

Going for the Gold

2009 Ryley-Jeffs Memorial Lecture

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Abstract

Ask any Olympian about their quest for gold and they will almost always tell you it's not really about the gold—it's all about the journey. What they learned and how they felt at the time of their successes, disappointments and failures is ultimately what challenged them to find the courage to truly believe in themselves and achieve their personal best. As dietitians, we are also like Olympians as each of us seeks personal success in our journey through life. It is no surprise that it takes knowledge and experience to become a champion. "Going for the Gold" highlights some of the milestones and challenges in the author's career and focuses on (her) two specialties, sports nutrition and nutrition and infertility, both relatively new to the dietetics field.

Having a successful private practice means building a solid foundation of knowledge, excellent clinical and communication skills, finding the courage to "think outside of the box", a compassion for others and a strong work ethic to fulfill goals that benefit both clients and the profession.

As the author recounts her journey, dietitians are reminded that there is no straight path to success, and in their quest for gold not to forget to give back...to their profession, their family, their country and their environment.

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Résumé

Si vous parlez à des athlètes olympiques de leur espoir de remporter une médaille d'or, ils vous diront presque toujours que ce n'est pas vraiment l'or qu'ils convoitent mais plutôt l'expérience en tant que telle. Ce qu'ils ont appris et ressenti au moment des réussites, des déceptions et des échecs, c'est en fin de compte ce qui les a incités à trouver le courage de croire véritablement en eux-mêmes et de se réaliser au mieux. À titre de diététistes, nous ressemblons à ces athlètes olympiques, car nous recherchons tous le succès dans notre vie. Il n'est pas étonnant qu'il faille des connaissances et de l'expérience pour devenir champion. « Going for the Gold » (« La quête de l'or ») met en lumière quelques événements et défis qui ont ponctué la carrière de l'auteure et décrit ses deux spécialités, la nutrition sportive ainsi que la nutrition et l'infertilité, deux domaines relativement nouveaux en diététique.

Réussir en pratique privée signifie acquérir une base solide de connaissances et d'excellentes compétences en clinique et en communication, trouver le courage de sortir des sentiers battus, éprouver de la compassion et faire preuve d'une éthique professionnelle à toute épreuve pour atteindre les objectifs qui profiteront tant aux clients qu'à la profession.

Dans le compte rendu de son parcours, l'auteure rappelle aux diététistes que la voie du succès peut être sinueuse et que, dans leur quête de l'or, ils ne doivent pas oublier leur profession, leur famille, leur pays et leur environnement.

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INTRODUCTION

It is a very special honour to receive the Dietitians of Canada 2009 Ryley-Jeffs Memorial Lecture Award in Charlottetown, since my roots are in Atlantic Canada. It is even more meaningful to be recognized by professionals in my own field.

I have entitled this article "Going for the Gold", since I spent a significant part of my career working in the specialty of sports nutrition helping fuel Olympic, amateur and professional athletes in almost every sport. I address some of the milestones and challenges in my career, focusing mainly on my two specialties in sports

nutrition and nutrition and infertility, both relatively new to the field of dietetics. It is reassuring to see some of you already involved in these areas and it will be exciting for me to see them grow in the future.

Dream big

Looking back on my own journey, little did I realize as a little girl growing up in Pennfield, New Brunswick—with big dreams of becoming a figure skater one minute, and a movie star the next—that one day I would be working with figure skating champions like Kurt Browning and

Jeffrey Buttle, or professional sports teams like the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Toronto Raptors, or budding actresses like Hayden Panettiere in the Disney movie "Ice Princess."

Reflecting on the past

I'd like to share with you a brief but relevant history lesson that reflects how far we've come in the field of sports nutrition.

"Gertrude Phinney (Acadia Class of 1932) won the Canadian Championship in the 220-yard dash in 1928, and although she qualified for the Olympics that year she never actually got there because her father listened to the experts of the time, who warned that strenuous exercise such as that demanded of a track athlete would most certainly have adverse effects on childbearing and perhaps cause irreparable harm to the mysterious inner workings of the female.

"Instead, Gertrude was promised a trip to Europe, if she would forgo her 'potentially dangerous' Olympic experience. Not wanting to displease her father, she acquiesced. We will never know, but based on a comparison of her performance times for her sport of track and field, had Gertrude Phinney gone on to Amsterdam that year, she would likely have returned with one or more Olympic medals" (1).

