

## TRAINING TABLE

By Leah Moore Thomas, MS, RD/LD, CSSD, Director of the Total Person Program,  
Georgia Tech Athletic Association.

Historically speaking, “training table” is defined by the NCAA as that one meal per day, for the student-athlete, outside of their institutional meal plan, on days when campus dining facilities are under normal operation.<sup>1</sup> With the deregulation of meals legislation passed by the NCAA in early 2014, effective August 1, there is a little more freedom in feeding the student-athletes than there once was, as outlined in the original rule above. While there will still certainly be financial restrictions that limit the amount of meals an institution will be able to provide their student-athletes, outside of their normal board allowance, there will also be more freedom to back up the ongoing messages that Sports Dietitians (RDs) provide, with “food as fuel” and “smaller more frequent meals”.

Outside of the past and/or present rules on feeding, there are some definite advantages to having separate dining facilities for student-athletes. As athletes, these college students have additional incentive to make good food choices and to pay particular attention to the food they fill their plates with – and that additional incentive is their athletic performance. There are many things that go into making an athlete perform at a high level successfully: sport specific training, recovery, rehabilitation, talent, strength and conditioning, and nutrition (among others). Educating them on their needs and how to meet them is one thing, but providing all of the necessary pieces to fulfill these needs adequately is another. The training table is the perfect opportunity to provide the fuel that these student-athletes need.

Currently across the NCAA, there are three main ways of providing this training table: 1) using a foodservice company to operate the dining facility, 2) hiring a private culinary expert to purchase and prepare high quality, fresh, and even local foods, and 3) catering a meal from local restaurants or other caterers. There could be advantages and disadvantages to any of these operations. For example, the quality and freshness of food could be compromised with a large-scale foodservice company, while a culinary expert using fresh and local foods could prove to be very costly. Having a Sports RD involved in any of these three scenarios is one important key to ensuring the best possible outcome for the student-athletes.

Regardless of the setup, it is important to provide a variety of complex carbohydrates, such as whole wheat bread or pasta options, lean proteins, such as grilled chicken breasts, pork loin, or lean cuts of red meat, a variety of rich-in-color fruits and vegetables, and low-fat dairy options. One critical key to remember when designing the menu options on any given day is that a “perfect menu” is not perfect if the student-athletes won’t eat it. Encouraging moderation and occasional enjoyment of those foods that you love is both positive and productive, and following that advice when designing a training table menu is equally as positive.<sup>2</sup> Equipping student-athletes with the knowledge of how their choices affect their day-to-day performance is one of the most important roles of a Sports RD.

As it turns out, using a training table set up as a “learning lab” is another extremely beneficial advantage of having such a facility. Teaching about nutrition can be most effective when doing so at meal time, especially when there are multiple food options available. Providing the basic nutrition facts (total calories, carbohydrates, protein, fat, fiber, sugar, etc.) for the foods offered is certainly nice, but taking that education one step further and relating the nutrient make-up to athletic performance is really equipping student-athletes to make good decisions when they are eating somewhere else, or even preparing their own food. Some learning lab ideas include:

- Signage describing the role each macronutrient plays in their athletic performance can provide real-time motivation for building the perfect plate for their sport. For example:
  - Carbohydrates are the primary fuel source for working muscles.
  - Protein is necessary for maintaining and building muscle mass!
  - Low-fat dairy products are a great source of both carbohydrates and protein, qualifying them as an excellent recovery nutrition product!<sup>3</sup>
- Posters on the role of antioxidants in the (anti) inflammation process that are located near colorful fruits and vegetables. For example:
  - Colorful fruits and vegetables contain antioxidants that help you fight the inflammation that occurs with your day to day training!<sup>4</sup>
  - Nutrients in these foods help keep your immune system strong. Fewer colds means more time in the game!
- Labeling the menu items with scan-able barcodes that can be uploaded to mobile nutrition apps that then automatically populate a student-athletes’ food record keeping system.

The training table can play a very important role in the fueling and educating of student-athletes. Under the direction of a qualified professional, the training table provides another piece to the overall care of the student-athlete.

### **Author**

*Written by SCAN/CPSDA Registered Dietitians (RDs). For advice on customizing an eating plan to meet your nutrition goals, consult an RD who specializes in sports, particularly a Board Certified Specialist in Sports Dietetics (CSSD). Find a qualified RD at [www.scandpg.org](http://www.scandpg.org) or [www.sportsrd.org](http://www.sportsrd.org).*

### **References**

1. NCAA Academic and Membership Affairs Staff. NCAA 2013-2014 Division I Manual. Indianapolis: National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2013. Print.
2. Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. Position of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: Total Diet Approach to Healthy Eating. Web. June 18, 2014.
3. Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. Position of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, Dietitians of Canada, and the American College of Sports Medicine: Nutrition and Athletic Performance. Web. June 18, 2014.
4. Dekkers CJ, van Doornen LJP, and Kemper HCG. “The Role of Antioxidant Vitamins and Enzymes in the Prevention of Exercise-Induced Muscle Damage.” *Sports Med* 21.3 (1996): 213-238. Print.