



#BetterThanYesterday

Episode 023: Drinking Culture and its Impact on Sports

Alcohol and Sports in Australia

Recently, recreational or social drug (including alcohol) use, by athletes has received significant attention in newspapers throughout Australia. This is not a new phenomenon to Australian Sport – just think back to cricket player, David Boon’s stubby record on a flight to England. This article briefly discusses where alcohol fits in Australian Sport, how athletes typically consume alcohol and the effects of alcohol consumption on subsequent exercise performance. It also provides strategies for athletes to employ when out with team mates.

Sport and Alcohol

Alcohol enjoys a strong association with sport in Australia at all levels. Athletes, coaches and associated officials are often captured in the media celebrating a win with alcohol. Major brewing companies often sponsor sporting events within Australia and numerous high-profile sporting teams are affiliated with brewing companies via sponsorship agreements. This relationship is particularly cemented in many high-profile, male team sports that receive wide media exposure. There is even an expectation placed on the spectator — ‘What would the footy be if you were not able to enjoy a beer while watching?’

For a variety of reasons there is a strong tie between alcohol and sport in this country. The issue at hand is whether this association creates an environment where athletes disproportionately misuse alcohol and other social drugs compared with their non-athlete counterparts.

What does the research say?

Much of the research investigating the relationship between sport and social drug (including alcohol) use has shown that when young adolescents are involved in organised sports, sport has a positive influence on an individual’s use of alcohol and other social drugs. That is, adolescents involved in organised sport are less likely to use alcohol and other social drugs.

However, other studies have shown that being involved in sport as an adult may actually encourage greater intake of alcohol compared with non-athlete peers, and that athletes are more likely to engage in high-risk behaviours such as driving or having unprotected sex while under the influence of alcohol.

It appears that athletes involved in team sports may be at greater risk of excessive drinking compared with individual athletes, with the main explanation from team players being that *“drinking is important to develop a bond with other players”*. Further to this, research indicates that for many athletes, alcohol is only consumed in binges and that these binges occur mostly after competition and frequently exceed recommended levels for safe drinking.

In a 1991 Australian study investigating the dietary habits of male athletes, food diaries collected from elite-level Australian Rules Football players revealed that the athletes consumed virtually no alcohol during their regular training week. After the game however, individual alcohol intake varied from no alcohol consumed up to as much as 350 g of alcohol in that evening. To give you an idea of how much alcohol that represents, there is 15 g of alcohol in a full-strength stubby of beer, so 350 g of alcohol is equivalent to one slab of beer. Some would say that athletes have become more professional about their behaviour since 1991, however the recent spate of headlines regarding the misuse of alcohol and other social drugs would suggest otherwise.

So, although sport is about fitness and health, playing elite sport may not necessarily create an environment that automatically develops healthy behaviours and attitudes towards the use of social drugs.

Alcohol and Exercise

Alcohol is a depressant drug, not a stimulant as many people think. It slows down activity in the central nervous system, including the brain. Depressants affect concentration and coordination, and slow the response time to unexpected situations.

Alcohol is an ergolytic aid to sports performance. This means that alcohol will detract from, not improve, exercise performance. Alcohol intake negatively impacts on a variety of psychomotor skills essential for successful exercise performance, including reaction time, balance and hand–eye coordination. Studies have also shown that drinking alcohol does not improve power, strength or endurance.

It is important to note that alcohol is banned in some sports during competition. Although most athletes do not use alcohol immediately before exercise, consuming alcohol in binges during the week or on weekends, is likely to affect recovery from exercise and exercise performance on subsequent days. The impact of consuming alcohol in binges has a variety of short-term and long-term effects for the athlete:

Short-term Effects

- **Alcohol causes dehydration:** Alcohol is widely reported as causing dehydration. This statement is true to a point however it is largely dependent on the concentration of the alcoholic drink being consumed. Concentrated drinks such as spirits consumed in small glasses or shots, full-strength beers and wine will result in a net fluid loss. However low-alcohol choices such as mid-strength beers and spirits served in large glasses with a non-alcoholic mixer may actually assist athletes to rehydrate following exercise.
- **Binge drinking exacerbates soft tissue injury:** Soft tissue injury management requires reducing blood flow to the area in order to contain the injury. Consuming alcohol has the opposite effect. It increases blood flow to the area, which is likely to extend recovery time following injury.
- **Slower decision-making:** It becomes fairly obvious that after a few drinks your ability to react and make correct decisions is impaired. This may increase your risk of serious injury from an accident or being involved in a brawl.