We now recognize this phenomenon as the "Female Athlete Triad," first coined in 1990. This triad of energy availability, amenorrhea and low bone mineral density is most recently described in the revised 2007 position paper on the Female Athlete Triad by the American College of Sports Medicine (2).

Although Mr. Phinney got it mostly right, if Gertrude had been referred to a registered dietitian experienced in sports nutrition, she might never have had to give up her Olympic dream.

Female athletes and infertility

Gertrude's story was very relevant to me since her issues were the same as those I would see daily in my private practice in two different offices—at The Sports Medicine Specialists clinic and at the CReATe Fertility Centre in Toronto.

As an avid reader of the sports nutrition literature and a strong promoter of early detection and prevention of the Female Athlete Triad, one of my eureka moments occurred after noticing that many of my infertility clients exhibited characteristics in their nutrition assessments that paralleled those of the Female Athlete Triad: female athletes in negative energy balance from overtraining, undereating or both.

My further curiosity about the nutritional status of infertility clients inspired me to develop a Nutrition Screening Tool for Infertility Patients to help specialists assess nutrition risks. With this tool, I gathered data on 300 female infertility patients and presented the results at three annual conferences of the Canadian Fertility and Andrology Society of Canada. Even though I was an anomaly in this group of professionals, I became recog-

nized for my work and subsequently was invited to speak to other infertility and health professionals in Canada, the United States and Ireland.

If you work in this area, you will need good nutrition assessment skills and counselling experience in energy balance and disordered eating. Knowledge of polycystic ovary syndrome, metabolic syndrome, diabetes prevention and vegetarianism is essential.

Documenting successful outcomes with this special population is complicated by many factors. The ability to synthesize noteworthy clinical data from dietary, social, medical, menstrual and exercise histories is key. Keeping an inquisitive mind and finding ways to communicate with busy specialists can be frustrating. It is often coupled with the need to educate both staff and clients about supplement safety, fad diets, and the importance of key nutrients within a balanced, varied diet. My interest in this fascinating specialty pushed me to develop relevant education materials and it continues to stimulate my interest.

Going for the gold

Ask any Olympian about their quest for gold and they will almost always tell you it's not really about the gold—it's all about the journey. What they learned and how they felt at the time of their successes, disappointments and failures are ultimately what challenged them to find the courage to truly believe in themselves and achieve their personal best. As dietitians, we all are also like Olympians as each of us seeks personal success in our journey through life. It comes as no surprise that it takes knowledge and experience to become a champion.

Building a solid foundation

The key to any successful dietetics career in private practice, I believe, means building a solid foundation of knowledge and excellent clinical and communication skills, as well as having the courage to think outside of the box, a compassion for others, and a strong work ethic to fulfill goals that benefit both clients and the profession.

The strong science foundation I received at Acadia and Cornell universities has served me well over the years. After completing organic chemistry, biochemistry, biology and physiology, the light went on for me and nutrition came alive.

Any practising sports dietitian will be much more credible with a strong science foundation when explaining energy balance to athletes who are overtraining and undereating, or why carbohydrates are more important than protein for recovery, or advising them on the latest "ergogenic" or performance-enhancing aid.

No straight path to success

You will find that your career will take twists and turns as you pursue interests that you really care about and find exciting. Well-intended goals may have to be put on hold for a while, but your life will be more enriched by the detour. I did not follow the traditional path to becoming a Registered Dietitian (RD). Instead of pursuing a dietetic internship after Acadia, I decided on graduate school and

a two-year Master of Science degree. I chose a double major in Foods and Nutrition because I really couldn't decide. Now I am thankful for both because of the versatility in translating the science of nutrition to the table.

One of my early jobs after finishing graduate school was working in the Human Metabolic Unit at Cornell. An exciting aside from my own work was the fact that our director was involved in research with NASA's Gemini VII Program, and our laboratory got to analyze new food preparations that were a novelty in space flight. There were plenty of inside jokes as astronauts Borman and Lovell tried to collect fecal and urine samples in a weightless environment as part of further nitrogen and mineral balance studies (3).

Family detour

In 1969 my son was born, and I became a stay-at-home mum for about six years. I had no plan as to when I would return to my career in nutrition. There is tremendous value in having mentors at times like these for inspiration and reassurance in getting your career back on track.

When my family moved from upstate New York to Tennessee, I met another young mother who became my mentor. I learned that she, too, was Canadian and a former Cornell graduate. It was she who urged me to take the RD exam—which I did, and never looked back.

