

# NUTRITION FOR THE FOOTBALL STUDENT-ATHLETE



“I’ve heard I need to weigh 320 pounds or more in order to be a successful lineman. I’ve been eating big meals and having a couple of protein shakes every day. I’m seeing some gains on the scale, but I’m not sure I’m gaining muscle. What can I eat to get bigger and stronger without feeling so full that I need to go lie down after meals?”

KENT GIDLEY / ALABAMA; ADDITIONAL PHOTOS FROM NCAA PHOTOS ARCHIVE AND SHUTTERSTOCK

**F**ootball is often called the ultimate team sport, requiring each position player to do his job in order for the play to be successful. Games are lengthy, but are played in rapid, short-duration bursts requiring speed, endurance and mental toughness, especially late in the game. Speed, power, strength and agility are important factors in all football athletes. Body composition of football athletes relates directly to position on the field, with larger, higher body-mass athletes playing line positions and smaller, more-lithe body types in skill positions.

As a collegiate football student-athlete, your focus should not be on a specific number on the scale. Instead, train your body to be hungry for a substantial breakfast, and fit meals and snacks in throughout the day. Protein should always

be included, and must be balanced with carbohydrates such as fruits and vegetables, and fats such as nuts and seeds. The key to gaining muscle isn't bigger meals, necessarily, but their timing, composition and nutrient density.

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## TIPS FOR JUNE AND JULY

- Establish nutrition habits that are conducive to your own performance goals for the upcoming season.
- Remember, this time of year offers great opportunity to add lean mass, lose body fat and optimize sleep habits.
- Capitalize on downtime by using it to learn more about shopping, cooking, grilling and meal preparation. Your performance benefits from using basic skills in the kitchen, and these lessons help prepare you for a healthy, productive life in the future.

## PRESEASON

### *June and July: Eight-Week Summer Program*

Summer conditioning focuses on preparing for the upcoming preseason camp and the competitive season. It includes strength training to optimize body composition after the May break, and running outdoors to prepare for games in the heat of late August. During this period, acclimating and persevering through heat is a priority. Summer on campus has a slower feel, and meals may be less available if campus dining services are not functioning at the same level as during the long semesters.

### *August*

Call it “fall camp” or the traditional “preseason” – no matter the term, all football student-athletes anticipate an intense few weeks preparing for the season. Meals and snacks are planned around your practice schedule, and fluids should be readily available. Here are some key concerns:

**Get enough fluids.** During this period, you’ll be weighed before and after practice to determine how much fluid you’ve lost via sweat in each practice. Each pound of body weight lost in a practice requires 20 to 24 ounces of fluid and one gram of sodium for repletion. Fluid and sodium (or salt) needs must be met in order to keep you on the field. You can help meet these needs by consuming sports drinks along with high-fluid foods such as fruits, vegetables and soups; and salty foods such as pretzels, crackers, salted nuts, beef jerky, lunch meats, cheeses, marinara sauce, mustard and pickles. You may have learned to salt your plate at each meal to help prevent muscle cramps, and that may work for some.

**Maintain lean mass.** Targeting your energy, protein and nutrient needs is key in maintaining lean mass during these weeks, regardless of whether you struggle to maintain or control your weight. Use the structure of your schedule to your advantage; whatever your weight or performance goals are, be sure to eat something at every meal that is provided. Consider preseason camp as an opportunity to



train yourself to be hungry early and throughout the day, and continue that ideal eating pattern during your season!

**Struggling to maintain weight and gain muscle?** If you have a difficult time maintaining weight or gaining muscle, start with a balanced meal at each opportunity and drink a protein shake in addition to or in place of the water or sports drink you choose. You want high-calorie, high-quality foods that give you a “big bang for your buck,” meaning lots of energy packed into a small bite. For example:

- Look for energy-dense foods such as trail mix, guacamole, cheeses, nut butters, granolas, nuts, 2 percent milk and chocolate milk — and find ways to add these to your meals.
- Add peanut butter to your toast, granola bar, waffles or shakes.
- Layer cheese and mayonnaise on your sandwiches, graze on trail mix and nuts, and sip shakes as the schedule permits.
- If the heat takes your appetite away, try cool foods such as yogurt parfaits, puddings with fruit toppings, tuna salad, deviled eggs, cheese and crackers, lunch meat or pimento cheese sandwiches, fruit dipped in peanut butter, or smoothies.

