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The Exciting World of Competitive High School Eating

At a small high school on the outskirts of Seattle, the Landhower Annual Complete Nutrition School Lunch-Eating Team prepares to see what it's made of, and to modify that by ingesting large amounts of french fries and chocolate milk. In recent years, the team has fallen behind in the national rankings: team averages have fallen, and several star players have been pulled from the team by their parents due to unrelated health concerns. Last year, some team members even failed to qualify for national competition, consuming fewer than seven federally-approved lunches during the qualifying round. Clearly, this has to change.

Many factors were blamed, including today's youth, popular music, and the school lunches themselves. However, as I showed in my seminal book on the subject, *Anyone Can Eat: From Folly to Jolly in 30 Days*, most problem eating is due to a lack of proper motivation. Therefore, I have designed a motivation plan to put Landhower back on top of the competitive food pyramid, so to speak.

Early Game: Enhance Hunger

The most straightforward method to increase eating behavior is to increase hunger. Early experiments by Hillman et al. showed that the intensity of a drive corresponds to the intensity of that drive's instrumental behaviors (Deckers, 2010, pp. 185-186). Therefore, if we can increase the hunger of Lunch-Eating Team members (LETters) to an overwhelming intensity at the start of a competition, they will eat faster, giving them an early edge over other teams.

For this I propose a three-day fast prior to competition days. Early work in the grossly underfunded field of starvation research shows that appetite may begin to decrease after five days (Carlson & Hoelzel, 1952). A three-day water fast will take advantage of ever-increasing hunger without risking starvation-induced appetite suppression.

However, this competitive advantage will only last until satiety signals suppress feelings of hunger. Thus, the rapid eating caused by intense hunger at the start of a match may bring an additional benefit: eating faster will allow larger-than-satiating volumes of food to be consumed before satiety sets in.

Anything we can do to delay the onset of satiety will further enhance performance. The low flavor of school lunches may already help in delaying taste-dependent satiety signals. In 1998, Guinard and Brun found that satiety could be reached for specific sensory experiences, such as saltiness or soft texture. LETters will capitalize on this by employing a bland-food-first (B.F.F.) strategy. Morgan and Truby (2008) reviewed research linking exercise to improved appetite regulation. Consequently, we will adopt a rigorous sedentary exercise program. LETters will also not be allowed to drink extraneous liquids during competition, to reduce the total volume consumed.

Another possible strategy is the administration of performance-enhancing drugs (i.e. marijuana). However, although apparently effective in enhancing appetite (Williams & Kirkham, 1999), this approach is neither ethical, sportsmanlike, or, most importantly, permitted.

Mid-game: Train Self-Control

Although extreme hunger will give our team an early advantage, it will have no effect on the post-satiety mid-game of competitive eating. During this phase, team

members will face many unpleasant sensations: increasing satiety, a sense of fullness, and possibly some slight physical discomfort. In order to succeed, competitors must continue to eat despite these harmless—but distracting—stimuli. To address this, I recommend a program designed to train self-control.

Self-control is particularly important in the world of competitive eating because it allows one to alter his or her behavior by suppressing undesired responses. In this case, those responses are satiety and other unpleasant signals that influence one to stop eating. The more self-control a LETter is able to exert, the longer they will be able to hold out against discomfort and continue eating.

A review by Baumeister et al. (2006) concluded that self-regulation ability can be increased through regular practice. To improve self-control, LETters will engage in ingestion training three times a week. During this practice, they will eat as much as possible, and focus on a number of specific techniques that may boost self-control. For example, visualization can be used to distract from unpleasant physical sensations; goal-setting may help rally energy and direct attention; and "sitting with" and tolerating unpleasant stimuli may sometimes be more effective than ignoring them.

Although self-control is a general resource, I suspect that training self-control via a single activity may eventually show diminishing returns. We will track improvements during ingestion training, and watch for plateaus in performance. If a plateau occurs, we might hypothesize that there are multiple aspects to the skill of self-control, and that these aspects could be further trained by a greater variety of exercises. Therefore, if self-control training slows after only ingestion training, we will enact a constellation of ingestion-related self-control activities. These might include food visualization exercises, diet

restrictions, and the ingestion and resisting of emetics. Implementing a variety of self-control exercises may hasten improvements.

Long-Term: Cultivate Intrinsic Motivation

It's important that LET members see their eating behaviors not just as a means to fame and glory, but as a rewarding and enjoyable end that they can commit themselves to. By cultivating intrinsic as opposed to extrinsic motivation, we can support greater levels of commitment and reduce strains on self-control resources. If I'm doing my job right, LETters will become lifelong eaters.

The strategy starts at tryouts. After time trials and standard Metamucil capacity testing, I will conduct short interviews with potential recruits. Amabile et al. (1994) created the Work Preference Inventory and showed it to be a meaningful measure of an individual's orientation towards intrinsic and extrinsic motivation over time. During the interviews, hopefuls will complete the Work Preference Inventory, and I will filter out applicants who score low on intrinsic motivational orientation. I will also ask open-ended questions to determine if a student is genuinely interested in becoming a better eater to ensure that they are not merely joining due to pressure from their peers or parents.

Throughout training, we will consistently rely upon LETters' intrinsic motivation without providing external incentives for performance. When rewards are expected, intrinsic motivation can be diminished (Deckers, 2010, pp. 257-258). Although external rewards can increase performance, I expect that an intrinsically-motivated eater will train harder and more consistently over time, resulting in greater performance gains in the long run than external rewards can induce.

The concept of effectance motivation is another key tool in managing delicate intrinsic motivation. Effectance motivation is the drive to successfully control the environment—put another way, it is a desire for competence or mastery (Deckers, 2010, pp. 255-256). Awareness of this motive informs our framing of goals and ideals to the team. By emphasizing mastery of competitive eating as the goal of our team, we can emphasize a goal that is intrinsically rewarding and based upon an intrinsic desire. This will be much more effective in cultivating intrinsic motivation than focusing on external events such as winning a competition or unexpected hospital visits.

Increasing commitment to the Lunch-Eating Team will also enhance intrinsic motivation. LETters will be encouraged to create and publicly announce goals. This will increase their commitment to those goals (Deckers, 2010, pp. 277-278). The most promising team members will also be encouraged to publicly renounce other areas of their lives—things like friends, dating, and hobbies—in order to have more time to commit to the team.

The strategy of bolstering intrinsic motivation can be looked at another way. Self-determination theory hypothesizes that self-control resources are not expended during self-determined activities; self-determined activities are those in which the participant feels competent, autonomous, and related (Ryan & Deci, 2008). By encouraging effectance motivation, we are supporting competence, and by framing it in intrinsic terms we are supporting autonomy. Being part of a team supports relatedness. Not only are we improving self-control as outlined in the previous section, but by cultivating intrinsic motivation, we make using self-control less necessary in the first place.

Lifelong Eaters

Based on research in motivation psychology, it is clear that with a few simple tweaks we can turn the Landhower Annual Complete Nutrition School Lunch-Eating Team around for the upcoming season. By promoting ravenous hunger with a three-day fast, we give our team members a crucial early advantage in every competition. By training self-control like a muscle, we give LETters the tools they need to keep eating despite the pesky forces of satiation. And by cultivating intrinsic motivation, we promote greater commitment to training and reduce strains on self-control resources. If applied correctly, this three-part plan will work in any high school to create a team of lifelong eaters.

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