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Eat plants, says Olympic athlete

by **Dolores Fox Ciardelli**

Chow down on a burger and your body has trouble figuring out what to do with it, says biochemist Mitra Ray. Then along comes a virus and kapow! you're down and out.

Olympic silver medalist Maureen O'Toole, 48, who lives and coaches in Danville, said she learned this lesson when training fulltime with the National Women's Water Polo Team in 1998. This is when she hooked up with Ray, formerly a researcher at Stanford.

"I was getting sick a lot and feeling worse every day," O'Toole said. "I learned after being sick for nine days the importance of eating a lot of fruits and vegetables."

Women's water polo became an Olympic sport in 1998; 150 players were invited to be on the U.S. team, including O'Toole, who came back from retirement to play.

"They narrowed it down by the end to a constant 16," she remembered. "Then they picked the team two weeks before the Olympics - they narrowed it down to 13."

"The average age was 21," she added. "I was way old."

"Maureen was by far much older than the rest of the Olympics team and what gave her the edge was taking a close look at her nutritional program," said Ray.

O'Toole said that as she got older, it became harder to recover from daily practices, which were seven hours a day, six days a week.

"I was not recovering, day after day," she said. "I was not taking care of my body to the extreme that I needed to."

"When younger I really believe you don't feel all the aches and pains, you recover no matter what," she said. "But - if you don't take care of yourself at a younger age, you are aging yourself. Your longevity as an athlete won't be as long."

O'Toole played on the boys' water polo team in high school in Long Beach because there was no girl's team. She swam throughout college. She joined the National Women's Water Polo Team when it started in 1977 and recalled the enjoyment of playing against professional teams in Europe during their off season.

Now O'Toole coaches Diablo Water Polo, whose team members have gone on to play for prestigious colleges, including Harvard, Brown, Stanford, Cal and Davis. Her daughter Kelly, a senior at Monte Vista High, will play at Cal.

Kelly was 8 years old when her mom was in the 2000 Olympics, and she accompanied her parents to Australia.

"My immediate best memory is walking through the tunnel of the opening ceremony," said O'Toole. "And playing in the gold medal game. NBC brought my whole family down to the front row. We were walking from one side of the pool to the other and I said, 'It would be so neat to see Kelly,' and then I saw her, hanging over the railing."

The U.S. team was ranked fifth and because it did so well, its games were shown live. This was an honor but meant they were televised in the middle of the night in California, O'Toole said with a laugh.

The U.S. faced Australia for the gold and lost in the last second due to a controversial call.

"I think that referee made an honest mistake, and it happens," O'Toole said. "It was hard - I don't like to end without clarity."

She talks about it now when she does motivational speaking.

"It's about the journey, going through the tunnel, making the team so you can represent your country," she said. "I feel I learned a great life lesson. It's so much more real - you don't always get what you want."

You can find O'Toole at the farmers market every Saturday buying fresh fruits and vegetable for her family. She tries to impart the importance of eating plants to Kelly.

"We all want them to do really well in school and in sports, yet it is so easy to hand them a soda," she said. "We really need to focus on this. They say this is the first generation of kids that will have a shorter lifespan than their parents."

She once asked her pediatrician's advice about how to say no to soft drinks.

"My pediatrician said, 'By giving them a soda, you're killing them,'" she recalled.

"Nutrition is everything - it makes you or breaks you," said O'Toole. "I hope we can educate athletes and young kids just starting to train."

"It's time to dispel the protein myth," said Mitra Ray. She recommends legumes for protein, whole grains for calories and nuts and seeds.

"Most athletes have a 'calories in, calories out' attitude," she said, "and think as long as they get their protein it's fine."

Even the most serious athletes can thrive with just 8-10 percent of their total calories coming from protein, Ray said, and more than 10 percent is not healthy because animal products and processed foods produce acid.

"Over time, metabolic acidosis leads to weakened legs," she explained, plus disrupted sleep, gradual weight loss, inability to concentrate, and a greater resting heartbeat.

"Eating more plants is really the foundation for an athlete," said Ray. "It is not a popular message but it is a necessary message. The young need to understand."

There are 195,000 species of flowering plants with edible parts in the world, which are not only nutritious but reduce swelling and cause healing.

"It's Mother Nature's pharmacopeia to keep human machinery performing as its best," said Ray.

O'Toole is looking forward to watching the Winter Olympics this week.

"I absolutely love watching these athletes compete at the highest level," she said. "It's one of the most phenomenal experiences we ever have."

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