

Wrestlers, moms grapple to balance weight with nutrition

by Saimi Rote Bergmann

While mothers of football players, basketball players and other athletes ply their children with calorie-laden foods to try to keep them filled up, mothers of wrestlers face a different challenge.

Many wrestlers are trying to lose weight while retaining muscle mass - a tricky balancing act.

"They have to learn that crash dieting is not doing them any good - they'll lose muscle," said Diane Miller, dietitian and mother of Mike Miller, three-time state champion wrestler for Lake High School in Canton, Ohio. "If they deplete their bodies of the protein they need, the body will break down the muscle to have the protein it needs. It's going to get it somewhere."

The key is to find low-calorie sources of high-quality protein.

CHECKING HIS WEIGHT - Wrestler Erik Schott checks his weight prior to a match. There are a number of foods that can help a wrestler maintain his weight and provide strength. CNS Photo by Bob Rossiter. "I got Michael's through egg whites, or Egg Beaters," Miller said. Other low-cal protein sources include skim milk, shrimp, fish, beans and skinless white meat of chicken or turkey.

Wrestlers also need complex carbohydrates for energy. Great sources of low-fat complex carbs include fresh fruits and whole grains.

"Because of their fast metabolisms, wrestlers burn calories really fast," Miller said. "Wrestlers burn between 2,000 and 4,000 calories a day. If they cut their intake to 2,000 calories a day - that's quite bit of food - they can lose 2 to 3 pounds a week."

Although most nutritionists agree it isn't safe to lose more than 2 to 3 pounds a week, wrestlers often lose more than that, especially if they played football at a heavier weight and have only a couple weeks to make their desired weight for the wrestling season.

Carol Schott's sons wrestled for Marlinton High School. She said her eldest, Marcus, decided to lose a lot of weight his freshman year in order to get a spot on the varsity lineup.

"He had to cut hard. That's when we learned the most. It's a helpless feeling for moms - they (the wrestlers) are going to go to the weight they want whether you want it or not, if it's something they truly want," Schott said. "My job as the mom is to provide for them nutritionally what they need."

Unlike adults who want to drop a few pounds, wrestlers can't eat just salads to lose weight. Their diet must be balanced to support their strenuous workouts. "Salads have so little nutritional value, they might as well drink a glass of water," Schott said.

In addition to protein and complex carbohydrates, wrestlers must add potassium to their diet, either in vitamin supplements or in foods such as bananas and potatoes.

"They lose the potassium when they dehydrate, and that creates a lot of cramping for them," Schott said.

Miller recommends a smoothie made with sugar-free yogurt, skim milk, frozen strawberries and a banana, mixed in a blender.

"The banana because it has the potassium, helps with the cramping, and I add a scoop of protein powder, the kind bodybuilders use," Miller said.

The night before a match, to provide Michael with carbohydrates, Miller often made a low-calorie version of French toast.

"I'd use whole wheat bread and Egg Beaters, then cook it with Pam, that nonstick spray, then serve it with sugar-free syrup. That would be his dinner the night before. It's satisfying, having something to chew."

An alternative to sugar-free syrup is sugar-free jelly, which can be microwaved to melt to pouring consistency.

Some high school teams attend summer wrestling camp at Clarion University in Pennsylvania, where nutrition education is part of the daily routine. Clarion's head wrestling coach Teague Moore said he learned about wise food choices while in training for the Olympic trials.

"Most of the things we talk about with the wrestling team center on food choices because our athletes eat prepared food so often," Moore said. "We concentrate on learning how to read food labels and understanding that their choice of caloric intake is as important as monitoring their amount of caloric intake." High-nutrition, high-fiber yet low-calorie meals can still be delicious. Consider a "stir fry" of fresh veggies and shrimp lightly sauteed in broth. Or black beans topped with salsa, chopped bell pepper, and chopped green onion. Miller reminds parents to have low-calorie snacks on hand.

"Parents have to realize, when the kids are cutting weight, they can't have the sweets and sugar in the house for themselves. That's my opinion," Miller said. "You need to support your child with healthy nutrition. High-fiber cereals, low-fat milks. Fresh fruits, cut up vegetables, things they can grab quickly."

(Note: This article is not meant as medical advice on weight loss. Before starting any weight loss plan, please check with a doctor.)

FOR MORE INFORMATION

American Dietetic Association: www.eatright.org

California Interscholastic Federation: www.cifstate.org

Gatorade Sports Science Institute: www.gssiweb.com

LOW-CALORIE NUTRITIONAL FOODS

Proteins

Large shrimp: less than 10 calories each

Crabmeat: 25 calories an ounce

Orange roughly and other white fish: 20 calories an ounce (raw)

Skinless white meat chicken: 31 calories an ounce (raw)

Skim milk: 1 cup 86 calories

Complex Carbohydrates

Orange: 60-70 calories

Raspberries: 1 cup 60 calories

Apple: 80-100 calories

Banana: 100-125 calories

Pineapple ring: 30 calories

Fiber

1 radish: 3 calories

Bean sprouts: 1 cup 12 calories

Broccoli: 1 cup 25 calories

Whole bell pepper: 30 calories

1 cup fresh green beans: 35 calories

1 button mushroom: 5 calories

Whole cucumber: 35 calories

Flavor

Salsa: 2 tablespoons 5-10 calories

Mustard: 1 teaspoon 3-10 calories

Hot sauce: 1 teaspoon 1-2 calories

Whole medium onion: 45 calories

Sweets

Sugar-free Popsicles: 10-15 calories

Sugar free yogurt: 6-oz. cup 50-60 calories