You may find you can start your meal with cool foods and work up to a hot, protein-centered meal.

**Is weight control a concern?** If you need to control weight while maintaining lean mass and strength, eating quality foods at each meal or snack will optimize your camp

experience. Seek out lean proteins and high-quality, high-fiber sides to feel full and satisfied. Some tips:

- Make sure breakfast, lunch and dinner are protein-centered meals with lots of colorful produce on the plate.
- Look for baked, grilled or roasted chicken, turkey, fish, tenderloin or sirloin cuts of beef and pork.
- High-fiber carbohydrates such as 100 percent whole-wheat breads, brown rice, whole-grain pasta,

quinoa and beans make meals more satisfying.

- Snack on tuna salad, apples with almond or peanut butter, carrots or pretzels with hummus, boiled eggs, cottage cheese with fruit, Greek yogurt, and dried or fresh fruits such as cherries and plums.
- Experienced student-athletes may prefer to minimize snacks or limit themselves to fruit, fluids or protein shakes between meals. This may be effective as long as earlier meals are adequate and balanced including protein, quality carbohydrates, and plenty of fruits and vegetables.



## WINNING RECOVERY NUTRITION STRATEGIES

- Stay committed to nutritional recovery as the season progresses.
- Make sure to mix up your choices to avoid getting tired of your recovery snack.
- As the season progresses, you may experience “food fatigue” (particularly about week 6 or 7). Ask your sports dietitian or training table manager to shake up the menus, offer choices in live-cook stations, incorporate theme nights and provide player menu requests during the second half of season to keep you and your teammates interested in fueling your bodies to finish the season strong.

## IN SEASON

### Late August to December

Once the fall semester begins, life settles into a more normal routine. Everything may feel easier to manage on a daily basis after the grind of football camp. Practices and conditioning continue to demand your energy, but training table and pre-competition meals go a long way in offsetting the workload.

Recovery nutrition eaten after practice and conditioning is a factor in your

game performance and in stimulating immune function. While team meals are more prevalent, optimizing recovery means continuing to prioritize consuming recovery foods — such as fruit, protein shakes, bagels with spreads, energy bars and sports drinks — within 30 to 60 minutes of practice.

*Remember: Consistent recovery yields better performance late in the season, keeping you on the field, helping you bounce back from injury, and maintaining your body weight and composition.*

