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New survey shows sports dietitians are vital to athletic programs as NCAA Div. I programs invest millions to fuel athletic performance

Sept XX, 2015—Major college athletic programs ramped up their spending for meals, snacks and dietary supplements to feed athletes, from \$534,000 to more than \$1.3 million, since the NCAA lifted food restrictions one year ago, according to a survey conducted last month by the *Collegiate and Professional Sports Dietitians Association* (CPSDA).

Thirty-one of the 53 full-time sports dietitians nationwide who head up the nutrition program in their athletic department qualified to participate in the study, most of them from the NCAA Power 5 conferences. The survey showed that the average annual food budget rose from \$534,130 in the school year ending in 2014 to \$1.308 million this year, a 145 percent year-over-year increase. These food budget comparisons reflect 23 programs or seven percent of the 345 NCAA Division I schools.

The survey findings clearly revealed that many more NCAA Division I programs are feeding all of their athletes now—an average of 569 per school, which accounts for essentially all intercollegiate athletes in a typical athletic program—compared to providing meals and snacks for an average of 368 athletes per school a year earlier.

Limitations were first placed on meals and dietary supplements by the NCAA in 1991 in an attempt to ensure “competitive balance” between schools. Removing them has further increased the accountability for sports dietitians working with these programs. In fact, eight out of 10 are working considerably more hours now, according to the survey; 36 percent of them by 15 or more hours per week.

“Much more administrative work, and more interaction with food service,” said Ohio State sports dietitian Sarah Wick. “We have more athletes to work with. At the same time, we also know that more full-time jobs will be opening up for students of dietetics who volunteer for us now, which is good for them, and very good for our profession.”

Eleven colleges hired their first full-time sports dietitians in 2014 with another four hires during the first half of 2015. The four sports dietitians who were working part-time for their school a year ago were promoted to a full-time position, according to the survey, which was conducted during the week of August 10th

The NCAA lifted food restrictions at Division-II schools this summer as part of an evolving package of newly improved benefits for student-athletes. The NCAA was in the crosshairs of its harshest critics last year, who argued that athletes were being denied certain benefits, among them guaranteed scholarships, adequate cost-of-living expenses, and sufficient health care to protect them beyond their college years. The NCAA voted in April 2014 to begin making more improvements to student-athletes’ benefits, starting with scholarships that cover the true cost of attendance, and also easing meal restrictions, which NCAA President Mark Emmert said had been in the works for two years. It was.

In June, 2012, Amy Freel, Director of Sports Nutrition at Indiana University, was selected to become the first registered dietitian to participate in the NCAA’s *Committee on Competitive Safeguards and Medical Aspects of Sports*. Within four months, Freel along with other leading sports dietitians, including then-CPSDA President Amy Bragg, director of sports



nutrition the University of Alabama, and Past-President Dave Ellis, who was one of the first full-time dietitians in collegiate athletics, forged the CPSDA's first position statement with the NCAA in mind: **"Recommended feeding protocol for all athletes."**

"As registered dietitians, we stressed to athletic directors and coaches the importance of balanced nutrition to make athletes whole again after workouts, practices and games," Freel said. "Meal restrictions to preserve competitive balance between schools that have widely varying operating budgets are one thing. But those same schools also have a responsibility to restore athletes' energy, repair muscle damage, and speed recovery. The CPSDA was thrilled when the NCAA lifted the feeding restrictions."

Sports nutrition has been a slow growth proposition in college and professional ranks dating back to the 1980s, when the University of Nebraska, Penn State and precious few other schools were leveraging science to feed athletes the proper blend of foods and beverages to refuel. CPSDA's Ellis, who doubled as both strength coach and sports nutritionist as a student at Nebraska beginning in 1982, credits then head football coach Tom Osborne with setting the gold standard for feeding athletes.

"Tom was and is a visionary on the value of fueling student-athletes, and he won three national football championships with the Cornhuskers, which validated his beliefs," said Ellis, CPSDA's first President, who has installed sports nutrition programs for dozens of college athletic programs and professional sports teams. "But here we are 30 years later and the full-time jobs for sports dietitians are only just beginning to get firm traction, including within the NBA as teams have just placed the first such positions in the last two weeks."

Indeed, only 13 colleges had a full-time sports dietitian on staff in 2007, recalls CPSDA President Scott Sehnert, sports dietitian at Auburn University. There were none in professional sports at that time, but ten NFL teams have at least one full-time sports dietitian today.

"Most of the old-timers who specialize in sports nutrition haven't turned 40 yet," laughed Sehnert, himself only 35. "But we have 53 colleges and universities covered now with at least one full-time sports dietitian. That's progress. And that leaves 600 more Division I and II schools that will eventually need our services. So job prospects for sports dietitians are looking up."

Georgia Tech has a rich history of being on the cutting edge of sports nutrition. Leah Thomas, who directs the nutrition program in the athletic department, spoke for nearly everyone who participated in the survey when she said it's all about "more."

"More athletes to feed, and more freedom to feed them properly, which is what we've been striving to do all along," said Thomas. "More to learn about food service operations, ordering and supply chains; more time spent at work; and more employment opportunities for everyone."

Sports dietitians were asked to rank from 1 to 10 how satisfied their athletes appear to be with the greatly expanded food offerings, 10 being "completely satisfied." The cumulative score was 8.

"Only 8?" asked University of Tennessee sports dietitian Allison Maurer. "They simply don't know how much better things are compared to just a few years ago. But after all, how could they? And I don't think we'll tell them. We don't want to spoil their appetites."

About CPSDA

The Collegiate and Professional Sports Dietitians Association (CPSDA) is a national membership organization for sports dietitians. CPSDA advocates for full-time employment of sports dietitians to develop, manage, and effectively operate all nutrition-related functions for athletic and military programs. For more information, please visit www.sportsrd.org.