

Don't Forget Your Chess Athletes (Yes, Chess)

Dear Editor:

Chess competition is a very demanding team/individual sport/endeavor, both physically and mentally. In Paul Hoffman's book *King's Gambit*, he reports that researchers at Temple University found a chess master expends as much energy as a football player or a boxer and that blood pressure and breathing rates rise considerably during a chess game. Nigel Short, the top British player of the 20th century, says chess is very unhealthy. Speaking from more than three decades of experience, he shares that during his world title bout with Kasparov in 1993, while eating normally he lost 10 pounds, 7.5% of his body weight, in just the first three title bouts. Short states, "What could be more unnatural than sitting still for four hours while your heart is racing at sometimes 140 beats per minute?" The stress buildup is dramatic, yet there is no convenient avenue of release. Even Kasparov himself, arguably the best player in the history of chess, has broken out with fever blisters in the heat of battle.

Most of the world's top players have strenuous exercise routines to balance their sedentary chess playing. Bobby Fischer worked out regularly long before it was fashionable, and Kasparov pumped iron, swam and rowed as part of his chess training. "Your body has to be in top condition," Fischer said. "Your chess deteriorates as your body does. You can't separate mind from body."

"Nutritional Practices of Chess

Grandmasters" by Roberto H. Bagnione, RD, head of the Department of Nutrition, National Sport High Performance Center, Buena Aires, Argentina, reports that a tournament chess game can take more than seven hours. Investigations carried out by the German International Chess Grandmaster Helmut Pflieger, MD, et al., have demonstrated that elite chess players have comparable physiological parameters as those who practice sports such as shooting, car racing and golf; consequently, chess could be classified as the same category of sport as those according to these criteria.

In order to analyze the sports habits of active International Grandmasters, a world survey was conducted in 2006, with particular emphasis on dietary habits. The study involved 72 active International Grandmasters (17 women and 55 men, 18 to 55 years old) from 35 countries. During the study, 66.7% of the surveyed Grandmasters ate at least three meals a day, but 36.1% often skipped breakfast. Breakfast is important because of its direct impact on your mental (and physical) performance in the morning. It directly affects the glucose concentration in the brain and liver, and supplies a number of nutrients essential for producing neurotransmitters, chemical messengers which act over neuronal cells communication.

Many investigations have shown that mental concentration can be affected when doing intellectual activities in the morning without having eaten breakfast, and that a proper breakfast helps to keep the mental performance in that moment of the day,

according to tests on memory and attention. It can be inferred that the performance of chess players who train or compete during the morning hours could be affected in the same way.

Chess players avoid overeating, since after eating, the bloodstream of the organs involved in the digestion process rises – and, consequently, the blood and oxygen supply to other organs, such as the brain, decreases. If the quantity of food is voluminous or of difficult digestion, consequences will be even more severe or last longer, and people may feel sleepy and tired, less alert and focused, and prone to make more mistakes in relation and search tasks. –

It is imperative for the chess player to hydrate/rehydrate during competition. Feeling thirsty is a sign of needing a drink, but it is a late symptom. During competitive chess games, it is common to lose water by sweating, and many times the environment is hot and/or humid. It is therefore recommended that comfortable/continuous fluid replacement take place during competition.

In summary, chess players should:

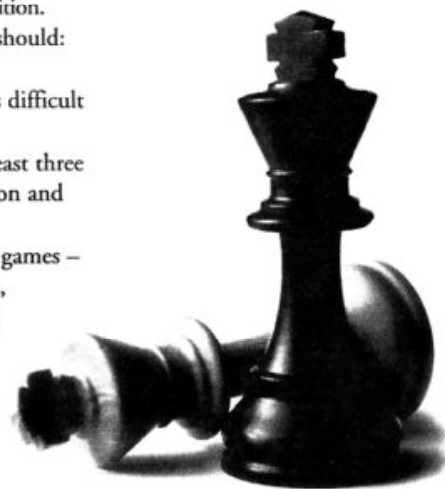
- Eat breakfast daily.
- Avoid heavy foods or foods difficult to digest.
- Eat the last main meal at least three hours before the competition and snack from that point on.
- Ingest fluids and – in long games – solid foods, fruit juices, tea, coffee, sports drinks, cereal bars, fruits, chocolate or cookies in moderation.
- Hydrate best by drinking small quantities of liquids at regular intervals.

- Adhere to a moderate strengthening and aerobic training program to increase endurance and concentration capabilities.

Athletic trainers who have the opportunity to work with the "chess athlete," it is your move.

This article was made possible by input from James Stallings, director of the University of Texas at Dallas Chess Program. The University of Texas at Dallas has won or tied for first in the Pan-American Intercollegiate Chess Team Championship six times. In the seven-year history of the Final Four of Chess, no team other than the University of Texas at Dallas and the University of Maryland Baltimore Campus has won.

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