

Nutrition & Injury – Coming Back Strong

By Donna Marlor, RD, BSN, MA

Marquette General Sportsmedicine Institute

“Nutrition is AS important as training for me...you need the right nutrition for recovery so that you can do the next workout.”

- Allison Baver, U.S.A. Olympic Short Track Speedskater

When an athlete suffers an injury, the result is devastating, both physically and emotionally. But when a serious injury happens to an Olympic hopeful seven months before the 2010 Trials, what then? Quit?

Not Allison Baver, 29-year-old member of the U.S. Speedskating Team and a 2002 and 2006 Olympian. Baver, who collided with teammate Katherine Reutter on Feb 8th in Bulgaria, during the ISU World Cup, was left with a split right tibia and ankle impacted with shattered bone.

“We were going about 35 mph, around a corner and I was hit in the chest, and spun around backwards.”

When I first met Baver, I felt goose bumps as she walked towards me. I was in sight of a miracle. A long-tattoo-like scar on her shin was the only visible reminder of her painful injury. She was smiling and looked relaxed despite the fact she had just finished an intense 2-hour practice on ice with her teammates at the United States Olympic Education Center (USOEC) on the campus of Northern Michigan University in Marquette.

“It feels good to be back here,” said Baver, who trained at the USOEC from 2000 to 2002.

Baver is not just a world-class athlete. She is also a beautiful young woman with a signed a contract with Wilhelmina Models, one of the most successful modeling agencies in the world. Before arriving at the rink to interview her, I checked out her website sponsored by Penske Trucks (www.AllisonBaver.com), and I’ll admit, felt a bit intimidated. Model. Olympian. MBA. What couldn’t this gal do when she put her mind to it?

Baver was on an extremely tight training schedule while in Marquette, training 6-8 hours per day, but as she explained to me,

eyes bright, "if I can do anything to inspire someone else not to give up hope after an injury, I want to do that."

An aura of positive energy surrounds Bayer. The tibial break was not the only injury she has had to overcome. During the 2006 Olympic Winter Games in Torino, Italy, she experienced a serious bone bruise, but came back from that injury to become the 2007 U.S. short-track champion.

Emotional resilience

Since all food choices are first directed from a message sent out by the central switchboard of thought, i.e. our brain, I asked Bayer how she had dealt with the psychological aspect of this untimely injury.

"I counted my blessings," Bayer replied. "It could have been worse."

When she was told "no toe to the ground for 2-1/2 months", rather than sink into a funk and dive into a bowl of M&M's, Bayer went out and bought a DVD with a medicine ball exercise routine.

"Yeah, me – an Olympian – buying a home exercise DVD." But Bayer followed through, doing those exercises demonstrated on screen that kept her feet off the ground. She managed to gain 4 pounds of core muscle through her trunk area while convalescing.

"I would ask myself: 'what can I do *today?*' and then focus on that daily goal," she said.

Bayer also went to intense rehab sessions, with some lasting 6 hours a day. The support of her family, teammates, and strength coach helped her through this period, too.

Nutrition key

Immediately after her injury, Bayer started taking arnica every four hours.

"Arnica is a homeopathic treatment for injuries, Bayer said. "I was in Bulgaria, so I didn't get medical treatment until after I flew back to the States. Arnica helps to reduce the swelling and risk of infection."

I questioned her about the use of supplements and her Olympic Team status. She said no, as athletes are legally permitted to take any food or herb that is not a performance enhancer.

More difficult for Baver was figuring out how many calories and protein she needed to support healing without gaining weight while her activity level was reduced.

"I'm used to eating a lot of calories," Baver said, "My strength coach kept reminding me I had to eat to heal."

Throughout her rehab Baver concentrated on "eating clean", cutting down on red meat, sweets, and focusing on getting in enough calcium every day. During the first months after surgery she ate a lot of chicken and supplemented with calcium, magnesium, silica, vitamin C, zinc, coenzyme Q10, l-lysine, and essential fatty acids. Some of her mainstay foods were yogurt, melon, and raisin bran.

"I didn't count calories or grams of protein," Baver said. Instead she focused on selecting low glycemic index carbohydrates, and ate a fresh fruits, vegetables and unprocessed foods.

Since I first spoke with Baver back in June, she has continued to train knowing that the Olympic trials in September will be tough. Via email in August she had this to say:

"I have cut out all sweets and have actually added just a bit more carbs now that I'm training more. I've struggled a bit to find my routine and body weight as it relates to my nutrition since the injury. It's such a major change to the body it's been tough to find a balance!"

With the 2010 U.S. Olympic Trials for speedskating short track set for September 8-12th in Marquette, Baver knows that she will be tested.

"Trials coming up soon. But, aah, who's counting the days?" she wrote.

Just reading about Baver's courageous return to competition does not do her justice. Seeing her fly around the rink does. She has already demonstrated true Olympic spirit with her remarkable achievements. Wish her good luck!