

# The Weight Debate: Nutrition and Ironman

by Brett Sutton | Oct 20, 2014 | Nutrition, Training |



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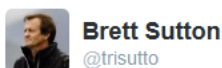
I've been asked at least three times since Kona about specific athletes and the impact that their weight, or lack thereof, had on their poor performances. While I won't single out athletes publicly in regards to this issue, I do hope to address it more broadly for those who have concerns about how it impacts on their own training regimes.

Firstly, let me make clear that nutrition and race weight matters. A lot. I've copped my fair share of misinformed criticism on this subject, but the fact remains you don't train 50+ Ironman winners without more than a basic understanding of race day fuel strategies. Indeed, before Kona I advised the Angry Bird that some athletes (men and women) wouldn't present the threat they had in previous years given their impressively ripped, but in my opinion seriously underweight frames.

Race nutrition doesn't start on race day. How you eat on a regular basis is more critical to your race day performance than what you actually consume on the day itself.

When training for Ironman a lack of fat in your normal day-to-day eating plan is a very big negative. I know it and I've seen it too many times not to.

Over the years this has led to some pretty unorthodox strategies to get people to eat. For example, it's long been reported about how I used to visit Chrissie to make sure she ate her chocolates or cheese. I used to buy Andrew Johns two cheesecakes a week. Reto Hug was another one who always needed to keep the weight up. More recently there was the Angry Bird tweeting a picture holding a 10kg piece of cheese that I asked her to eat by the time she left Cozumel for Kona.



**Brett Sutton**  
@trisutto

**Coach would rather you be killing the cheese and chocolate! Get to work on eating more when in the heat. @danielaryf**

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Broken down to their lowest level, calories, whether classed as the 'healthy' or 'unhealthy' type are burnable fuel. And

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## Trisutto.com contact

Robbie Haywood  
robbie@trisutto.com

Brett Sutton  
admin@trisutto.com

Mailing address  
Via Chavallera 7  
7500 St Moritz

given the level of training Ironman athletes do at the top end of the sport they need a lot of fuel.




Now some athletes understand how important this is and concede to my wishes about consuming fat. Others go along with it because even though they don't agree, they realise 'he is the coach and he seems to get results'. Finally, there are some who are just so desperate to have a six pack that they flat out refuse, no matter what impact it has on performance.

So yes, for certain athletes when I know the fight is not going to be worth the effort I step away from the nutrition area and let them do their own thing. Some end up doing a great job, others would be better sticking to the chocolate.

What I won't stand for though is being criticised for not falling in with whatever is the latest nutritionist's view on the 'correct food-formula' or for not being 'amazed' by this season's new wham-bam energy goo that pumps up how performance enhancing it is. They come and go. Always have, always will.

The complete hypocrisy of the 'tri-fad' nutrition bandwagon is best illustrated with an example:

In 1991 I used to advise many athletes to train on chocolate milk. 1991! As you can imagine the 'experts' in the tri community took great pleasure in laughing at, mocking and ridiculing what was obviously the stupidest piece of

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WTC what better product for recovery  
with no record of successful athletes and  
then dismiss me as a Neanderthal. It's been happening for decades. Just as I roll my eyes when I have to listen to  
previously very successful (now less so) ex-athletes who say 'he just doesn't get food. He doesn't have a food plan.'  
After I continually harped on them about how 'your diet needs more fat in it. More fats please' only to be told 'my  
nutritionist thinks your wrong and knows best what I need on race day.'

I realise it's very comforting to think that the nutrition 'experts' have this worked out to a fine science. That you can leave your race diet to their capable hands without having to worry about it. It just ain't the case. Like many specific sciences, the 'science' itself may work in the laboratory but is totally flawed when applied to the real world. There are just so many interconnected things that need to be considered to achieve the desired result. That the athlete is physically and pshyologically comfortable with what they're consuming needs to be considered above all else.

Nutrition aside, what's most important to your race is the thought process under pressure. You can have all your 'perfect nutrition' laid out and prepared, but because of a failure to think clearly under pressure you may decide to run past an aid station. Maybe you drop some food or make a snap decision because 'I don't need it'.

While you may be able to get away with errors like this in a 70.3, in the big show, a full Ironman, any chance of a good performance can be finished in that little 10 second window when you were making the 'will I or won't I' decision. If you make a mistake with your nutrition it also takes not just clear thinking but courage to play defence and correct your error.

For those who one day want to go to Kona, learning how to get your mentality right in those situations is 10 times more valuable to you than what's in your bar or gel.

So in conclusion, I'm happy to let my competitors rave on about how important the latest nutrition advances are so they can carry on sounding knowledgeable as coaches. I also pay little respect to the food doctors that don't coach but sell their expertise on what is best for an athlete without even knowing them.

But for a simpleton like me I place my focus on 3 things:

- 1) Drilling people to make the correct decisions under pressure.
- 2) Knowing the amount of calories you need per hour.
- 3) Taking those calories in food stuffs and in ways that you are both physically and psychologically comfortable with.

I couldn't give a toss if they are the 'correct' calories for you. I'm in the business of getting the job done and I guarantee if you adhere to my advice you will have a fat-free race.

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