Before taking the exam, I enrolled in an advanced course in clinical nutrition at the University of Tennessee, where I had started back to work as a part-time research associate. This course ignited my passion for nutrition in a big way. I loved the detail and complexities of medical nutrition therapy and I found another mentor for a nutrition counselling practicum, Jane White, who later became a president of the American Dietetic Association (ADA).

In 1980, we moved from Tennessee to North Carolina, where my husband took a position at East Carolina University School of Medicine. Suddenly I found myself with the opportunity to teach medical students and Family Medicine residents about nutrition.

Make learning relevant and fun

I was initially afraid of teaching. Doctors can be a tough audience, but after engaging them in looking at their own personal nutrition, they got hooked. I also partnered with some dynamic teaching physicians who staged humorous skits with solid take-home nutrition messages. My advice to you: keep your sense of humour, stick to the basics, and don't be intimidated by those who appear to be "above you". Remember, YOU are the expert in *your* area.

Once I got over the teaching hurdle, I took on the challenge to help design one of the first Model Nutrition Curriculums for Family Medicine Residents in the United States—one of my first big career milestones.

Building sports nutrition knowledge

At the same time in the early '80s, I began to observe the need for sports nutrition information among family doctors working with high school and collegiate athletes. Sports nutrition was in its infancy at the time, and I learned every-

thing I could. To bolster my knowledge in this area, I joined the Sports, Cardiovascular and Wellness Nutritionists (SCAN), a dietetic practice group of the ADA, and have maintained my networking and good friendships to this day.

I would also like to commend the Dietitians of Canada's growing Sports Nutrition Network, which has contributed much time and effort to developing a website with timely topics and practical advice for those working with athletes. Expanding our global network and bringing together the resources to plan Canada's first-ever International Sports Nutrition Conference would be a great goal following the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver!

Starting a private practice

For many of you, pursuit of greater goals has included the desire to begin a private practice. After living in the US for 21 years, I returned to Canada in 1986 and three years later I found the courage to start my own practice. It was not easy beginning a new career in Toronto, where no one knew me. It took about five years to build up my practice. I have learned that excellence in practice means attention to detail, particularly in communicating with physicians about their patients. This paid off in the form of referrals for new and exciting opportunities—such as writing for *The Medical Post* and working with professional athletes.

Power of networking

Through the power of networking, I also got the opportunity to become involved with the Sports Medicine Fellowship Program at the University of Toronto as a clinical sports nutrition mentor. Over time, other opportunities came via Skate Canada from a sports medicine physician who asked me to consult with two young stars in the Disney movie "Ice Princess." My connections to the National Ballet of Canada and the Toronto Dance Theatre came from sports medicine physicians and physiotherapists who valued reliable nutrition counselling experience.

Being in the right place at the right time doesn't hurt either. Early in my private practice, one of the referring doctors invited me to become nutrition consultant to his new clinic, The Sports Medicine Specialists. Through contact with this physician and a supportive athletic trainer, I was invited to consult with the Toronto Maple Leafs Hockey Club. This was both exciting and intimidating, but overall thoroughly enjoyable. My advice: get yourself invited to speak at training camps, go to the competition venues and see for yourself how hard the athletes are working, how much they sweat, how often they drink fluids, and where and what they eat. You will learn more about nutrition and sport from the athletes and coaches themselves than in any textbook.

Working with professional athletes and coaches

Prevention of injury and fuelling properly is a detail rookies cannot ignore if they are going to last as a professional. Damon Stoudamire of the Toronto Raptors became NBA Rookie of the Year in the team's very first year. Early

in the season, this young, single male living a long way from home called me and said, "I need your help!"

But working with professional athletes was not always rosy. It was often difficult to get coaches and trainers on board with nutrition. Learning to understand the pressures coaches and athletes face and why nutrition is not always a top priority (even though it should be) was often hard to accept. Even now when I read in the news about a team that wins one night and loses the next on a constant basis, it makes me wonder if they were receiving sound nutritional advice and if they were recovering properly.

When the new Canadian Sport Centre Ontario (CSCO) came into existence in 1998, I became an official nutrition service provider where I had the opportunity to work with a multitude of athletes, including the Gold medal winning Senior Men's Wheelchair Basketball Team. These men proved to be some of the most hard-working and memorable athletes I have ever met.

