

VITAMINS FOR RACQUETBALL: SHOULD YOU OR SHOULD YOU NOT?

By Edward I. Placidi

"Man does not live by vitamins alone. He needs minerals, fats, carbohydrates, starches and proteins as well," quips M. Daniel Tatkon in his popular book, *The Great Vitamin Hoax*.

But how much help do vitamins give to athletes, especially racquetball players?

Why did Muhammad Ali purportedly drink a "secret potion"—said to contain vitamin E, folic acid, lecithin, B₆, honey and bee pollen, in an orange juice base—the night before entering the ring?

Why does 63-year-old Bobby Riggs, the self-proclaimed "biggest vitamin user of all time," claim vitamins have made him what he is today—the super fit, number-two player on the 60-and-over U.S. men's tennis list?

Doubtless there are athletes in virtually every area of professional sports, as well as recreational athletes, who make similar claims as they down their pills and blended health concoctions every morning. But the big, forever-argued-about "if" is whether or not this vitamin proposition is just total hype (and big business), exaggerated truth (beneficial but not a maker of champions) or plain fact.

Vitamins—and countless health and dietary preparations—came of commercial age in the 1970s. It was a decade of growing health and fitness awareness, raising a virtual universal consciousness in America that our bodies deserve better and need more.

The public has been bombarded with claims, and counter claims, concerning vitamins, health foods and dietary programs, leaving nearly everyone confused. Nonetheless, easy-to-take vitamins, as a daily dietary supplement, have been accepted by more and more Americans even though the user may know little about them or perceive little if any beneficial effects from them.

Professional racquetball player Ben Koltun, for example, is a committed vitamin user, taking double his normal dosage (a multiple, plus extra E, calcium, C and B) when he has a tournament coming up. "I started taking vitamins on a daily basis a few years back. I don't always eat right and I need to keep up. But to tell you the truth I don't notice a whole lot of difference. Though I'm sure they help me. They don't give me a boost or anything like that. I don't see any noticeable difference," he says.

On the other side of the coin is top-ranked Marty Hogan, who takes a series of vitamins daily to supplement his diet, claiming they have been noticeably valuable to him. But he doesn't go so far as attribute his racquetball success to vitamins. "When we are traveling (on the circuit) I eat a lot of junk food, so I need vitamins. Even in my everyday diet I don't get enough. And of course I work out hard and that burns up a lot. But in general I feel a whole lot better for taking them," he says.

The obvious, puzzling question raised here is why the experiences of two professional athletes taking vitamins on a daily basis differ radically.

Metabolism is an individual thing. It varies according to such factors as environment, physical activity, heredity, even stress. In other words, every body is different. The organic compounds essential for normal metabolic processes are vitamins, none of which the body manufactures itself except for biotin, vitamin K and minimal quantities of vitamin D. Vitamins are a chemical part of enzymes, which are the catalysts for body chemical reactions. Enzymes don't work without vitamins, meaning neither do you.

Doctors, researchers, nutritionists and health food advocates disagree little about the above. But now come the bones of contention.

The position of many doctors as well as the FDA is that if you eat a "well-balanced diet" of three "square" meals a day, vitamin supplements are unnecessary. In probably the most widely read book on the subject, Tatkon asserts, "I do believe that all the necessary vitamins we need are available in abundance in the American food supply. It is the self-prescribed use of vitamin supplements that I strongly object to."

Vitamin-supplement supporters, on the other hand, see things in a different light. They ask, for example, what exactly is a "well-balanced diet?" William Gottlieb, senior editor of *Prevention*, a widely-read health magazine, has written, "Nutrition is not an exact science, it's a controversial science." But assuming a balanced diet means including something each day from the meat, dairy, grain and produce groups, how many Americans' diets are balanced? Don't Americans actually eat far too many sweets, processed and fast foods—foods high in calories, chol-

esterol, saturated fat or salt?

