



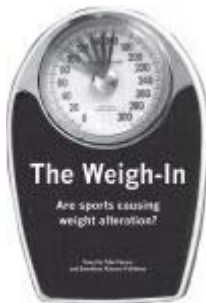
## The Weigh-In: Are Sports Causing Weight Alteration?

Written by Jonathan Kramer-Feldman and Max Turner

Slim down. Bulk up. Either way, the consequences of significant weight modification for high school athletes can be severe. But what exactly is it that motivates these athletes to shed—or gain—the pounds?

Sports like football emphasize strength and bulk, encouraging players to build up their body mass. Linemen in particular spend long hours of training in the weight room.

Conversely, sports such as crew and wrestling encourage participants to lose weight in order to better their performance. Both sports are organized into weight classes, and an athlete's failure to "make weight" can have an adverse impact on the team's performance.



"I know that they want you to be strong and lean both," said physical education teacher Mike Dibley of the crew team. "The fact that you have a nationally-ranked program over there adds that much more pressure."

While student athletes face pressure to better their performance from a variety of external sources, the most significant motivation often comes from an athlete's personal drive to succeed, said Dibley.

"The pressure is not necessarily direct," he said. "It's almost internalized by the young athlete." Dibley noted that athletes will sometimes say to themselves, "Oh shoot, I've got to get into an Ivy so I'm gonna put pressure on myself."

To decrease their weight in a short period of time, professional athletes have been known to drastically alter their eating habits, and their high school counterparts seem to have picked up on the habit.

"In any sport where your weight is a factor in your ability, you're going to see some pretty dramatic behavior to make weight," said Dr. Casey Cooper, a Mission Viejo sports psychologist.

In crew, rowers are divided into two weight categories: the lightweights and the heavyweights. On the girls' teams, an athlete may weigh no more than 135 pounds if she is to qualify for the lightweight boat.

"That's already a little stress on you, just hearing the names of the boats," said junior Olivia Miller, who rows with the Marin Rowing Association.

"I know girls who are making salads and bringing them to school. They are on lettuce diets," Miller said. "It's hard to eat that little and still perform well."

Dr. Madeline Levine, psychologist and author of *The Price of Privilege*, said that weight modification in teens is "driven by the terror of failing at something."

According to Levine, the majority of girls consider themselves overweight, and many diet. "Body image, particularly for girls, is so emphasized and important in our society," she said.

"A lot of these girls are very perfectionist. Besides genetics, perfectionism is the biggest predictor of depression," Levine said.

Cooper stressed the importance of maintaining an athletic environment that discourages unhealthy weight loss.

"In order to curb unhealthy behaviors, first and foremost it's a matter of developing a consistent routine, a standard nutritional guideline, a standard workout guideline," she said.

Cooper also said that athletes who seek to improve their performance by severely limiting caloric intake can often end up harming their sports careers in the long run.

"A lot of times, athletes believe they're immune from being labeled as having an eating disorder," she said. But "if [the condition] meets the criteria for the diagnosis, it doesn't matter whether it's an athlete or a non-athlete."

According to Dibley, there is high awareness of the problems associated with weight loss. "But there is also pressure, internal and within families, and from coaches," he said. "They want you to be the best you can be, and balancing that, striking a healthy balance is really the challenge of any athlete, of any coach, of any parent."

Perhaps the sport most commonly associated with weight loss is wrestling, where an extra meal can be the distinction between an opponent 50 pounds heavier or lighter. Wrestlers will frequently forego a meal or two in lieu of a defeat in a heavier weight class.

"Sometimes if you're overweight a day before a match, you make yourself not eat just so that when you weigh in you'll be able to get under," said varsity wrestler Miguel Harrison, junior. "It's really stressful because it hurts not eating."

Harrison described techniques that wrestlers will use to get rid of water weight, which is dangerous because it puts athletes at risk for dehydration.

"One time I weighed in two pounds over when they weighed me in the morning," Harrison said. "I had around an hour to lose two pounds, so I put on five sweaters and a lot of pairs of pants and I started jogging for an hour, just so I could lose all that sweat and all that water."

If I want to be able to compete, I have to do that," said Harrison.

On the other end of the spectrum, football teams rely on the physical mass of their players to outperform rival squads. During a competitive high school season, a few pounds can make all the difference for the linemen, players who train to develop their bulk and muscle.

"To be at the top of your game, you need to be at a set weight," said varsity football lineman Michael Avtonomoff, junior. "The coaches don't really say anything to you, but it's sort of implied that it would be best for the team."

During the season, football players are required to attend weight lifting two times per week. In the summer, coaches ask team members to show up at the weight room every day, which can become tedious, according to Avtonomoff.

While football players are generally not as diet-conscious as other athletes, the use of nutritional supplements to increase bulk is not uncommon.

“There may be the occasional kid who uses creatine,” Avtonomoff said. “At one point, I was using creatine just to see its effects.”

Dibley stressed the importance of maintaining moderation in athletic activities.

“There are a lot of forces tugging at the student athlete at Redwood High School. And ultimately, we sometimes think of you all as adults and you’re really emerging adults,” he said. “We have to recognize that and make sure that you’re living and competing in a balanced way that’s healthy for you, but also challenge you.”