



Sports nutrition in international tournament football

Prof. Craig Sale sat down with Dr Laurent Bannock to discuss the demands of sports nutrition in international football.

Thanks for sitting down with me Laurent and for agreeing to answer some of my questions. Perhaps I can start with a general one that might help some of the early career practitioners; can you tell us a little bit about how you developed to where you are today as a leading performance nutritionist for top athletes and clubs?

It's my pleasure Craig. Happy to share my journey and experiences with you and the readers. It's a difficult question to answer, because my career spans 30 years; my success has not been an overnight phenomenon. I have embarked upon a journey involving a considerable investment (of time, effort, and money) in establishing and developing my credentials, as well as benefiting from the learnings that one acquires through the day-to-day experiences that life and work bring. During my 20s, I worked as a personal trainer and an S&C coach. I was working with the general population, usually 1:1 with clients who mostly wanted to lose weight and/or improve body composition and general health and wellbeing. During this time, I developed an interest in nutrition and lifestyle due to the greater impact this appeared to have on my client's body composition. I enjoyed this phase of my career, and, although I was doing quite well, I became increasingly aware of my need to further my knowledge and credentials, which led me to undertake many CPD courses in fitness and nutrition. This insatiable thirst for knowledge, combined with the desire to improve my own skills and abilities and achieve the best results for my clients, is something that I maintain to this day. During my 30s, I decided to undertake an MSc in nutrition, which resulted in a second MSc in exercise science. During this phase of my career, I started to transition from working with the general population to working with athletic individuals. I also started to focus more on nutrition and lifestyle than on exercise training. It's only in the last 10-12 years that my professional and educational journey became more closely linked to where I am now; I started to work with professional fighters, tennis players, Olympians, and professional football and rugby teams, as well as clients in private practice. I joined the SENr community, with 2021 marking 10 years as a proud registrant. I forged great professional relationships with colleagues and mentors, many who were experts contributing to our IOPN programme and my "We Do Science" podcast. This made for a rich combination of personal, professional,

and academic assets that have had an immense impact on me and what I do. Most recently I completed my professional doctorate, exploring the need to bridge the gap between science and practice, which has further ignited my passion for learning, researching, and impacting my profession. I remain passionate about our discipline and the development of effective practitioners; it is important to work at the cutting edge for me to be best equipped to achieve the level of impact I intend to have in the future. Whilst not quick or easy, I am proud of my achievements.

I am most interested in your recent work as a support member of staff at the recent European Championships. Perhaps I can start by asking you how you became the performance nutritionist for the Belgium National Team and what made you decide to undertake the challenge?

The Red Devils were looking for a new team nutritionist to work with them for the European Championships and up to the 2022 World Cup. In their global search for a performance nutritionist, my name was put forward and I was approached to see if I would be interested in discussing the role further with the head coach and his medical and performance leadership team. After several meetings, I was offered the role. Why did I decide to undertake the challenge? The answer is quite simple, it is a unique privilege and honour to work with a national team, and especially with one of the best teams in the world. Having spent many years learning how to support elite performance and recovery, having the opportunity to apply the science to real world practice at this level has been a dream of mine.

What are the challenges of tournament football from the performance nutrition perspective that you might not necessarily have when supporting a team through a regular season?

There are many challenges the nutritionist will face, especially in tournament football. These vary from team to team, player to player, and tournament to tournament. Perhaps the greatest challenge is supporting each player's performance and recovery following an already long season even before international duties

start, and the highly congested fixture schedule that is typical for international tournaments. In our case this always seems to involve significant international travel. Another key challenge is that players come to camps with a wide variety of pre-existing knowledge and interest in nutrition; some have great nutrition support at their club, but others have no support at all or, worse still, have support from poorly trained and educated practitioners promoting dubious practices (i.e., avoid carbs to improve body composition). This can lead to them providing advice with a poor evidence-base (often relating to supplements). Players are based at a wide variety of clubs around the globe, including Belgium, England, France, Spain, Italy, Germany, and Japan, which adds further challenges, such as adaptations to local customs and mealtimes. For example, our Spanish based players want to eat at 9pm, as they do back home, but at a camp the evening mealtime is 7:30pm, leading to potential snacking issues later that evening.

