



HOW TO

EAT LIKE A PRO

ON MATCHDAYS



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Hi, I'm Matthew Jones.

I am the current 1st team nutritionist at West Ham United and the Scotland National Team. I have also previously worked at Liverpool, Flamengo, Stoke City and Brentford.

As an elite football nutritionist the question I am most commonly asked is “what should I eat before a game”. Players, parents and coaches are all interested in what they should be consuming or feeding their players prior to kick off to improve their performance.

Unfortunately my answer is typically something along the lines of “it depends” and sometimes even “there is no perfect pre-match meal”.

Sorry to burst your bubble if you came here in search of that one meal that is going to turn you into peak Pele, but I am sure you will agree, a single meal, on its own is not able to do that.

In the context of sports mastery you will often hear of the ‘10,000 hour rule’ that suggests you need to commit around 10,000 hours of

deliberate practice in order to become a master of the craft. The same thing applies to almost all aspects of life, there are very few, if any shortcuts to success. Diet is no exception.





CHAPTER

01

THE
NUTRITION
DIFFERENCE



Nutrition is Critical

Whilst there may not be a one size fits all miracle meal, it is important to recognise that your performance on game day will be improved to a greater extent as a result of a consistently good diet rather than a perfect pre-match meal and otherwise poor diet.

Success leaves clues. Look at the elite end of the game, the players I work with make good diet decisions on a daily basis, they eat and drink the right things at the right times, and in the right quantities consistently, day-in and day-out. That provides the health foundation from which they can train hard each day, recover well and in time to train hard again the next day. This ultimately leads to elite performance on game day.

Without that foundation, without those consistent good decisions, healthy habits, time after time, they would be fragile, weak and eventually break during training or a game. Suffering when the going gets tough.

Rather than zooming in on a single meal, in this case the pre-match meal, I would implore you to first address your daily diet.



CHAPTER

02

CORE PRINCIPLES





The Core Principles

Nutrition is actually way more simple than you think, almost common sense. Imagine for a moment each day you wake up with a series of empty buckets. Buckets for carbohydrate, protein and fat, buckets for vitamins and minerals, fibre and fluid.

Essentially all you need to do is make suitable food and fluid choices to fill these buckets adequately. The complexity lies in the fact that these buckets differ in size depending on individual requirements and your unique physiological make up and also simply not knowing what to eat in order to fill the buckets and meet those unique requirements. But thankfully you are in the right place.

Certain individuals look to overcomplicate nutrition. In truth this is merely a marketing tool, 'edgy' science, and out-there, controversial statements sell books, which is often the aim of these statements. Fad diets boom off the back of these controversial, 'edgy', eye catching

statements, as does the authors bank balance. Everyone is on the look out for a quick fix, in the belief that there is some secret formula to optimizing health, performance and body composition. In reality, unfortunately there isn't one.

Me telling you that in reality nutrition is simple will not get me to the top of the Amazon bestseller list, that is not my aim, so it's of no concern to me. My main concern is to deliver evidence-based scientifically sound advice that when implemented will provide results.



A large, light-colored bowl filled with a pasta salad. The salad contains rotini pasta, green lettuce, cherry tomatoes, shredded cheese, and pieces of cooked chicken. The bowl is set against a light background.

CHAPTER

03

FOOD

CHAPTER TWO

Food Theory

Now the truth is out there, let's get back to the question: what should you eat before a game?

Objectives

Without stating the obvious, the primary objectives of the pre-match meal are to ensure you have enough energy to perform to the best of your ability, the correct types of foods to ensure you are fuelled to run far and fast, focus, think and communicate with team mates rapidly, and enough fluid to ensure you are well hydrated.

That said, let's dive into the details.





Football Fuel

Carbohydrates

Carbohydrate is the primary fuel for intense football actions. As a player who sprints, jumps, changes direction, kicks and passes, battles to regain possession you will be using stored carbohydrate rapidly.

Carbohydrate is stored in small petrol tanks in the muscle and liver, scientifically referred to as glycogen stores. These stores are limited and are used up quickly, so modifying your diet in the days before the game and also before kick off to ensure these stores are topped up is critically important.

