

Power Breakfast

Whatever sport you do, you'll do it better if you fuel up in the morning **BY RACHEL RABKIN**

PROFESSIONAL SNOWBOARDER and mountain biker April Lawyer follows a few rituals on the morning of a big race. She does a series of warmup and stretching exercises, visualizes herself racing every inch of the course—and makes sure to sit down for a breakfast of two eggs, cereal and a small fruit smoothie made with rice milk.

This morning meal has proved to be one of the most important parts of Lawyer's athletic regimen. She's convinced it's integral to helping her get to the finish line first. "I just can't function >>



» without breakfast,” she says. “It boosts my endurance and keeps me energized and focused.”

It’s a lesson more athletes would do well to learn. Whether it’s a fear of gaining weight or not being hungry, millions of Americans skip breakfast, according to the International Food Information Council. And that can be a bad move, especially if you’re active.

“If I only give two pieces of advice to athletes, it’s drink plenty of fluids and eat breakfast,” says Melinda Manore, a professor of nutrition at Arizona State University. “Unfortunately, the typical athlete who’s worried about her weight skips breakfast, grabs something light for lunch and goes to practice drained of energy. At night she’ll grab anything because she hasn’t eaten for six hours, which means she won’t be hungry again the next morning. It’s a vicious cycle.”

Food for thought

You’ve heard it so often it’s become a cliché, but it’s true: Breakfast really is the most important meal of the day.

Fasting for hours after a night’s sleep leaves your blood glucose levels low. “It’s critical to put fuel in your tank in the morning to jumpstart your engine,” says Jacqueline Berning, assistant professor of biology at the University of Colorado–Colorado Springs.

Skip this morning fill-up, and you risk poor performance or even injury. “Without enough energy, your body eventually goes into survival mode,” says Manore. “Metabolism slows and cortisol levels increase, both of which can put stress on your immune system, weaken your bones and cause the breakdown of precious muscle tissue.”



MORNING STAR Choose breakfast foods with a mix of nutrients.

Excuse-Proof Your Breakfast

Think you have a good reason for skipping that morning meal? Think again. We bust all the excuses.

EXCUSE: Eating breakfast will make me fat.

REALITY: Eating in the a.m. boosts your metabolic rate, so you burn calories more efficiently through the day, says Jacqueline Berning, an assistant professor of biology at the University of Colorado. This helps maintain, not increase, weight.

EXCUSE: I don’t have time for a whole meal.

REALITY: Grab an energy bar or a low-fat yogurt to eat at your desk. Some energy bars can have the same effect on performance as a bowl of oatmeal, according to David Pearson, coordinator of exercise science at Ball State’s Human Performance Lab in Muncie, Ind.

EXCUSE: I’m not hungry in the morning.

REALITY: After about two weeks of eating breakfast, your stomach will adjust to the switch. You’ll wake up ready to eat and perform better, promises Berning.

EXCUSE: I get nauseated when I try to eat before a competition.

REALITY: Try eating complex carbs like whole-grain cereal 90 minutes before your event. As it draws closer, uncap a sports drink, which provides energy and hydration.



Both your muscles and your brain require glycogen to function properly. A 1998 study published in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* reported that college students who ate in the morning found their memory and concentration improved. Research conducted at the Children’s Nutrition Research Center at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston found that children who skip breakfast are more anxious, irritable and have poorer concentration than those who take time to eat.

Even the best athletes say their day suffers when they start it by fasting. “When I don’t eat in the morning my energy and performance are affected,” says six-time Olympic medalist Jackie Joyner-Kersey. “I’m fatigued and moody.”

The right stuff

It also matters *what* you eat. A cruller and a cup of cocoa can fill you up, but they won’t necessarily help your performance. To get the most from your meal, look for a mix of complex carbohydrates, protein and a »

➤ little fat. Try to balance breakfast the same way you would the rest of your diet—60% of your total calories coming from carbs, 15%–20% from protein and 20%–25% from fat.

Complex carbohydrates like whole-grain cereal, toast, pancakes and granola provide energy and much-needed nutrients like fiber, folate and iron. Protein-rich foods like skim or soy milk, cheese, yogurt and peanut butter assist in glycogen resynthesis and muscle-tissue repair—and dairy foods are also an important source of calcium, which is vital for building strong bones. Eggs, another good source of protein, are also high in B vitamins, which help to metabolize energy and

are often in short supply among female athletes. Add fruit or a glass of orange juice for vitamin C, which aids in iron absorption and helps keep your body healthy under the stress of workouts.

All in the timing

Most nutritionists recommend eating at least an hour before exercise to give your body time to digest and absorb the energy. But your stomach may make the decision for you. “Some people can eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on the starting block; others eat three hours before a race and get sick,” says Berning.

If you’re the type who rolls out of bed and reaches for her sneakers, you

may not have time to digest a lot of food. Manore recommends grabbing a banana, a slice of whole-wheat toast or a sports bar, plus a big glass of water or a sports drink before heading out the door. After your workout, be sure to replenish what you’ve burned with a bigger meal.

The key is doing what works for you and doing it consistently. “Some people change their diet on race day and wonder why their program is below par,” says Joyner-Kersee, who favors pancakes, fruit and a little bit of turkey or chicken in the morning. “There’s no set-in-stone breakfast of champions. You have to experiment and learn what’s best for you.” ♦

Wendy Ingraham’s Black Bean Soup

TRAINING IN THE chill of early spring days gets world champion triathlete Wendy Ingraham, three-time winner of Ironman Austria, in the mood for thick and hearty black bean soup. A great source of protein, the soup works even for vegetarians—just skip the bacon and turkey or chicken breast, and substitute vegetable broth for chicken broth. Serves six.



2 16-ounce cans of black beans
6 bacon strips
1 onion, chopped
1 serrano chili pepper, diced
1 13-ounce can of chicken broth

2 cups finely chopped turkey or chicken breast, cooked
¼ cup Monterey Jack or cheddar cheese, shredded
Sour cream (optional)
Tortilla chips

Rinse and drain black beans and place in stock pot. Fry bacon in skillet; chop and set aside.

Sauté onion in bacon grease; drain grease and add onions to beans. Add chili pepper; stir in broth.

Add turkey or chicken to mixture. Bring to a boil; cover and simmer for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Pour three cups of the soup into a blender; mix until it thickens, then return to stock pot. Add more broth or water if soup seems too thick.

Pour into bowl and top with shredded cheese, sour cream, chopped bacon and tortilla chips.

Nutrition lowdown (per ¾ cup serving): Calories, 354; protein, 23 grams; carbohydrate, 34 grams; dietary fiber, 7 grams; fat, 15 grams; saturated fat, 5 grams.

FOOD STYLING BY JEE LEVIN