

Daniel Thompson - 00:14

Hello. Welcome to the Canoeing Coaching Podcast. Today's podcast episode is brought to you by the England Talent Program. Today's podcast is all about nutrition of an athlete. In this podcast episode, we get first-hand experience of the nutrition of a senior athlete, where we'll understand their daily nutrition habits, nutritional strategies for training and their experience of making nutrition work for them in training and competition.

My name is Daniel Thompson and I'm the Talent Operations Coordinator for British Canoeing. Joining myself with discussions on this topic area today is Lewis Fletcher. Lewis is a senior canoe sprint athlete on our World Class Programme, where he's been part of the senior team for the past seven years. Hi, Lewis. It's good to have you with us and I'm looking forward to chatting about all things nutrition with you today.

So the England Talent program have delivered a number of webinars which can be found on the Talent Parent Programme web page in the webinars and video resources section of the British Canoeing website. So I encourage all listeners to also take a look at the resources on that web page as well. So in those previous nutrition webinars, we discussed the key nutrients that should be consumed, their role and what a healthy diet should consist of.

But itself, Lewis, as a senior athlete, I'm keen to learn what your daily nutrition looks like during a typical day and week.

Lewis Fletcher - 01:50

Yes, so my daily typical nutrition is I try to keep it the same every day really. For me consistency on what he just makes. It makes things easy for me. So I typically would be first thing in the morning I get up, I always blend a shake and it's just something for me that works. I typically start with [...] eat something quite heavy in the morning, especially before a training session.

So I'll blend just in a NutriBullet just – just like in a blender. I'll blend some oats and some protein powder, and just some water. And I'll just drink that. That's something that's really nice and easy for me to drink, and it's good carbs, good protein source, nice and easy. It's quick as well. That and coffee. Probably can't leave the house without coffee in hand at least.

After training, I'll go home or head up to work. So if I'm at work, I'll have something - again, pretty simple to make and take with me. So that'll probably be a yoghurt and a bit granola, bit of honey as well. If I'm at home, I'll get to eat some eggs, so I look forward to the days I get home, and I can make some hot eggs. Whether that's scrambled or whatever.

But typically getting a bit of the protein in there, a bit more protein. Again, depending on the time of year and depending on the session, I might add a bit more carbs. Maybe some bran or toast or even maybe even some oats. So that's how I split my breakfast into two. Just because of the [...] I have to fuel before a session but also again after the session. But that's always before 11:00, so I've eaten twice already.

For lunch, again depends on when training is, depending on whether I've a middle of the day session or not and when the afternoon session is. I'll typically have one to two lunches. Either one bigger lunch or two smaller lunches depending on, again, when in the day my sessions are. But if I've got two lunches, I've pretty much split the same lunch into 2. So that would consist of pasta bolognaise or [...] So a good meat source for me, whether that's chicken, beef. Those are the two typical ones.

Sometimes fish if I can cook it at home. I don't want to batch cook before a session. And then, again, same with carb sauces will just be typical pasta, rice or potato. I quite like my rice cooker so I'll have lots of [...] I eat a lot of rice just because the rice cooker is so, so convenient for me. Again, convenience is such an important thing for me. And again some veggies so yeah I'll go training and then I pretty much probably have almost an identical meal after training as dinner and that's pretty standard for me.

I batch cook, so I've probably got three meals on rotation at any one go, at any one time. So yeah, I'll typically I might even have the same thing that I had for lunch. It doesn't really bother me again. Same sort of thing. Good protein source: beef, chicken, fish, even turkey as well. And then again, good carbs source: rice, pasta, potatoes and veggies, again.

So that's pretty standard. Pretty similar for me every day. And then before bed, depending on, again, where we're at with training, whether it's in a particularly heavy block, I might afford myself something kind of less healthy or I might just keep to kind of leaner sauces, whether [...] if I've already had eggs in the day, and I haven't had yogurt. I'll have the yogurt. And if I've already had the yoghurt, I'll probably eat those eggs. So but if I'm feeling kind of like I need something a bit nice, something that is not so healthy.

Daniel Thompson - 05:59

Mixing it up a little bit. Yeah. There are some really good points there that you mentioned. We're going to talk a little bit around when you got heavier training blocks and stuff in this podcast episode. But the couple of points that you mention there - key ones around having that good protein source and carbohydrate source is crucial to help you refuel, recover, for the [unclear] from your muscles and obviously gaining that energy that you need for the rest of the day for your other sessions.