## POSTSEASON

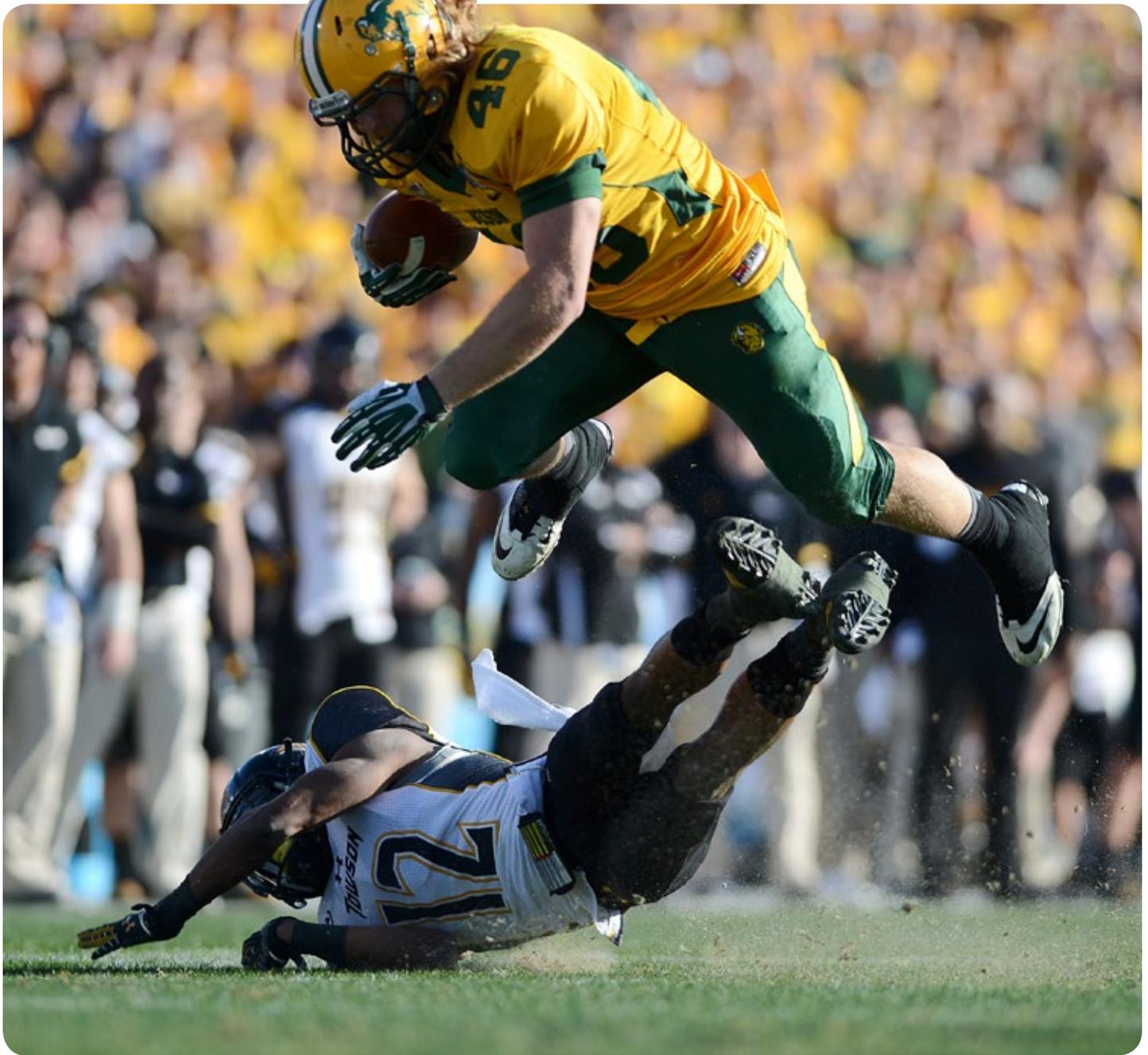
### Late December and January: Championship and Bowl Preparation

Your team has earned a postseason game, and if you're lucky, you can wrap up finals before preparation begins. The emphasis now falls on recovering from the grind of the season and going into championship practices feeling fresh and ready to tackle the last game of the season. Meal plans may end along with the academic calendar, so meals and snacks function to cover your energy needs for practice and conditioning while optimizing weight and body composition for your last performance. Keep these things in mind:

- Catch up on rest.
- Keep your recovery nutrition strategy in place as a permanent element of your preparation.
- Once you're at the championship site, meals may be offered, but they may not be designed with performance in mind. Make the best choices you can — focus on proteins and keep

salads, veggies and fresh fruits well represented on your plate when available — and know that those indulgent, local foods will still be there the minute the game is completed!

- As much as possible, stick to your typical eating and recovery pattern because these have become part of your performance. Recovery at the practice site or quickly thereafter back at the hotel is key.



## OFFSEASON

### *Late January and February: Winter Conditioning*

The plan and timing for the offseason will be designed for your team, but typically this includes four weeks of winter conditioning, followed by spring football practices. Although the intensity may vary, winter conditioning is usually the most physically and mentally demanding time of year. Nutritional recovery from these sessions is critical, because you may not have pre-competition or travel meals built into this period of training. Therefore, greater demand for energy, protein and nutrients comes at a time when meals are provided via a meal plan and fit within the individual athlete's schedule.

### *March and April: Spring Ball*

Although practices are scheduled on alternating days, you may find yourself challenged to manage academic work, conditioning and the mental demands of the installation for next year's new offense or defense. With few practices to execute new plays and show your abilities, you must make the most of your reps and elevate your performance when the opportunity arises. You also need to make the most of fueling your body throughout classes, meetings and practices. Proper fueling requires commitment:

- Ideally, you would enter afternoon practice after two meals and a snack or two, with fluids throughout the day.
- Incorporate liquids into your

practice preparation and take sips during meetings up to the time you head for the field.

- Stock your backpack with a water bottle, nuts, trail mix and your favorite protein bars. Use breaks between classes as occasions to pre-fuel your practice.

### *May: Active Rest*

This is the period when you can spend quality time with family, be active, and enjoy your time away from the game. Eat those foods that you enjoy from your childhood that aren't usually a part of your training nutrition. You can also share new menu ideas and show off new cooking skills with your family. Savor and make the most of your time!