



## DR. K'S MENTAL MINUTE

THE ATHLETIC MIND INSTITUTE

### **Muscle or Media?** **By Todd M. Kays, Ph.D.** **Sport Psychologist**

A common issue among student-athletes, especially high school and college student athletes is body image. Body weight/image and eating behaviors can be issues for males and females, but it is more prevalent among females. Furthermore, there are sports where it is more common, such as gymnastics, swimming, figure skating, wrestling, cross country, diving, and dance, but it is found across all sports. Reasons why certain sports contain higher rates of body image issues, eating disorders, or “disordered” eating patterns than others are: (1) greater emphasis on the connection between performance and weight (2) judges rate performance, and (3) less clothing is worn and more of the body is exposed.

Female student athletes develop body image and eating issues for many reasons. In the world of sports, emphasis is on athletic performance. What are the requirements of great athletic performance? Many times it is strength, speed, endurance, muscle tone, and power. These skills require changes in the body through strength and conditioning. At the same time, young female student athletes are receiving messages from multiple sources of the “ideal” female body – most of the time it does not involve muscle mass, power and speed. One only has to have seen the recent “Victoria’s Secret” special on television to understand the “ideal” female body. So who do our daughters listen to – muscle or media? Female athletes are constantly hearing mixed messages about eating, weight and body image and it unfortunately can have a very profound and negative impact upon their development.

There are no easy answers to this issue and I could literally write for days about it, but I will provide points to keep in mind as you raise your daughter in sports. If you have any more detailed or specific questions, please feel free to call the Athletic Mind Institute.

#### **Focus on Fitness**

One of the keys to great athletic performance is fitness. It does not have to do with just weight or muscle mass - it has to do with being fit. Try to keep comments and suggestions focused on fitness, not eating behaviors or body weight.

#### **Focus on Nutrition**

There are certain healthy and unhealthy foods. But remember, “Everything in moderation.” A nutritious diet does not mean one cannot occasionally have sweets. It does mean developing balanced and healthy eating habits with appropriate foods that will help one perform well. Again, focus on nutrition, not weight.

### **Parents, coaches and athletic personnel education**

Anyone directly involved in the athletic lives of female student athletes needs to be educated about the issues of body image, weight, and eating. Unfortunately, I have heard female student athletes on too many occasions discuss how parents, coaches or athletic personnel said something to the effect that “they are getting too fat to perform.” Many times female student athletes will not say anything, but these comments are extremely hurtful and sometimes devastating. These types of comments are not only highly inappropriate and inconsiderate, but are many times not even factual when it comes to athletic performance. Parents, coaches, and athletic personnel are not trying to be hurtful, but they do need to be educated about these issues.

The issue of body image, weight, and eating is a concern for athletes today, especially females. We need to address it head on so that our children can grow up with health and happiness in sports!

Play Hard, Play Smart and Play Well!