Going for Gold, With Olympic-Sized Calorie Consumption

By Erik Lief — August 9, 2016

We're now settling into our collective, two-week, nightly routine, where TV viewers across the United States are parking themselves in front of their flat-screens with a smorgasbord of snacks, while Olympic athletes in peak physical condition amaze us with their feats of endurance and awe-inspiring performances.

And in between the waves of our guacamole-dip and tortilla-chip consumption, many of us will also take a few moments to marvel at the sculpted, muscled bodies flashing before our eyes.

A guilt-producing article; that's not the intention. Rather, it's about appreciating how, through precisely-calibrated nutrition, these extraordinarily dedicated athletes become powerhouses of Olympic performance. Aside from their sport-specific training, it can be argued that Team USA is only Team USA because of the U.S. Olympic Committee's Sport Nutrition Team, which puts the right food on the training table and guides each athlete through their individualized schedule of consumption.

Now when it comes to consumption, the first question that's usually asked is: How many calories do these athletes consume daily?

While some reports wildly exaggerated Michael Phelps' intake at 12,000 calories per day for the 2012 Games in Beijing, the range for endurance athletes like him (in cycling, swimming, marathon running and rowing) is really 3,000 to 8,000/daily. For other athletes, consumption ranges from a high of about 4,500 calories/daily (soccer, basketball) to as little as 1,200 to 1,500 (wrestling, fencing, tae-kwon-do).
But let's get back to those on the high end of the scale. For instance, swimmers, some of whom like Ryan Lochte, power down a remarkable 7,000 to 8,000 calories a day -- or more than triple what's recommended for a normal adult American man. If you're interested, here's his menu [3]. Based on it, the 11-time Olympic medalist reportedly eats four big meals a day, and Lochte has even be quoted as saying that he's "tired of eating" and that his "jaw was getting sore" because of it. Meanwhile, other athletes are prompted to eat even more often than Lochte: every four hours. 

In order to guide their athletes with precision, the Sport Nutrition Team, which has five staff dieticians in Brazil, has mapped out what specific foods should be consumed [4], based on whether it's an "Easy Day" of training, a "Moderate Day" or a "Hard Day." And if the athletes don't meet their daily requirements, some will go to somewhat bizarre lengths to consume the right ingredients.

Before these Olympics began last week, here's what one olympian had to do to get his diet back on track, according to the Associated Press:

"Here's the concoction that U.S. swimmer Ryan Murphy [5] came up with when he was desperate to get a lot of extra nutrients in a hurry before calling it a day: Handfuls of kale and spinach, followed by some beets, oatmeal, splashes of tart cherry juice and a little bit of mango, all tossed into a blender for a few moments. He chugged it down, too."

"'He knows he needs to get all the nutrients he can,' said Alicia Kendig, the sports nutritionist for the U.S. swimming and track and field athletes that are competing in the Rio Games. 'Some athletes want it to taste good. Ryan knows that he needs to just put all the good stuff in it and get it down. That was his way of getting a salad down right before bed.'"

Finally, if all this talk about eating properly has provided the motivation to improve your own daily intake, then read this, quick 7-step guide [6]. The short article contains some helpful advice we can all use.