

Sports Nutrition Spotlight:

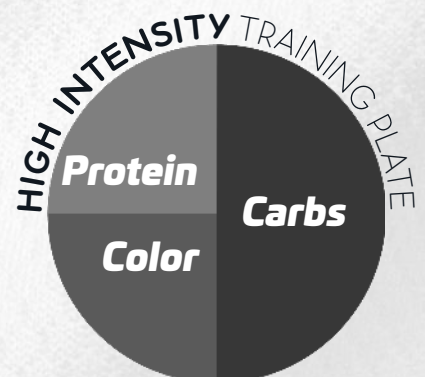
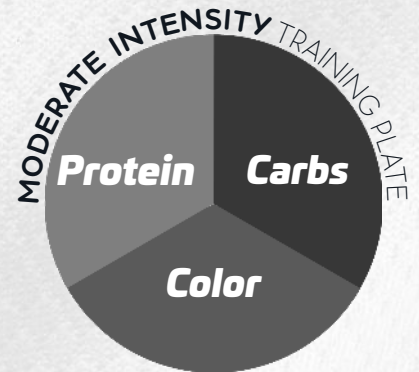
Build Your Best Performance Plate



FUEL BETTER. RECOVER FASTER. PERFORM STRONGER.

Each month, IL Wesleyan Dining Services' Registered Dietitian shares practical nutrition strategies to help student-athletes fuel for success. Whether you're preparing for competition, recovering from training, or navigating the offseason, your nutritional needs change throughout the year. One of the simplest and most effective ways to support performance is by building a plate that matches your training demands.

A performance plate is a visual tool that helps athletes balance the three nutrients most important for success: carbohydrates, protein, and fruits and vegetables. Learning how to adjust these components based on your activity level can help improve energy, recovery, and overall performance.



Matching Your Plate to Your Training

Not every day requires the same amount of fuel. An athlete's plate should reflect the intensity and volume of training.

During the offseason, on recovery days, or while rehabilitating an injury, a low training plate may be the best option. This plate emphasizes colorful fruits and vegetables alongside lean protein sources, with a smaller portion of grains and starches. Because energy demands are lower, the focus shifts toward recovery, overall health, and providing the nutrients needed for healing.

For athletes participating in regular practices or moderate-intensity training sessions, a moderate training plate provides a balanced approach. Carbohydrates, protein, and produce are included in relatively equal proportions to support performance while maintaining stable energy throughout the day. This plate serves as a great starting point for many athletes and can be adjusted based on hunger levels and training demands.

On game days, double practice days, and during periods of intense training, athletes often benefit from a hard training plate. In this case, carbohydrates become the star of the meal. By increasing portions of whole grains, potatoes, rice, pasta, and other starches, athletes can maximize glycogen stores, which serve as the body's primary fuel source during exercise. Consistently under-fueling can lead to fatigue, slower recovery, reduced performance, and an increased risk of injury.



Why Protein Matters

Protein is often the nutrient athletes focus on first, and for good reason. Protein is essential for building and repairing muscle tissue after training. It also supports healthy bones, joints, tendons, and the production of hormones and enzymes that help the body function optimally.

However, **protein cannot do its job effectively without adequate carbohydrates.** When carbohydrate intake is too low, the body may begin using protein as an energy source rather than for recovery and muscle repair. For this reason, athletes should focus on building balanced meals rather than simply adding more protein.

Dining halls offer a variety of quality protein sources, including chicken, turkey, fish, lean beef, eggs, Greek yogurt, cottage cheese, milk, beans, lentils, tofu, edamame, and nut butters. Pairing these foods with carbohydrates creates a winning combination for performance and recovery.



Adding More Color to Your Plate



If your plate isn't colorful, you may be missing out on nutrients that support recovery and overall performance.

Fruits and vegetables provide vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, and fiber that help athletes recover from the physical stress of training. Intense exercise naturally creates inflammation within the body. **The antioxidants found in colorful produce help combat that stress and support the recovery process.**

One simple goal is to "eat the rainbow." Different colored fruits and vegetables provide different nutrients, so varying your choices throughout the week helps ensure your body receives the tools it needs to perform at its best.

PRO TIP:

Combining whole food with small electrolyte additions such as a squeeze of fresh lemon in your water will provide complete muscle recovery. Whole foods provide fiber, vitamins, minerals, and long term health benefits.

The Truth About Carbohydrates

Despite their bad reputation in some diets, carbohydrates remain an athlete's most important fuel source.

When carbohydrates are eaten, they are broken down into glucose, which provides energy for the muscles and brain. Any excess glucose is stored as glycogen in the muscles and liver. During practices, games, and workouts, glycogen becomes the body's preferred source of energy.

Athletes who consistently consume adequate carbohydrates tend to maintain higher energy levels, experience less fatigue, and perform better during training and competition. Carbohydrates also play a critical role in reaction time, concentration, and decision-making, which can be the difference between winning and losing in competition.



Not all carbohydrates serve the same purpose. Foods such as whole grain bread, brown rice, quinoa, oatmeal, beans, fruit, and sweet potatoes are considered complex carbohydrates because they contain fiber and digest more slowly. These foods are ideal for meals because they provide lasting energy over time.

Simple carbohydrates, on the other hand, digest quickly and provide rapid fuel. Foods such as pretzels, applesauce, sports drinks, dried fruit, crackers, and fruit juice can be useful before, during, or immediately after exercise when quick energy is needed.

The key is understanding when to use each type. Complex carbohydrates fuel your day, while simple carbohydrates can help fuel your workout.

Recovery Starts with Real Food

Recovery nutrition doesn't have to be complicated. While sports drinks and supplements have their place, whole foods provide many of the nutrients athletes need for long-term success.

Foods such as bananas, sweet potatoes, avocados, blueberries, and coconut water naturally provide important electrolytes and recovery-supporting nutrients. Pairing these foods with quality protein and adequate fluids helps the body replenish energy stores and prepare for the next training session.

Even small habits can make a difference. Adding fresh lemon or lime to a water bottle can encourage hydration while complementing a balanced recovery routine.

Final Takeaway

The best performance plate is the one that matches your training demands. As workouts become more intense, your need for carbohydrates increases. Protein remains essential for recovery, while fruits and vegetables provide the nutrients that keep your body healthy and resilient.

The next time you walk through the dining hall, think of your plate as part of your training plan. Building a balanced meal today can help create a stronger, faster, and better-recovered athlete tomorrow.

UPCOMING HEALTH & WELLNESS EVENTS

Wednesday, 9/30 @ Lunch	Meet the Dietitian
Monday, 10/26 @ Lunch	Don't Be Spooked By Diet Culture & Teal Pumpkin Project Treats
Tuesday, 11/10 @ Lunch	Fall Themed Teaching Kitchen
Wednesday, 12/2 @ Lunch	Winter Holiday Cookie Decorating



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Patrick has a Bachelor of Science in Nutrition & Food Science from Ohio University and a Master of Business Administration from Dominican University. He can be a great resource for students to help meet fitness, nutrition and athletic performance goals.

Patrick empowers individuals of all ages to take a personalized, evidence-based approach toward wellness. Reach out to him via email or by scanning the QR code to ask nutrition questions or learn how to fuel performance while on campus!