And a really good point you mention was about batch cooking. Is that something that you try to regularly do to help yourself out so that you're able to get those meals ready and available for yourself?

Lewis Fletcher - 06:44

You know that without batch cooking I would be a bit lost, really. I wouldn't get all the meals in I need to get in. Doing what I do, I have to eat quite a lot. So if I didn't batch cook, I'd be spending so much time in the kitchen cooking stuff fresh and it's time I don't have in the day. That time can be better spent relaxing, doing work and getting on with other stuff in my life. That's just to make training easier, really. By batch cooking. You do it once. Yeah. It's a bit of a bigger job, but you're doing that [...] I'll pretty much [...] I'll get my shopping for the week and I'll spend an evening cooking. I'm trying to think now how many meals it would be. It's probably about 30 meals or even more to be honest, depending on, on how many meals I decide to cook that week.

But yeah, I'll typically have three meals on rotation and then I'll drop in throughout the week some meals that aren't batch cooked, like I said, my fish and stuff, meals that I want to get that are just have a bit more taste. Because batch cooking isn't that the most flavoursome. You can make them taste good, but eventually, once they're four or five days old they start to [...] especially fajitas - all your peppers and onions start to go a bit soggy. For sure batch cooking just makes things so much

easier. And that's a lot more convenient. And when things are easy and convenient, those simple habits of getting the right fuel in becomes so much easier. It's so much easier to whack a fajita and rice in the microwave and blast that for 2 minutes than it is to even go into the cupboard and just make some toast. It's even easier than that. And it's actually it fills you up better, it feel better. You feel far, far better than you would otherwise.

Daniel Thompson - 08:40

You've mentioned around, you know, batch cooking and how that's helped. that seems like, you know, you've perfected that over the years. Actually, kind of I want to now take you to the time when you were a junior athlete and what were your nutrition habits like when you were a junior? And how did you manage to perfect your nutrition habits over the years?

Lewis Fletcher - 09:03

I really struggled as a junior just eating enough. I remember I was always at the canteen at school, getting baguettes and all sorts.

Daniel Thompson - 09:17

Bit like me. I was the same.

Lewis Fletcher - 09:19

It was really difficult for me. I was always pretty skinny as a kid and never seemed to eat enough. And I think that's just my own personal experience. But certainly I enjoy [...] The transition. Maybe I definitely relied on my parents as a when I was kind of 15, 16 years old. But yeah, having, having that ability to eat good, proper nutritional foods can make such a huge difference.

I know my mum, when I came home from school, she'd have snacks ready and stuff for us. Quite a lot. It was always very difficult going straight from school, straight to the training. And that was probably something that if I went back and looked at that, we were having just like a milkshake and, and a granola bar. And I know now that after school just isn't enough. And that was why [...] That was one of the areas I was probably struggling in a lot - of getting enough food in. And that was [...] If I could - I know it's not maybe the most practical to have a full meal before I go training if I'm going straight from the school gates straight to my boat. That's quite difficult. But if there is an option to get a proper meal in before you go training, but that's probably the best thing.

I think from when I moved out of home that was when my actual learning process of how to fuel really started. And I think that was a learning process that's taken five or six years to actually to get nailed down. That's not been [...] It's been - I wouldn't say difficult - but it just it's a process that takes time and experience counts for a lot. And certainly learning the values of convenience, of batch cooking, things of that makes a huge, huge difference in just being focused.

Daniel Thompson - 11:17

And I think, yeah, a couple of the points that you mentioned were really important, I think, and sharing your experiences as a junior athlete. It's always really difficult as a youngster: got school in the daytime and then training straight after school, and it's always that difficult to try to get that meal in, as you said, depending on when training is.

And that's potentially not possible and a couple of pinpoints that you mentioned. Even just having that shake is going to help you. And it's just get a bit of fuel in prior to training so that you can then have some energy for training to then be able to have that bigger meal afterwards. And I'm keen to now dive into a little bit around nutrition strategies.

You kind of touched a little bit on it at eh beginning. And generally, how important is it to ensure that you're eating the correct things before training, but also during competitions as well?