Moreover, beyond the consideration of individual needs stemming from individual biological-biochemical differences, vitamin advocates affirm that researchers have found that fruits and vegetables undergo considerable nutrient loss after they are picked and then ripened in storage or through artificial means. Other nutrient losses can occur to varying—and sometimes startling—degrees in the processing, storage and cooking and/or preparation of food. And individuals must take into account vitamin-depleting factors which affect their own bodies, such as smog and stress.

"Doctors receive almost no training in nutrition during medical school, and it shows," says Gottlieb, who stresses that "even if your diet is truly healthful, you still need vitamins. You need a concentrated extra dose of naturalness to counter the unnaturalness of modern life."

Tatkon, on the other hand, comes down hard on what he calls the "good-health evangelists."

"The vitamin industry has been successful precisely because there is some truth to its claims. The human body does need vitamins. We cannot remain healthy without them. It is not this fact that is the basis for complaint, but the distortion of the fact by means of extravagant claims, false innuendoes, the repetition of the nutrition myths, and the use of worthless ingredients to increase the saleability of a particular product. The fraud is perpetrated by the vitamin manufacturers, the health food promoters, and the vitamin hucksters."

All this point and counterpoint probably means very little to Lynn Adams, the third-ranked woman racquetball player, who has been taking three multi-vitamin multi-mineral tablets three times a day for a year now claiming they have done wonders for her vitality. "I notice a lot of difference when I don't take my vitamins," she says. "I have less energy. . . I feel it right away. Since I began taking vitamins I don't have those lows in the middle of the day, anymore."

Getting the needed amount of vitamins is obviously important for some athletes. But no one has a guarantee that he or she is getting all that is needed. According to Dr. Robert Nirschl, "Partial or even single vitamin deple-



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tion can occur with subtle impairment of body function, without major malnutrition problems. Thus, some athletes, both professional and recreational, may have partial nutritional deficiencies without even knowing it."

There is no doubt that athletes must take extra care in seeing to their vitamin needs if they want to perform well, but what about the claims that an overabundance of vitamins can improve performance?

There have been few tests and no conclusive results about the value of taking megadoses of vitamins. Though the racquetball pros interviewed for this article all believe in and take vitamins, none take or experiment with massive doses. And there is always the danger of overdosing on vitamins, particularly vitamin A. Several years back at the U.S. Open tennis tournament, pro Bob Lutz was reportedly "taking megadoses of vitamins and as the tournament went on he became listless and started feeling strange."

There have been studies in recent years conducted with vitamin C which say you cannot overdose on it. People taking 250 to 500 mg. of C daily, according to a study reported in the *Journal of Applied Physiology* (Vol. 4, No. 2), had lower heart rates and lower body temperatures in intense heat than people not supplementing their diet with C. *The Review of Czechoslovak Medicine* (No. 4, 1976) reported on a study which showed that people taking 1,000 mg. of C daily for two weeks had faster reaction times than people not taking C supplements, and a study in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* (March, 1976) revealed that people taking over 400 mg. of C daily had half as much fatigue as people consuming 100 mg. daily.

Athletes around the world are forever searching for ways to increase their stamina, strength and performance. Runner Bill Gookin has developed and marketed a "magic drink," E.R.G., or Electrolyte (body salt) Replacement with Glucose, that is credited with "saving the lives of countless exasperated athletes suffering from dehydration, cramping and nausea associated with extreme physical exertion."

Steve Riddick, gold medalist on the U.S. Olympic Relay Team in 1976, credits bee pollen with increasing his recovery power after a hard sprint by 75 percent. After two months of three tablets a day, he says, "I felt an upsurge... as though my body had shifted into a more powerful gear."

Racquetball pro Jerry Hilecher has apparently found his individual need: A "sports" packet of 10 vitamins a day. "I don't cramp up anymore. I also train harder."

Vitamins will continue to be a source of controversy for years to come. But as we learn more and more about them by way of studies, experimentation and tests, we will be able to apply the results to better athletic performance.

