



# EAT like an ATHLETE

WHILE WE AREN'T LIKELY TO PICK UP A MEDAL FOR OUR EFFORTS, WE CAN CERTAINLY LEARN A THING OR TWO FROM THE EATING HABITS OF OUR COUNTRY'S SPORTING GREATS.

Words Karen Burge



**F**ood is fuel for everyone, but especially for sportspeople – it powers their bodies for training and for recovery, and it really underpins their peak performance. And as athletes elevate to elite levels in their chosen sports, their diets must

be tailored and balanced to meet growing demands, which is where Sally Walker (above left) steps in.

Senior dietitian at the NSW Institute of Sport (NSWIS), Sally gets all the enviable gigs. She was Australian team dietitian for the Commonwealth Games in 2018, dietitian to the NRL's St George Illawarra Dragons and AFL's Greater Western Sydney Giants, and in 2021, she'll be dietitian to the Australian Olympic Team at the Tokyo Olympics.

"It's a real privilege to be part of an athlete's journey," she says of her work. "The more we care for them and understand their needs, the more specific support we can give them, so they can just focus purely on competing."

With all this first-hand experience helping elite competitors reach peak condition, Sally believes there's a lot the rest of us can take from our top-shelf athletes.

## SETTING (AND KICKING) GOALS

The key to making changes on your plate is to have a sharp focus on what you want to achieve, Sally says. While it's easy for athletes to know what drives their diets – whether it's being stronger, faster, or the dream of wearing green and gold – the rest of us can also define what's important to us and use it to motivate our food choices, she explains.

Your reason for eating more healthily might be to build muscle, beat pre-diabetes, lose some weight, lower cholesterol or to have more energy for the kids. "And that reason needs to be stronger than the discomfort it takes to make changes to your lifestyle," Sally says.

When it comes to goals, start small, Sally recommends. Rather than looking at the end result, think about the things you could do each week to reach your healthy eating target, like cutting out alcohol or sugar one day a week. And she suggests reminding yourself: "What I'm doing today is still contributing to where I want to be" – no matter how small.



**THERE'S NO PODIUM FOR DIETS**

Sally says her mind boggles when she hears people talk about the 'best diet', as though there's a gold standard. "The thing I find inspiring about working with athletes, and something we can all learn from, is that they eat with a purpose and a goal in mind," she says.

"It's the choices you make every day that make the biggest difference. If I'm presented now with the opportunity to eat a whole wheel of cheese or not, which one is going to get me to where I want to be sooner?" The best diet is the one that helps you achieve your goal, Sally says, while being healthy and best suited to you.

**FOLLOW THE 80:20 RULE**

Sally says she still has the odd "head-slap moment" when athletes confess to her what they ate on the weekend, and she admits to having her own weak moments, too.

"I'm not perfect; I'm only human," she laughs. "But one unhealthy meal won't ruin you - just like one healthy meal won't make you healthy." You need to be flexible.

Consider the 80:20 rule, says Sally and her NSWIS team. This means that 80% of the time your diet includes nutrient-dense foods, with 20% of the time allowing for the less nutritious items. And avoid saving yourself for a "treat blow-out". This can encourage over-eating simply because you've created a window where you're allowed your cheat food.

The trick is to maintain a balanced diet with nutritious meals and snacks, and include small portions of dessert or extras every now and again if you enjoy them. "I say this to a lot of athletes; you don't make a lifestyle to fit in with your diet," Sally says. "You make a diet to fit in with your life. If you shun dinner out with friends because you don't know what you'll be able to eat, you're changing how you interact with people to control that diet," she continues. "That's actually not a healthy diet, even though you think you're being healthy." >



“ Understanding what I need to be putting in my body at certain times has been crucial in being able to find my peak performance.”

KURT LOVETT, HOCKEY ATHLETE



## REVIVE, REFUEL, RECOVER

By the time athletes reach Commonwealth and Olympic Games level, they should be well on track in the kitchen, Sally says. And just like athletes eat to meet the demands on their bodies, we, too, should be properly fuelled for our days. There's no point sweating it out at the gym, then feeling dizzy because you didn't eat beforehand. This, she adds, can cause problems and lead to over-compensatory behaviours.

"If you train while you're already deficient in energy, your body puts up a flag and says, 'that's not right, I need to get that energy back again'. The result is that you can end up eating more afterwards than what you've burned," she explains. "It can slow down your metabolism."

Should we eat after exercise? For sure, Sally says, otherwise you've also lost an opportunity to build and lay down new muscle mass, which helps bump up your metabolism. You want to eat something with a protein source and a carbohydrate, she adds. That might be a yoghurt with some fruit or Vita-Weat crackers with a tin of tuna. "Think to yourself, what does my body need? It needs to recover and refuel."

Sally says the message for all is to recognise that nutrition can be literally 'empowering'. If you can narrow in on goals and create positive habits – no matter how small – you're on your way to achieving your personal best. 🍌

## Breakfast of champions

Sports dietitian Sally Walker says an athlete's brekky should contain carbohydrates for fuelling, protein for muscle recovery and other nutrition boosters like fibre, healthy fats and antioxidants for optimal health and to help recover from training.

### Brekky ideas for active Aussies:

- Fruit salad with muesli and high-protein yoghurt
- Savoury veggie muffins and a milk-based coffee
- Bran and date muffins with high-protein yoghurt

- Grainy breakfast wrap with tomato relish, cheese, eggs and baby spinach
- Sachet of grainy porridge, microwaved with hot water or light milk and topped with fruit and crushed nuts
- Toast with avocado and freshly squeezed lemon and cheddar cheese slices or crumbled feta
- Chia pudding made with light milk and topped with mixed berries and a dollop of natural yoghurt.

Looking for healthy eating inspiration? Visit [hcf.com.au/health-agenda/food-diet/recipes](https://www.hcf.com.au/health-agenda/food-diet/recipes) to discover healthy food choices for breakfast, lunch and dinner.



Giving your best every day, loving what you do, having fun – we can all be champions in life."

JESS FOX, CANOE SLALOM