Long-term Effects

In the long term, regular binge drinking can add significant kilojoules. People talk a lot about the carbohydrate in beer as the reason for men putting on weight. Beer contains very little carbohydrate, as the sugar in beer is converted into alcohol. It is the alcohol in beer, not the carbohydrate, that is responsible for weight gain.

Alcohol has also been shown to increase fat deposition, as the body prefers to use alcohol as a fuel source when consumed. If you eat high-fat foods when you are drinking alcohol, the fat in these foods is directed to storage as opposed to being used as a fuel source.

So, if athletes go out and have half-a-dozen drinks, their kilojoule intake can increase more quickly than they bargained for. This is particularly important for athletes aiming to maintain low body-fat levels and/or a low body weight.

Outside of these direct physical effects, binge drinking following exercise has numerous indirect effects in delaying the recovery process. Some of the indirect effects of binge drinking following exercise include:

- the athlete being distracted from carrying out appropriate recovery strategies to help the body refuel, rehydrate and facilitate muscular repair
- athletes may relax their attitudes towards certain foods they usually may not eat
- athletes may fail to follow-up appropriate injury rehabilitation and management
- athletes might place themselves at an increased risk of violence or being involved in a brawl, leading to serious injury and/or adverse publicity.

The combined direct and indirect effects of binge drinking may seriously affect the recovery of athletes from exercise, their subsequent exercise performance, and potentially their sporting career.

Guidelines for surviving a night out with team mates.

Enjoying a drink is often a part of relaxing with friends or celebrating a special event or victory. The following is a list of practical suggestions that will assist athletes in managing their alcohol intake when out with friends and team mates. Importantly, athletes need to control their own intake, rather than the team environment dictating their alcohol intake. Athletes should:

- *Plan in advance:* Think about where you are going, who you will be with, how much you are going to drink, and what you need to do the next day.
- *Eat before or while you are drinking:* Eating carbohydrate-rich foods following exercise helps replenish muscle fuel stores. Furthermore, food in the stomach slows down the rate at which alcohol can be absorbed into the blood stream. Eating slows down your drinking pace and fills you up.
- *Pace yourself:* Space alcoholic drinks with non-alcoholic drinks. You could even start with a water, juice or soft drink. You will drink much faster if you are thirsty, so having a non-alcoholic drink to quench your thirst before you start drinking alcohol is a good idea, particularly after playing sport.
- *Drink slowly:* Sip your drink, do not down it in gulps. Put your glass down between sips.

- *Select low-alcoholic drinks:* Low-alcoholic beers or spirits in large glasses of juice or soft drink.
- *Be the designated driver:* If you have made the decision not to drink and are worried that there might be pressure from your friends or team mates to have a few, let them know that you are the designated driver. They will respect that decision and it will save them money in cab fares.
- *Drink one drink at a time:* Do not let people top up your drink if you have not finished it — it is a lot harder to keep track of how much you have drunk.
- *Keep yourself busy:* If you are occupied you tend to drink less. Have a dance or play pool, do not just sit and drink.
- *Avoid rounds or 'shouts':* Drinking in a 'shout' with team mates encourages you to drink at someone else's pace. If you do get stuck in this situation, buy a non-alcoholic drink for yourself when it is your turn.
- *Do not take any substances you are not sure of and do not leave your drinks unattended:* There are increased reports of 'drink spiking' across Australia so always watch your drink and do not accept drinks from strangers.
- *Look out for your friends and team mates:* Always watch out for your friends or team mates. If you got into trouble you would expect them to watch out for you. Do not be afraid to let them know that they have had too much. They may not be too impressed when you let them know, but they will most probably thank you the next day.
- *Make sure you rehydrate before you go to bed:* One of the best ways to prevent a hangover is to make sure you drink water before you go to sleep. Drinking water throughout the evening is also a good option.

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For further information regarding your sports nutrition requirements, contact the Enliven Nutrition Performance Division via email at info@enlivennutrition.com.au and be sure to visit our website at enlivennutrition.com for more health and nutritional information.

References:

Australian Institute of Sport. Alcohol and Australian Sport. Available from:
http://www.ausport.gov.au/ais/nutrition/factsheets/basics/alcohol_and_australian_sport