Lewis Fletcher - 12:19

And so I look at [...] certainly for training, I look at - it sounds really boring - but consistency across the day. I think there are some nutritional studies out there that talk about what you need to get so much protein, or so much carbohydrate, then post-session or post-gym session or stuff of this. I don't look at it like that. If your body effectively is saturated and always topped up with those levels of protein and carbohydrates and also the micronutrients as well, you shouldn't be having to load around sessions, especially if you're just trying to maintain a good body composition. If you're trying to change from body composition, i.e. gain muscle or lose fat, then nutrition timings can come into it quite a bit. But when I'm just trying to stay consistent, fueling just becomes a consistent thing, even if I'm trying to put on muscle, consistency of macronutrients, i.e. proteins and carbohydrates. The consistency of just having those levels topped up is far more important than actually looking into can I put a little more protein here or there.

That, I'd say, is more important. Certainly if [...] when times are appropriate, I would think about maybe putting a little bit more fast-release carbohydrates in for a session or more towards before I go to bed thinking about "Okay, I probably don't need [...] certainly not fast-release carbohydrates before I go to bed.

Something, again, before I go to bed is typically protein. I don't need a lot carbs. So it'll be eggs, yoghurt and maybe even a protein shake if I'm feeling lazy or anything like that. And then before training, I would typically look at having a long slow-release carbohydrate, probably a couple of hours out - 1 to 2 hours out from before training.

And then it's a feeling like I need a little bit of something in my stomach before training. I maybe have a banana or something, or something small that with fast-release carbohydrates. Some toast or some sort of even dessert to be honest if I'm feeling that that's okay.

Daniel Thompson - 14:56

As you mentioned at the beginning there, consistency. You used that word consistency and I think that's definitely coming across in terms of what you've mentioned there around you try not to think about it too much and have you got good nutritional base of knowledge there and you consistently do the same things each day and not really think too much around it.

Lewis Fletcher - 15:21

Try not to overcomplicate. You can overcomplicate things like, you know, “I need to eat this before and I need to eat this after” and actually it does matter. But to really not to the extent that people make out. If you're comfortable on the water and you're not having stomach ache because you've just had a pizza half hour before, like if you're comfortable in the water and you're not sitting there going ‘I feel ill’ or ‘I’ve got stomach flu’ or even ‘I don't feel like I’ve got enough energy’. If you don't feel like you've got enough energy before the session, you've probably just not eaten enough before the session. Whether that's [...] Maybe think about this before the session. [unclear] little more carbohydrates and maybe I need to have a bit more rice with the meal before I go training. And don't overcomplicate by thinking ‘I need to eat something different.’

It's maybe not that you're eating anything wrong, it's actually just eating a little bit more of something. So yeah, I wouldn't be overcomplicating things like that. When it comes to racing, again, it comes down to what I feel comfortable eating. I try not to overcomplicate it. I tend to actually stick to things I normally eat. I'll maybe forget about protein sources for the day because really the body's not using it because we're not recovering in that time.

The body is really just seeking carbohydrates. So I would maybe ditch eggs for breakfast, I would maybe ditch any protein shakes or anything like that. But eating something that I'm used to eating. If I went and decided, okay, I'm going to eat a bowl of custard when I racing, but actually when was the last time I ate custard? I'm quite sure my body would be fine with it, but it's something that you're introducing into your body, but your body isn't used to processing. So again, I would just stick to the all the same carbohydrate sources that I would normally eat. And I go through a lot of bananas on race day. I do use kind of isotonic energy gels that you get. But that is just purely as a top up - as a thing that I use as a strategy of ‘Do I have the ability to digest that between breaks?’. And so if I've got a really short gap between races, I know having a full meal, like if I eat a bowl of rice kind of thing, that is going to sit far too heavy in my stomach. So actually a banana and a gel works far, far better. And I can postpone that meal to later.

Around racing, It's just about what feels right and having lots and lots of options. If you've got all the options available to you, you can pick and choose and say, ‘That's not appropriate right now. But that is. I can have that later.’ Don't be so strict on yourself and ‘I have to eat this here, and I have to eat this there’. If you've got all your options laid out in front of you, you can pick and choose what feels right at the time because you can try and predict, oh, I'll have this meal here. But the amount of times I've done that and gone ‘I think I'll have this meal here’ and I get to that meal and I'm nervous or I've been sick because I've been out – I've just finished the 500 or something like this – and I'm just not wanting that food. Actually, do you know what? That Squares bar and a Mars bar and a banana and a gel - it might not sound the best, but actually it's what I'm needing at that point in time just to then work and actually fuel properly. So the more options I have there, the easier race day becomes for me. That's for race day it's just having options and making sure you're comfortable and feeling okay. It's about getting to the end of race weekend really.