had significant challenges with regards to feeding and hydration restrictions during daylight hours, which was further complicated by the amount of daylight hours that varied from country to country. During the recent Euros, we had to deal with the many impacts of COVID. A major negative impact was the lack of spectators, which resulted in an underwhelming environment, which no doubt affected the mindset of every player (and support staff). There were many other issues. From ensuring we were always isolated as a bubble (including restrictions on our own freedoms during the rare moments we would get time off), to PCR testing every few days, to ensuring the players had strictly individualised drinking bottles (sports drink and separate water) during training sessions and games. This and the many extra restrictions imposed when travelling added up to far more work in a day than we ever had before. Everyone was in the same boat though, so we all just got on with it!

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Presumably one of the key challenges is managing players nutrition as they transition from venue to venue, or as was the case for you in this tournament, from country to country? How much planning goes into this and what is the best way to overcome these challenges?

With the National teams I have worked with, there has always been a vast amount of international travel. A great deal of planning and organisation happens in advance of each tournament, especially once fixtures and venues are known. This involves numerous people, from the team manager and operations / logistics team to the head chef and his team who will travel to the venues to prepare food to the standard and style required by the players to ensure optimal performance and recovery. I design the nutrition strategy in advance of camps and tournaments, which is provided to the chef, the staff, and the players. Time needs to be spent ensuring all stakeholders understand the strategy. A close working relationship between the nutritionist and the chef is vital to help translate the science to the plate, considering practical factors (i.e., kitchen facilities, arrivals / departures from airports, hotels, training grounds and stadiums), the individual needs and preferences of each player and the specific needs of each day (fuel for the work required). Whilst the chefs are responsible for sourcing and preparing the food, the nutritionist is responsible for managing the supplements and hydration products. Considerable thought goes into determining which supplements are needed so that they can be stocked ahead of the camp and loaded onto flights in advance, to ensure the team has what they need for optimal performance and recovery (e.g., sports drinks, powders for recovery, milk-based smoothies) and specialist products for matches (e.g., sports drinks, gels, caffeine gums). You must plan for things going wrong, such as cargo going missing and problems at customs. It is critical that all supplements are batch tested by informed sport (or similar), which involves additional paperwork, since players are regularly tested.

I know this is not your first experience of working in this environment, having been the performance nutritionist for the Egyptian National Team at the last World Cup, but how did this one compare given the huge changes that the world has experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

During the World Cup with Egypt, my main challenge was that the key training and preparation period right up to our first game coincided with the Holy Month of Ramadan and players

What is the hardest lesson that you have had to learn when working with football players in this type of environment?

I think it's more of a case of coming to terms with the fact that each tournament will be a massive roller coaster of highs and lows, from extreme joy when you win, to the surprising levels of sadness and frustration when you lose or when things just don't go to plan. If you can prepare yourself for these experiences, after all its "just a game", you can achieve maximum impact in your role and savour the hugely privileged and rare experiences you get from this type of work for the rest of your life.

What lessons did you learn from this experience that you will take forward to the next one? i.e., what advice would you give to aspiring sports nutritionists?

There is a constant reminder to ensure you focus as much as possible on what is truly important for the team and individual players (i.e., "the basics"), with regards to the ways your nutrition strategy will impact the bigger picture (e.g., to win the tournament). Ensuring that "the basics" are not only met but well understood by as many stakeholders as possible is essential. No matter how great your knowledge might be, ultimately you need to achieve impact in the real world, which in this context is far from the university classroom and lab environment. It is essential that you do not focus all of your time and effort on developing technical knowledge at the expense of your ability to make contextually relevant recommendations, that you can actually translate accurately and practically to the pitch or plate. Without doubt it is essential to communicate effectively to establish the staff and player relationships needed to get the necessary buy-in and trust to be effective. There are many individuals involved, and yet it is just one team. You play your part, and, as the nutritionist, you must realise it is a small, albeit important, part that you play. ■



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