Research has shown that 200 grams of carbohydrate consumed 3-hours before kick off is enough to top up these fuel stores in the muscle and improve endurance, with players covering 40% more total distance in the second half. Similarly, other researchers have found that a higher carbohydrate meal before a game can increase high intensity running by 33%. Even a modest increase in carbohydrate intake with the pre-match meal can improve perfor-

mance in the vital final 30-mins of a match.

So all the evidence is in favor of a carbohydrate-rich meal prior to kick off, with some suggestions that you should aim for a dose of around 2 grams of carbohydrate per kilogram body weight. That is at least 160 grams of carbohydrate for an 80 kg player. We will zoom into what that actually looks like in practical, food terms a little later.

Keep it simple

Science nerds have argued back and forth for many years about whether or not pre-exercise meals should be low GI or high GI. GI is essentially the term used to describe how fast a carbohydrate delivers fuel to the body.





Consistency is Key

High GI carbohydrates can be considered fast fuels and include things like sports drinks, energy gels, candy and ripe bananas, while low GI carbohydrates can be considered slow fuels, delivering fuel slowly over a sustained period of time and include foods such as whole grain breads, bran flakes, lentils and vegetables.

Despite these arguments there is still no clear consensus on what works best. We know that pre-match nerves or dare I say stress can significantly impact the gut, leaving you feeling uncomfortable and in some cases unable to eat much. That said we need to top up the fuel tanks quite quickly and minimise any stomach discomfort prior to kick off it is likely better to opt for lower fibre, higher GI, faster fuels such as white rice, white pasta, mashed potato, Rice Krispie cereals etc. as they will be digested easier and quicker, leaving you fully fuelled, but comfortable and ready to perform. Another important consideration here is to consume foods that you are familiar with, nothing new, nothing fancy.

This meal will probably be pretty boring, but the most practical meal of the week. I generally encourage players in the Premier League to select two pre-match meals, one suited to earlier kick off's, breakfast style and the other suited to later kick off's and commit to those two for their entire career so the body is used to it and responds well.





Protein

Protein is made up of small amino acids, amino acids are essentially bricks that are used to build various things in the body. When we eat protein, such as a chicken breast, it is broken down, digested into these small bricks (amino acids) and then absorbed, where the bricks then become available for use in the body.

It is well known that these bricks help build muscle, so consuming protein at regular intervals through the day is incredibly important to a football player. But these bricks also play an important role in building various other things relevant to our performance, including neurotransmitters.

Neurotransmitters are chemical signals that influence our mood, emotions and actions. Some neurotransmitters can make us feel slow and sleepy, while others can make us feel awake, alert and energized. It is pretty obvious which we should prioritize during competition, but do not fall into the trap of making the wrong choice, otherwise your performance will suffer, guaranteed.

Without making this unnecessarily complex and confusing let's get to the facts. Including around 30 grams of quality, low fat protein from sources such as sea bass, chicken breast, eggs, milk or yogurt alongside the carbohydrate rich meal will help to optimize neurotransmitter production, leaving you feeling alert, focused and ready to perform.

Failing to consume protein with the high carbohydrate meal will increase the production of the neurotransmitter serotonin, which will make you feel sleepy, lethargic and ready for a nap. Similarly, selecting turkey or cod which are both rich in tryptophan can kick start serotonin production.





So when selecting foods to include in your pre-match meal, be careful and opt for those that will enhance your brain performance.

Nitrates

Rocket fuel

Nitrates are the new kid on the block, so to speak. In recent years the evidence to support the beneficial effects of nitrates on endurance, strength and power has grown significantly. We now know that including more nitrate rich vegetables, fruits, juices, shots or ideally a combination of them all in your diet in the days leading up to a game and then again immediately before kick off is certainly likely to improve your ability to perform.

Nitrates are reduced to nitric oxide in the body, nitric oxide makes blood vessels wider, reducing blood pressure, allowing blood to flow more freely around the body, delivering more oxygen

the muscles and brain, ultimately increasing the likelihood of peak performance. Consider it the natural diet alternative to hitting the nitrous oxide in Gran Turismo.

