

The Great Debate: Sports Drinks vs. Water

One of the most frequent questions I am asked by players and parents is: "Which is better: water or a sports drink?" This is, in fact, known as "The Great Debate" and is a very important topic as it relates to one of the most common problems in athletics -- dehydration.

Before we get into the debate, let's first talk about what exactly is dehydration. Sweating is basically the body's way of preventing overheating. When playing soccer (or any other sport or physical activity), muscles generate heat, which is then carried to the skin's surface via the blood. The heat is shed through the skin (sweat). Dehydration occurs when the body is unable to replace the fluid loss. Athletes can properly replace lost fluid mainly via drinking water or a sports drink.

So which is better? Well, most experts in the field – professional trainers, etc. -- will always recommend a sports drink, such as Gatorade. The reason is simple: Water does not replace the electrolytes lost in sweat. Water does not contain sodium. Water does not provide an energy boost.

So does this make Sports Drinks the winner? Not necessarily. Many athletes I've been in contact with do not like sports drinks and prefer water. As a certified Speed, Agility & Quickness Trainer, I, too would recommend a sports drink over water. But, when asked this question by people my answer is this: "Either one is better than neither one!"

I've seen kids bring fruit juices and bottled iced tea to practices. When I've questioned this selection, I've been told by parents that the fruit juice "is 100 percent fruit juice" and the iced tea is "green tea which is good for you." Well, even 100 percent fruit juice has to have some type of preservative or ingredient in it to keep it fresh so that alone makes it wrong for the athlete and iced tea is just not good at all during physical activity. Keep the fruit juices and iced tea home for afterwards. Before, during and immediately after a practice or game should be the domain of a sports drink (preferably) or water.

There are those of you who are afraid of some of the myths in regards to sports drinks; such as "sports drinks are high in sugar and calories" or "sports drinks are high in salt content." Neither is true. Sports drinks, according to research, have nearly half the calories and sugar of juices and sodas and an 8 oz. bottle of Gatorade has less salt than an 8 oz. glass of milk. The combined ingredients of Gatorade or Powerade are designed to help the body rehydrate.

I've also heard that sports drinks are not good for young athletes. Again, not true. My pediatrician used to recommend Gatorade when any of my kids were sick to help against dehydration.

Bottom line, as I mentioned before, while this is indeed a great debate, sports drinks vs. water is a battle for the ages. Either one is better than neither one. If you would like more information about sports drinks please do not hesitate to contact me.