19:19**Daniel Thompson**

A couple of really great points that you mention there. But the best point that resonated well with me was around not changing anything from your daily nutrition habits. And I think that's really

important to make sure that you're having those regular foods and drinks that you generally do have on a daily basis because as you said, your stomach it's not going to like something that's a bit different.

And another point that you mentioned around gels. You mentioned a little bit around supplements. British Canoeing we take the food-best approach with athletes, making sure that they're having the right nutritional elements from food groups. And do you generally use many supplements yourself or not?

Lewis Fletcher - 20:12

I do. The same thing with [...] I don't overcomplicate it. And certainly, if I could go back in time to a younger Lewis, I'd tell him to forget about it because I thought it was something I needed to use and actually it just stressed me out trying to use all sorts of beta and keratin and caffeine and all that sort of stuff that actually it just stress me out because I was always having to make sure I'm having that on time and having this on time. And it doesn't really make that big of a difference. And actually being consistent with your food is the thing that's helped me most with my training. So certainly I used to think that in order to put on muscle, I had to be using a protein powder because that was and that's what all the adverts now say.

Daniel Thompson - 21:08

Yeah.

Lewis Fletcher - 21:09

And that's just not true. If I put it in front of you on the table, a protein powder or a piece of chicken breast, the chicken breast has got higher value protein and actually your body can utilize that far, far better. So food is always number one. So the supplements they help, for example myself, when I'm struggling to eat in the mornings, but before my sessions a protein powder is perfect for me because I am blending that with some oats. Just because that is what I am used to now, and that is one of the only things that I can really stomach early, early in the morning.

That's where supplements can be really useful. But I don't live my life on protein shakes. It'd be easy if I could, but it's certainly not the best. If I could eat a full meal early morning, that's what I would be choosing. I just know that for me, it just doesn't sit well on my stomach. It's an easy way to get that first meal of the day in to then I can then from then I'll move on throughout the day. But I do try to limit them [unclear] proteins like supplements I use.

Daniel Thompson - 22:32

Yeah. And then the final point on that, you know, if you do, if someone does decide to make that decision to take supplements or use supplements as part of their daily routine. That's something that you need to make sure you're checking with Informed Sport to just check whether those products are eligible and you're able to take them. Is that something that you do?

Lewis Fletcher - 22:56

Yeah, I couldn't be more diligent on stuff like checking Informed Sport batch numbers and stuff. The amount of supplements that even say they are Informed Sports. But if you don't check the batch number, that batch number might not have actually been checked. So it's really important you actually check that batch code and check on the Informed Sports website that is checked.

Even stuff down to [...] It sounds silly, but as soon as I am in the stores and the supermarket, it's something like, for example, Aldi. You get a day's protein dessert pudding. So that's like a mousse. They say it's got 20 grams of protein in it. My first thought is where is that 20 grams of protein coming from? So when you read on the label, it says milk proteins. That is effectively whey protein.

Yeah, that's what that is. Where my head goes with that is 'where's that whey protein coming from?' Is that whey protein coming from an Informed Sport batch test? That's the company that is, that's what, that's how they [...] So I don't know whether that has got potentially banned substances, traces of banned substances in that product, even though it's still on the shelf in Aldi. It doesn't mean that it's necessarily safe to use. So given that I get tested as often and I get tested, it really just not worth the risk for me. As nice as those products are and it's a little bit of cheat and a little bit of life hack, I just don't use it because it's not worth the risk to me.

Daniel Thompson - 24:42

Yeah, absolutely. And I think, you know, we could talk about this topic area for quite a while, actually. I know that we have done some previous webinars and podcasts on clean sport on the topic of clean sport. So if you do want to find out a bit more information about that particular topic and supplements and Informed Sport and I definitely recommend you taking a listen to our clean sport podcast episode.

We talked a little bit about food and how you use nutrition on a daily basis. But hydration is equally as important and it's also really crucial that athletes don't forget that. And that's something definitely younger athletes, they tend to forget about that. And what are your top tips around hydration?

Lewis Fletcher - 25:36

Hydration is actually something I'm probably [...] that's the poorest area of nutrition for me. It's always the one that is forgotten. You're thinking to yourself, 'Well, I need muscle mass – I need to eat protein. I need to be fuelled for this session. Right, I need carbohydrates.' But they're very obvious ones, where actually hydration does get lost in that. So I think of it as when I'm eating meals, I will always have a drink there and I will always make sure I finish that drink. So like a big pint glass.

