

“Let Food be Your Medicine and Medicine be Your Food”

By Jan Clementson

From Antiquity to “Limeys”

As far back as 400 BC, **Hippocrates** (the father of modern medicine), recognised the importance of food in relation to health when he made the now famous remark “Let food be your medicine and medicine be your food”.¹ However, it has taken many centuries before this wisdom has been acted upon.

The first scientific nutrition experiment was not conducted until 1747, when Dr James Lind - a physician in the British navy - discovered that lime juice saved sailors from scurvy (a deadly and painful bleeding disorder).....and gave rise to the term “limeys” for British sailors. Yet, the essential vitamin C within lime juice was not identified by scientists until the 1930s.



The Ancient Olympics

The origins of athletic activities date to prehistoric times, although the ancient Olympic Games in Greece were not founded until 776 B.C. and continued until 393 A.D.² Revival in the modern era occurred only in 1896, with the first Olympiad in Athens, Greece. The feats of well-known ancient athletes, and their training and dietary rituals, still survive today in texts from antiquity.³

Despite these texts being a mix of legend and fact, a clear emphasis can be found on food and athletic performance. The best surviving account of athletic diet relates to Milo of Croton – a wrestler whose feats of strength became legendary.⁴ His high protein and carbohydrate diet would not be far off the diet of a strength-athlete of today. Perhaps it is no coincidence that such ancient understanding of the impact of nutrition on athletic performance should originate in the country of origin of Hippocrates!

A Century of Progress

One of the first nutrition-related studies to appear on Olympic athletes was conducted in association with the 1952 Helsinki Games and focused on energy

intake.⁵ Progress since then has been slow. Without doubt, many elite athletes have utilised diet as a component of their training programmes, although many report that they have formulated their “ideal diet” through trial and error.⁶

Nutrition as a discipline is still in its infancy, whilst sports nutrition is almost ‘embryonic’! But the tide is turning. The last 20 years, in particular, have seen significant breakthroughs in scientific understanding in multiple areas of general physiology, sports physiology and nutrient requirements. It is now known that appropriate nutrition is an essential prerequisite for effective improvement of athletic performance, conditioning, fatigue recovery and avoidance of injury and illness.⁷

Present Day Olympians

From Helsinki 1952 to the London 2012 Olympics, nutrition has come a long way. No longer is it the preserve of the ‘elite few’. In recognition of its importance, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) issued all athletes of the 2012 Games with a practical guide to eating for health and performance. This was based on an International Consensus Conference held at the IOC in Lausanne in October 2010. Its key message being: **“nutrition is a KEY element of the serious athlete’s preparation”**.



Sports Nutrition for the Athlete

Over the coming months, I will be writing a series of articles that will seek to explain the complex field of Sports Nutrition in more depth. I will help to dispel the fact from the fiction and will provide some practical tips to help you achieve your optimum performance.

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¹ Smith R (2004) “Let food be thy medicine...” *BMJ*, 328 (7433): 0-g.

² Grandjean A C (1997) Diets of elite athletes: has the discipline of sports nutrition made an impact? *J Nutr*, 127: 874S-877S.

³ Kieran J et al (1977) *The Story of the Olympic Games: 776 B.C. to 1976*. Philadelphia, USA: J.B. Lippincott.

⁴ Grandjean A C (1997) Diets of elite athletes: has the discipline of sports nutrition made an impact? *J Nutr*, 127: 874S-877S.

⁵ Jokl E (1964.) *Physiology of Exercise*. Springfield, IL, USA: Charles CT Thomas.

⁶ Grandjean A C (1997) Diets of elite athletes: has the discipline of sports nutrition made an impact? *J Nutr*, 127: 874S-877S.

⁷ Wataru A et al (2006). Exercise and functional foods. *Nutrition Journal*, 5:15.