

Fasting and Sports

Perhaps, the most difficult topic is fasting for serious athletes. It is important to emphasize that we are talking about serious athletes. A walk in the park or high-school P.E. do not constitute a serious athletic pursuit and do not require any relaxation of fasting rules. Likewise, we will not discuss Olympic-level athletes—their training is so strenuous that they often require a special strict diet and are not likely to be able to follow a monastic fasting rule. But what if one is seriously involved in high school or college athletics? People who engage in physical exercise need two basic nutrients: carbs and proteins. Carbs are what fuel our muscles. During any physical activity, our muscles burn the carbs that are stored in them, and then during the period of recovery, the carbs in the muscles are replaced. If exercise is hard enough—and that is the only way to increase performance—our muscles actually get damaged (that is why we feel sore) and it takes protein to repair them. As our damaged muscles are repaired, they get a little stronger and bigger than they were before a workout. In other words, it is nearly impossible to observe a monastic rule of bread and water after vespers and have regular hard workouts. To be sure, one can do it for a day or two, but not for forty or forty-nine days—athletic performance will suffer. So, in order to maintain athletic performance, one probably needs at least three good meals a day with plenty of complex carbs and 30 to 50% more protein compared to those people who lead a less active lifestyle. But one can still keep the fast. For example, one can completely abstain from meat. There are many successful athletes who are vegans and vegetarians (www.greatveganathletes.com). If people think that they absolutely have to have animal protein in their diet, fish is a much more Lenten choice than beef. One can get a lot of protein from many plant sources—the most strong and muscular animals on planet Earth are all herbivores. (Of course, the digestive system of those animals is very different from the human digestive system, but the Church is not calling us to only eat grass for the rest of our lives.) Many athletes also feel that they need to take various supplements. Here, we will not discuss the wide variety of products that supplement companies are trying to sell to anyone who will listen to their advertising pitch, but people often ask about protein supplements, such as protein shakes or powders. In my opinion, such things as supplements, herbs, vitamins, etc., are not food and there is no good reason to worry too much about whether a capsule is made from gelatin or whether protein isolate was derived from whey. If someone absolutely has to take protein powder, it may be healthier for the body to take whey protein than soy protein. Such a person can still be very strict with his or her food: no ice cream or hotdogs (and if one is a serious athlete, one probably does not eat junk food anyway). But if they think they must take extra protein (and this is a big “if”), choose the healthiest option, which is probably not soy isolate. However, the very idea of drinking a whey protein shake during Lent may bother you, and it probably should. There are plenty of people who live healthy, productive lives on a purely vegan diet. There are also many successful vegan athletes, including marathon runners, bodybuilders, Olympic sprinters, MMA fighters, cyclists, boxers, basketball players, football players, even strongman competitors and powerlifters, and many others who never eat any animal protein. They win championships and tournaments on a completely Lenten diet, proof that anyone should be able to observe a fast for forty-nine days. It will take some research and forethought, but one can absolutely be an athlete and observe the fast. The health benefits one gets from competitive sports are very important, but only for a few years or a few decades. The spiritual benefits one gets from fasting last for eternity. Everything should be put in its proper place: eternal things first, temporal—second.