And actually I just makes food go down easier when you're eating as much as I do. Food becomes a bit frustrating sometimes. So all the food that I have to eat. Sometimes, I wish I didn't have to eat as much food as I do. But certainly having a large drink with meals. And water is obviously the best. But if it makes it easier, a little squash does make things easier with drinking. If you're the sort of person – and I know a lot of people just really aren't bothered by water and they just don't like drinking water – add some squash in. It's better than not drinking at all. Certainly, I do that from time to time. During the session. I can't go out on the water without a bottle of water.

Yeah, and I'd say that's a really good habit to get into is always having in the boat a bottle of water. Even if it's a small bottle and even if you don't get through it, have it there. Because if it's there, you're more likely to drink it and more likely to use that water to hydrate yourself. If it's not there, of course you can't do that.

So between those two things: always having some form of hydration with your meal and then always having hydration with you out on the boat or in the gym or wherever you are. Other than that, it's how else can you remind yourself to drink since you're at school. Again, take a bottle of water with you. I'm quite sure your teachers aren't going to be upset that you're drinking bottles of water. If they are, you can send them my way.

Daniel Thompson - 27:57

Yeah, [unclear] and another thing is potentially, you know, when you go to the toilet, just seeing the colour of the urine. I know that you can kind of identify whether you're [...] feel like you're dehydrated or you need to get more hydration in that way.

Yeah, as you said, something that I think it gets forgotten about, but it is still a really crucial aspect to when you're thinking about nutrition hydration - should come in hand-in-hand with that as well, yeah.

I'm going to draw this podcast episode to a close really shortly. But I've got sort of a final question for yourself. What would your top tip for parents, coaches and athletes be around providing nutrition for talent program athletes?

Lewis Fletcher - 28:48

Keep it simple and don't overcomplicate it. So, again, with batch cooking it, that just keep things simple. It's really easy to do. Or rather, doing it initially is maybe a bit a bit frustrating and it takes a bit of time, but actually once it's done, you've got a whole bunch of meals in the fridge that you can just pull out and throw in the microwave.

So making things easy for yourself – it's such an importance. When things are easy, those habits are done far easier. Yes, so making things easy for yourself and being present and not overcomplicating things. So, again, not like I said earlier about and the young me thinking that I needed all these supplements in order to perform. I'd spent the best periods of my nutrition where I've been performing my absolute best has actually been what I've been using the least amount of supplements. Overcomplicating it and thinking I needed this, that and the next thing. An example is when it came to race day, I had a race day protocol. I had to have all these supplements. If I missed one of those supplements or forgot about one of those supplements, it would stress me out and I'd be thinking, "Well, now I'm not going to perform." Whereas actually it made no difference.

Daniel Thompson - 30:12

Taking that away.

Lewis Fletcher - 30:16

Taking that away. And then not even got to think about “I’ve got to take this caffeine gel at this time” and all the rest of it, it allowed me to focus on what I was there to do. I'm not there to focus on what nutrition to take, I’m there to focus on racing and putting out the best rates I can. Stripping all that back and not bothering with that.

Keep things simple when it comes to nutrition. Don't overcomplicate it by looking at lots of different supplements. Give your basics right of your food stuff: your macronutrients, your micronutrients, i.e. your carbs and proteins and fats. And obviously your veggie stuff like vitamins and minerals. Get that nailed and get your hydration nailed, and actually that's 99.9% of it.

And don't let anyone else tell you that, “oh, supplements are a big thing” because they’re just not. If you get those basics nailed, I know there’s plenty of athletes that don't bother with supplements. They are actually they are as successful, if not more successful, than anyone else. So don't get drawn into that thing of supplements are the be all and end all.

So yeah, keep it simple, and make things easy for yourself.

Daniel Thompson - 31:28

Yeah, that's an excellent final tip to end on. Thank you, Lewis, and thank you for joining on today's podcast episode. It's been great to have you with us. I know I'm feeling a bit peckish actually, talking about food and everything. So, yeah. After this podcast episode, I’m going to get something to eat.

So as I mentioned earlier, I encourage all listeners to watch any of the previous nutrition webinars delivered by the England Talent program. This can be found on the Talent Parent Programme web page in the Webinars and Video Resources section on the British Canoeing website. This podcast is available on the British Canoeing Awarding Body page and also on our Talent Parent Programme web page on the podcast section of the British Canoeing website. It's also available to listen to on Spotify, Podbean or Apple Podcasts channels. Just follow our podcast’s name, British Canoeing Coaching. Thank you for listening.