Research has shown that muscle power improves by as much as 5%, allows players to complete 3% more high intensity running and improves repeated sprint ability by 4% after an optimal nitrate loading plan.

Including some form, or ideally multiple forms of nitrate in the pre-match meal is a wise move. Think beetroot, spinach, rocket, beetroot juice or beetroot shots. Now that may not seem so appetizing, but mixing spinach into a pasta sauce, adding beet juice to apple juice can make it a little more manageable.



Anthosayawhat?

Anthocyanin is the technical name for a group of polyphenols found in berries, particularly blueberries. Polyphenols are essentially the part of a plant, or in this case berry, that helps protect the plant from damage by the outside world, it does this via potent antioxidant defenses.

Anthocyanins therefore have huge benefits to our health and should be consumed regularly in the daily diet. But in recent times anthocyanins from blueberries have been studied in the performance space and the results are very, very promising.

Consuming blueberries prior to exercise can result in improved attention, reduce the time taken to make a decision and then react, and also improve our ability to defier information from various streams at the same time, while daily consumption can improve memory. This is all likely a result of improved blood flow to the brain (his is 1000x when combined with nitrates) and also protection of the brain cells.

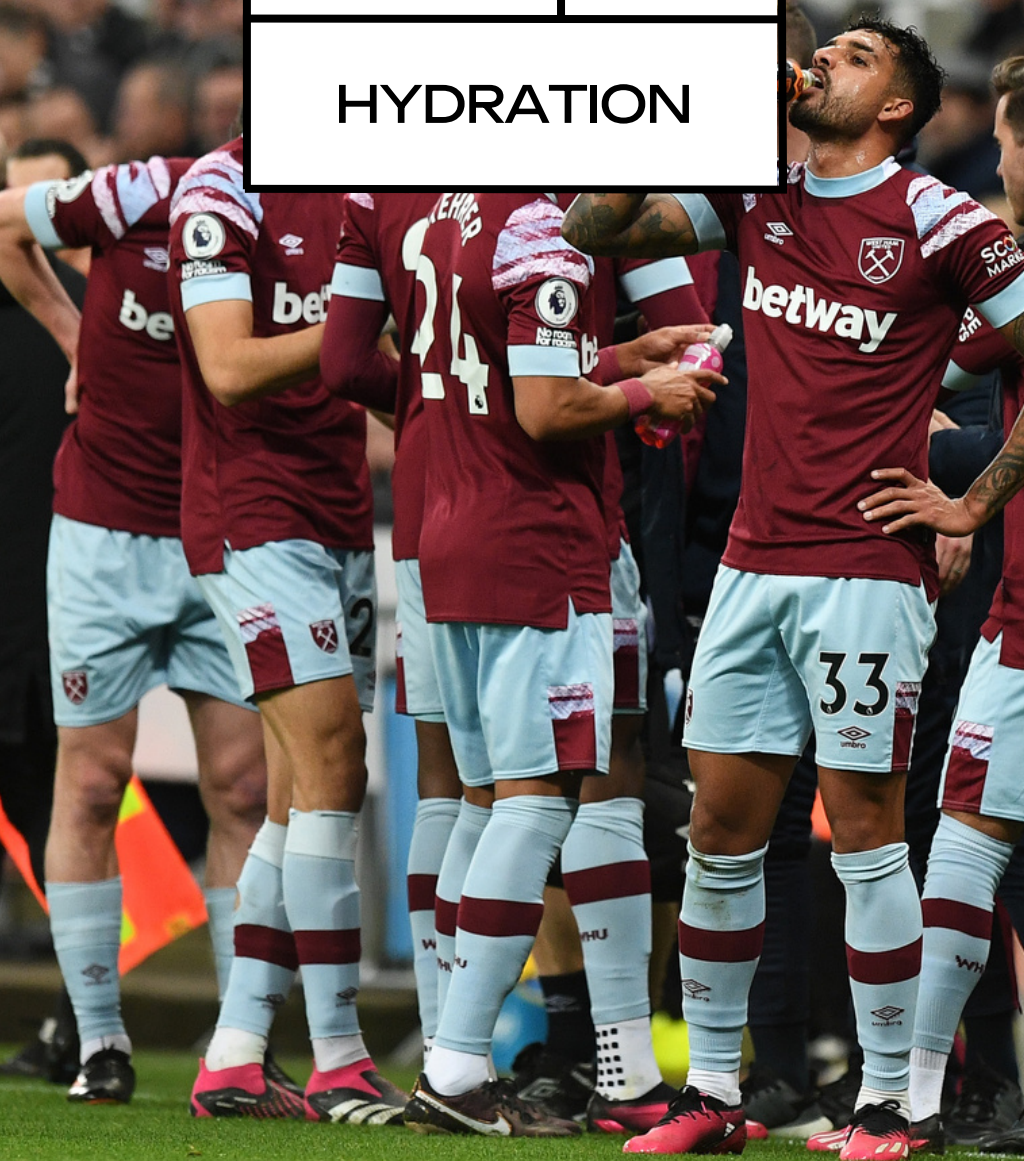
Including some anthocyanin rich blueberries or blueberry powder in your pre-match meal could be quite literally the icing on the cake.



