston isn't unusual among UNC athletes. Each one has access to Jen Ketterly, a registered dietician who serves as the nutritionist for more than 800 athletes.

That includes the football team.

Once Butch Davis arrived at UNC, he saw the opportunity of having a full-time nutritionist available and asked Ketterly to work more closely with the football program.

This summer, she helped redo the team's training table. Nearly every food is color-coded. A purple dot tells a football player that strawberries will help with muscle soreness and a yellow dot next conveys that chicken noodle soup can help ward off cramps.

The football team also has a color chart in the urinals so a player can see if he's hydrated.

Part of Sports Medicine

Ketterly is in her second year of working exclusively with the athletics department -- which makes her unique. Although both N.C. State and Duke have nutritionists who work with athletes, only UNC has one in its Sports Medicine department.

Dr. Tim Taft, who runs UNC Sports Medicine, said the athletics department had two nutritionists before Ketterly, who originally worked closely with the athletics department. Taft lobbied for a full-time sports nutritionist and after a reorganization two years ago, Ketterly joined Sports Medicine.

Ketterly teaches athletes how proper nutrition can increase energy and endurance.

"Nutrition is the last legal edge," Ketterly said.

When most athletes get to UNC, they don't know much about nutrition. They meet Ketterly during their physicals, and she begins their education.

"She gets our student-athletes to start thinking about their performance and their performance level, which gets all athletes' attention," UNC baseball coach Mike Fox said.

Fox's program has worked with Ketterly the four years she's been at UNC. She helps plan pregame and postgame meals and healthy snacks for during the games.

Each sport has different nutritional needs -- there's a textbook in Ketterly's office that details



Jen Ketterly's color codes aid athletes in choosing what to eat.

Staff Photos by Robert Willett

requirements in every sport -- but some hints go for every athlete.

For example, there is a 30-minute window after an athlete leaves the practice field or a game in which it is imperative that they get something to eat to aid their recovery for the next day.

That's why UNC football recently reorganized its weight room, adding a refrigerator with Gatorade nutritional supplement shakes so that the athletes can grab one after lifting.

A popular program

Fox said he isn't sure how much the effort to focus on nutrition helps with recruits, but he and other coaches make a point to tell them about the program.

Each sport uses Ketterly's services differently. A coach can request that Ketterly come to his or her team or a player can contact her directly.

Ketterly's morning clinic calendar is booked up weeks in advance. Her small office holds a number of plastic food models that demonstrate what athletes should be doing to improve their performances.

One point she impresses upon athletes is the need to eat carbohydrates.

With a generation of young adults who have grown up hearing about the Atkins diet and messages that "carbs are bad," Ketterly teaches about the energy-enhancing role of carbs.

She advises athletes to fill two-thirds of their plates with carbs and the other third a lean protein.

Ketterly even will go with a player to a grocery store. She took several women's basketball players in the summer of 2006, teaching them how to read labels and what foods they should buy.

Aiding women's health

Women's basketball is one of the sports most devoted to using the nutritionist. If Ketterly wanted UNC coach Sylvia Hatchell's managers to monitor exactly how much water the players drank during practice, then they'd do it.

To Hatchell, Ketterly is another voice teaching her athletes to embrace a strong body image.

"I don't think most people realize that especially teenage girls have -- sometimes it's with the image -- nutrition situations," Hatchell said. "Some of them just don't eat because they're afraid they're going to gain. Being anorexic or being bulimic -- I think that's out there a lot more than people want to admit that. [With a nutritionist] kids know that 'Hey, I can be nutritionally healthy and not gain weight.' "

Ketterly watches for eating disorders and food allergies, and monitors iron levels and irregular menstrual cycles that can be signs of improper nutrition.

Her job also involves opening athletes' eyes, much as hers were opened as an elite teenage basketball player in West Virginia. At one camp, nutritional information was given out, amazing Ketterly. She soon decided to study it and picked Cornell, where she could pursue the subject as an undergraduate.

Ketterly spreads the nutritional gospel to UNC's athletes.

"Food is chemistry," Ketterly said. "For most people, food is food. It's enjoyment, it's pleasure, it's all those things, but for an elite athlete and a competitive athlete, it can also be performance-enhancing because you can manipulate it that way."

(Staff writer Robbi Pickeral contributed to this story.)

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