Coach Mike Frogley included me in their success after the team won gold in Athens (2004), which vindicated the work I was doing with the team at the time. "Thanks for all the great nutrition advice you gave the team," he wrote in an email, adding, "It allowed them to press harder on the court – and win the gold."

Building bridges with coaches is a key ingredient for success in working with athletes, since coaches are their role models. In 1999, developing a first-time comprehensive Nutrition Task (18 hours of nutrition) as part of a two-year coaching certificate at the National Coaching Institute Ontario (NCIO) helped me build more bridges to a newfound understanding with Olympic-level coaches, elite athletes and the myriad issues they face in their search for excellence. Learning to "speak the language" of many different sports, utilizing evidence-based sports science, and involving coaches in understanding the nutrition assessment process helped me instill in them a greater appreciation for nutrition and its impact on physical performance.

Writing for Professionals and the Media

Through my networking with SCAN dietitians, I was invited to write two chapters in SCAN's Sports Nutrition Manual for Professionals Working with Active People (2000) – one on Hockey, the other on Martial Arts. For the latter, I solicited the help of a Sports Medicine Fellow I had mentored who also was an experienced martial artist (4,5).

In 2005, I accepted an invitation to be a Canadian co-author for the revised Position Paper: Nutrition and Athletic Performance. Subsequently an invitation from the American Overseas Dietetic Association (AODA; <http://www.eatrightoverseas.org/>) allowed me to present its key messages at their conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (6).

In 2007, Kelly Anne Erdman and I co-authored DC's first Sports Supplement course, which went online in 2008 (7). We partnered again to design DC's Sports Nutrition Workshops: Tools of the Trade, which we recently presented across Canada.

Writing for *The Medical Post* for the past 17 years has resulted in other magazine, television and radio interviews or speaking engagements. Today, it is more important than ever to become media savvy and to promote the RD as the nutrition expert not only in Canada but also around the world. Battling misinformation on the internet will be an ongoing challenge, and perhaps liability issues associated with counselling on the internet.

Reaching Your Goals

Mentoring is a two-way street. Be sure to seek out mentors who keep you feeling positive and challenged, and remember to give back to these relationships to keep them strong. Try to communicate on a regular basis—at a local coffee shop, on the phone or the internet.

Give back to others who seek help from you. As a mentor myself, I found working with dietetic interns fun and rewarding. I always enjoyed hearing about a young dietitian's aspirations and ideas as much as sharing my sports nutrition and private practice skills. Teaching Sports Nutrition at Ryerson University from 1997-2003 was also a learning experience for me, since many of today's sports-oriented dietetic students are athletes themselves and may already have studied Exercise Physiology or Kinesiology—necessary ingredients for today's sports dietitian.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention the camaraderie of the Sports Nutrition Advisory Committee (SNAC) of the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC). This is an excellent example of dietitians from the Canadian Sport Centres across Canada combining talents to produce user-friendly sports nutrition resources on the CAC website (www.coach.ca; search under Sports Nutrition for resources, fact sheets and the Sports Nutrition Registry).

In 2005, I was invited by the ADA's Commission on Dietetic Registration to serve as the Canadian member of a working group to establish the first-ever Board exam for qualifying sports dietitians. Of all the credentials available to sports dietitians to date, the Certified Specialist in Sports Dietetics (CSSD) exam is the only one that mandates having RD status for at least two years with verification of 1500 hours of sports nutrition counselling and experience (8). In 2006, I became the first Canadian dietitian to earn the CSSD credentials.

Follow your dreams

A lot has changed since I received my Bachelor of Science in Home Economics some 48 years ago. There were no courses in sports nutrition then. Today, the science of nutrition has advanced with new paradigms such as nutrigenomics, pharmaconutrition—and, perhaps soon, carbon footprint labelling on foods.

Health Canada's message of eating well, being active and feeling good about yourself is important not only to athletes but to all of us throughout our lives in terms of health, wellness and personal success. Building bridges with chefs and getting families back into the kitchen is also our role in celebrating the pleasure of healthy eating.

In your journey, you will find there is no straight path to success. By pursuing opportunities in line with your

interests, you can create your own job. Don't give up on your dreams by following the path of least resistance. And network, network, network! The people you meet can take you places you never imagined.

Remember that the human factor supersedes technology. Being a good listener and empathizing are the keys to effecting behavioural changes. And aside from the knowledge you acquire, to be truly successful you really have to open your heart.

As you continue your quest for the gold, don't forget to give back – to your profession, to your family, to your country, and to your environment.

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