CHAPTER

04

HYDRATION





Clear Pee Please.

Drinking enough fluid to stay hydrated is likely one of the most mundane, overlooked elements of good nutrition. Yet it is undoubtedly critical to unlocking peak performance.

Dehydration quite literally kills performance, it makes you slow, tired and sh*t at football. Research has shown that even mild dehydration negatively impacts dribbling performance, endurance, sprint speeds and jump height. Imagine being beaten to a header that then leads to a goal for your opposition because you didn't drink enough.

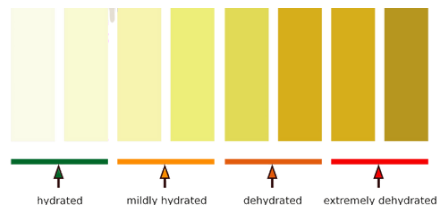
Research has shown that a high proportion of young (66%), female (65%) and senior (35%) footballer players start games dehydrated and their performance suffers. So you can quite literally gain a competitive advantage over your opposition on game day by simply turning up hydrated.

Hydration should be a daily habit, starting first thing in the morning.

As soon as you wake up you should aim to consume 500 ml of water to rehydrate after a night's sleep. Then the ball park figure of 1 ml per 1 kcal of energy expended with an additional 500 ml per hour of exercise should be the aim to maintain hydration. So for a typical male football player that would be around 3000 ml or 3 L of fluid plus an additional 500 - 1000 ml on top to cover training.

One of the easiest ways to monitor your hydration status is to check the colour of your urine. A dark urine suggests dehydration, urine that is clear/pale with nearly no colour is ideal. You should aim to drink enough each day to create clear urine.

In the build up to a game try and consume around 1 L of fluid to maintain hydration.



What about Coffee?

Caffeine, commonly found in coffee, tea, energy drinks and other supplements is one of the most widely used performance enhancing substance. Caffeine consumed prior to a game can benefit both brain and body, by stimulating the central nervous system, improving alertness and focus, making hard work feel easier and even improving skills such as shooting and passing.

Drinking coffee with the pre-match meal can be considered a good idea, with an optimal dose of around 3 mg of caffeine per kilogram of body weight, a double espresso with your pre-match meal and a caffeine chewing gum during the warm up is likely enough to boost performance.



CHAPTER

05

TIMING





When Should I Eat?

Ideally the last meal should be consumed around 3 hours before kick off, so aim to begin eating your pre-match meal around 3½ hours before you kick off. By meal I mean a large plate of food made up various ingredients, including carbohydrate, protein, fat and fibre. This will allow adequate time for the food to digest, absorb, top up the fuel tanks in the muscle or appear in the blood or brain ready to perform.

Any additional food or fluid consumed between that meal and kick off should be small and light, and mainly carbohydrate. Think small snacks like ripe bananas, dried fruits, caramel rice cakes, Rice Krispie square bars. These options will digest rapidly and won't cause too much of an issue to your stomach.



