

Striking the Balance

by Benita Fitzgerald Mosley

When Christy Henrich lost her battle with anorexia nervosa in 1994, people assumed it was just another case of an athlete who had pushed herself too far. Elite female gymnasts, figure skaters, runners and athletes in other sports in which body composition is believed to play an integral part of performance are under intense pressure to maintain a certain weight and percentage body fat. Is this pressure any greater than what the average female teenager faces in trying to be accepted by her peers? Eating disorders, particularly anorexia nervosa and bulimia, are horrible diseases that manipulate the mind to create a distorted body image. And while we examine the connection between athletics and eating disorders, such disorders by no means affect just female athletes.

When athletes such as Henrich and or fellow gymnast Cathy Rigby suffered from eating disorders, it made national news. The same was true when singer Karen Carpenter died following a tumultuous battle with eating disorders and when Princess Diana admitted to suffering from bulimia. Does this mean that only celebrities suffer from eating disorders? No, they just happen to be in the spotlight. Athletes and celebrities are not alone in this fight.

According to a 1995 Gallup Poll, 20 percent of college-age women and 10 percent of adult women suffer from eating disorders. Recent studies also indicate that the preoccupation with weight begins at an even earlier age. The Jacobs Institute of Women's Health reported that 40 percent of third-grade girls said they were dieting to lose weight. Among fifth-graders, that figure climbed to 75 percent.

In some sports, such as gymnastics and diving, the ability to perform acrobatic feats while maintaining aesthetic beauty is critical. Body composition may limit an athlete's ability to perform those skills.

That does not mean that participating in those sports must lead to an eating disorder. Many sports' governing bodies, including the American Volleyball Coaches Association, USA Gymnastics and US Swimming, have created educational materials for coaches and athletes on strategies to minimize the likelihood of developing an eating disorder. Nutritional knowledge and a clear understanding of healthy eating habits have become as much a part of a coach's responsibility as knowing how to perform a flip. The key element in any athlete's training regimen is the balance of exercise with proper caloric intake.



Shannon Miller

An eating disorder is a signal that something is wrong. Self-destructive behaviors such as avoiding food and bingeing and purging are the result of underlying problems. Eating disorders usually strike people who suffer from depression and low self-esteem. Instead of

treating just the eating disorder, it is crucial to find out what is causing the depression and to treat accordingly.

Sport can actually act as a deterrent to eating disorders, because girls who participate in athletics benefit from higher than average levels of self-esteem. Women who were active in sports and recreational activities as girls generally have increased confidence and self-esteem and a more positive body image. Women who continue to exercise have lower levels of blood sugar, cholesterol and triglycerides and lower blood pressure than nonexercising women. Active women report being happier, having more energy and feeling more satisfied with their health than those who are self-proclaimed "couch potatoes." Sport is one of the strongest socializing factors in any society. The skills learned while playing games as a youth serve as preparatory skills for playing the game of life. Discipline, teamwork, time management, how to deal with pressure and how to cope with failure are just a few of the lessons learned on the playing field.

Sport is an activity that can be enjoyed by all without negative repercussions. The key is to balance an active, physical lifestyle with healthy eating habits in an effort to gain the greatest satisfaction out of life. See you at the gym and then at the training table!

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