A close-up, top-down view of a bowl filled with a variety of ingredients. At the bottom, there's a layer of dark red beans. Above the beans is a generous portion of diced, cooked meat, possibly pork or beef, which is browned and glistening. Slices of ripe avocado are arranged in a fan shape across the middle. A dollop of white, creamy sauce, likely sour cream or yogurt, sits in the center. Fresh green cilantro leaves are scattered on top. The bowl is also topped with shredded white cheese and shredded orange carrots. The bowl itself is white with a thin gold rim.

CHAPTER

06

APPLICATION

Theory Into Practise

Now we have covered the major theoretical elements of what should feature in your pre-match meal to ensure you are adequately prepared to perform, let's translate that into real world, on plate meals that you can actually eat.

I mentioned that I encourage players to select a breakfast option and a lunch/dinner option to cover all bases and possible kick off times, so let's do exactly that.



Pre-Match Breakfast

- 2 poached eggs on a toasted bagel
- Bowl of rice krispie cereal with milk, sliced banana, blueberries and honey
- Beetroot and apple juice
- Double espresso
- 1 L water and electrolyte tablet

The lowdown:

Eggs are rich in lean protein, poached eggs are also low in fat so they digest easily and quickly. Eggs also provide a big dose of choline, which is converted to acetylcholine, a neurotransmitter that helps with memory, learning and concentration. The bagel provides around 45 grams of fuel, with Rice Krispies, honey, banana and fruit juice adding a further 150 grams to maximize fuel stores. Beetroot juice delivers your dose of nitrates, with the blueberries providing anthocyanins. The double espresso provides that much needed brain boost while the litre of water and electrolyte provides the fluid required to hydrate.



Pre-Match Lunch

- 1 Oven baked sea bass fillet with no skin, large serving of basmati rice with tomato passata sauce and large serving of wilted spinach
- Banana, blueberries and honey
- Beetroot and apple juice
- Double espresso
- 1 L water and electrolyte tablet

The lowdown:

Sea bass is rich in lean, quality protein to provide the building blocks required for full focus and attention. Its also low in fat so digests quickly and easily, with no irritation to the stomach. A large serving of basmati rice provides 80 grams of fuel and digests super quickly, leaving you fully fuelled but feeling light and ready. The banana, honey and juice offers another 80 grams of fuel to top up the fuel tanks in preparation for the game. The large serving of wilted spinach in tomato sauce delivers the required dose of nitrates, with blueberries packing the polyphenol punch.

The double espresso provides that much needed brain boost while the litre of water and electrolyte provides the fluid required to hydrate.



A top-down view of a healthy meal on a white speckled plate. The meal includes a portion of grilled salmon with visible grill marks and white sesame seeds, a pile of fresh spinach leaves, a cluster of red kidney beans, a mound of cooked quinoa, and some broccoli florets. A sprig of fresh cilantro is also present.

CHAPTER

07

CONCLUSION



Concluding Remarks

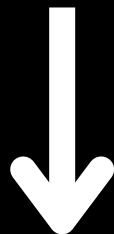
Hopefully we have now answered your question of what, when and how much to eat before kick off to optimise performance while also feeling comfortable and ready to perform.

But I'd take this opportunity to reiterate the importance of zooming out and looking at your diet in the days, weeks, months and years prior to that game. Are your decisions moving you toward or away from optimal performance?

Remember that chronic beats acute, every day of the week. Habits, daily actions, daily decisions, consistently over time accumulate to produce truly powerful results. The perfect pre match meal is quite literally the icing on the cake, nothing more.



AN **EXCLUSIVE** INVITATION



Are you still struggling with your diet? Wondering what, when and how much to eat at breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks? Confused and conflicted by all that you read online?

The Baller Program is exactly what you have been looking for.

Everyone has an opinion. But there is only one science. This program has been developed and is delivered by sports nutrition experts working in the English Premier League, with more than 15 years of experience in managing the diets of the world's best players.



- Learn what, when and how much you should eat as a football player.
- Understand both theory and practice so you never have to ask again.
- Copy and paste the diet of the Premier League elite.
- Get coached and supported toward your goal.

Warning: this is not a quick fix, this is long term, sustainable success.

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