

THE RED LIGHT ZONE

Competitive athletes are prepared to train hard to improve performance and reach their goals. But how hard is too hard? Your menstrual cycle (or lack thereof) can give you an insight into whether your body is under too much stress.

TIFFANY BONASERA reports.

FOR many of us, “that time of the month” is considered an inconvenience – a necessary evil. We know deep down that it’s a good sign our bodies are working as they should be. The reality is it can be a pain, in more ways than one. There’s the inevitable dash to the chemist to stock up on an assortment of sanity products (which, might I add, will cost you a small fortune). But more significantly, the physical symptoms can be uncomfortable, to say the least. What’s there to like about bloating, mood swings, sore breasts, lower back pain, and abdominal cramping?

Often referred to as “the curse” or “women’s problems”, it’s certainly not surprising that there have been many fallacies over the years about what women can and can’t do while they’re menstruating. Like many female functions, menstruation has long been characterised as a “condition”, which has influenced the way we think about it.

More often than not, we’re unlikely to openly discuss our menstrual cycles even though it’s something we, as athletes, should be paying close

attention to. True, we may have a whinge to a close friend about having pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS), or our partner might accuse us of being under the control of these symptoms when we’re really just cranky because he forgot to put the rubbish out!

Thankfully, however, two of Australia’s most prominent and successful athletes, 2000 Sydney Olympian Georgie Clarke and 2006 Melbourne Commonwealth Games representative Anna Thompson, are willing to share their experiences with running and menstruation and their thoughts on the importance of being in tune with our cycles.

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Menstruation and the challenge for female athletes

In the 1800s medical “wisdom” about exercise for women was that they must not participate in any activities during their menstrual period (and pregnancy). Evidently, times have changed. (Even though we’re all probably guilty of using our periods to skip PE at some stage during our adolescent years!).

In fact, according to much of the recent research, there is no conclusive proof that getting your period negatively affects athletic performance. It’s now commonly believed moderate exercise

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For many elite athletes, particularly female distance runners, the combination of high volume/heavy training and low body fat levels can lead to amenorrhea; the cessation of menstrual periods. This means that the body doesn’t feel it has sufficient resources to nurture a foetus.

Even if having a child is not on your lifetime to-do list, not having a period can increase the risk of stress fractures and loss of bone mass, which can lead to osteoporosis (weakening of the bones) in later life. Neither of these is conducive to optimal athletic performance.

According to Georgie, 22, who has been competing at an international level since she was just a teenager, young athletes should be encouraged to speak up if they haven’t had a period for two to three months.

“It’s a big concern if you’re not getting your period,” she says. “It’s not a cool thing to happen, you lose bone mass pretty rapidly.”

Herein lies the challenge for many competitive athletes: how to maintain a healthy weight so we get regular periods while also balancing a rigorous training program, which demands a lean physique, to achieve the best possible results.

Unfortunately, says Georgie, many young athletes strive to achieve the same lean physiques as older, more mature athletes. She concedes she fell into that trap as a 14- to 16-year-old. The problem, she says, is that some young athletes perform at a high level with a low body weight. But these performances are likely to be short-lived.

“If you look at some of the elite runners who are 17 or 20 and they keep pushing their bodies through that growth and development stage, it doesn’t help in the long-term,” she says. “It gives you a false sense of reality and performance, and then you’ll fall into a deep hole.”

Know your cycle

There will be some athletes who will not be especially disappointed that they don’t get a regular period or even get one at all. But it’s really important for female athletes and their coaches to understand the potential repercussions.

For me, having a regular cycle throughout my later running career is something I have been quite proud of. Now it is something I am eternally grateful for after recently falling pregnant with

relative ease. I am due to give birth to my first child in early February 2007. (Please note: having a regular menstrual cycle is one of many influences determining a women’s fertility.)

Anna, 29, agrees that getting a regular period is a good indication an athlete is a healthy weight. She says she prefers to be “natural” rather than take the Pill.

“It’s a good way of keeping tabs on whether your weight is okay,” she says. “If not, it’s not really healthy running-wise. I like to know I am menstruating on my own.”

Admittedly, other than the obvious - I got a period each month and was probably a bit moody and emotional in the lead-up, just ask my husband - until recently I knew very little about the menstrual cycle. But planning for a family meant I needed to look beyond the basics. So if you’re anything like me, your knowledge may be a bit sketchy, too.

It’s generally accepted that an “average” cycle is around 28 days. But I say that loosely because it can range anywhere between 21 days and 40 days (plus) depending on the individual. Stress is known to shorten or lengthen a cycle; sport is considered a “stress” which usually lengthens it.

If you’re a competitive athlete, your coach may even try to determine when your performance will be at its best based on your cycle. Without going into the complicated scientific explanation (largely because it’s beyond my level of expertise and understanding), there is research that suggests peak performance for the endurance athlete is during the mid-luteal phase of the menstrual cycle (about a week after ovulation).

According to a report published on www.serpentine.org.uk, muscle glycogen in the legs is

Anna Thompson
– an advocate of a healthy
weight and a natural cycle.



higher during this stage of a woman’s cycle, which could lead to increased speed over the final distance of, for example, a marathon because of the potential for greater output. For the most part, however, it’s not practical or realistic for an athlete to base her competition schedule around her menstrual cycle.

Instead, we all must learn to accept that on any given day, at any given time, at any given race or championship, there will be circumstances that will be less than ideal and we must be able to adapt maturely and appropriately ... and just get on with it. Perhaps you might like to keep a pack of tampons in your race kit, so if your period does decide to come at an inopportune time, at least you’ll be prepared!

Anna says in her experience, having a period hasn’t been a hindrance to performance, but interestingly hers tends to come a little late if she’s been preparing for a particularly big event.

“I think your body sometimes knows it has a big event coming up and it might hold it [menstruation] off,” she says.

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>> ‘Athletic’ amenorrhea and the female athlete

Earlier this year, 2006 Melbourne Commonwealth Games 5000m representative Eloise Wellings bravely admitted in a national newspaper report that she’d suffered an eating disorder when she was 16 and was told her bones were as weak as a 75-year-old woman. As shocking as it

sounds, she’s certainly not alone. These two symptoms are considered to be increasingly common among female athletes, particularly those participating in ‘high-risk’ sports such as distance running.

It’s generally believed that disordered eating and bone density loss (osteoporosis) are two of three components at work in what researchers coin the “female athlete triad”. Amenorrhea is the other component in this three-way relationship. In the August 2006 issue of R4YL, I explored what is a healthy weight for female distance runners and found through speaking with a sport psychologist and sports dietitian that there is a tendency in this group towards disordered eating patterns because the sport emphasises low body weight and a lean physique. The danger here is that an athlete may not be getting enough energy to fuel a demanding training program, and it’s this negative energy balance (the relationship between kilojoules consumed and kilojoules expended) that will trigger amenorrhea.

If you’re a healthy weight (or are menstruating) you will have normal levels of the female hormone estrogen. This is important for your body to be able to absorb calcium, a mineral we all need to build strong bones. If you’re not getting a regular period, you’ll be more prone to getting stress fractures, especially in a high-impact, repetitive sport like running.

Through my experience, many athletes consider amenorrhea to be a normal consequence of hard training without having an understanding that some of the

possible outcomes, like osteoporosis, are likely to be irreversible. Of even greater concern is that some athletes are so focused on the short-term that they’ll turn a blind eye to having an irregular period or not having one at all. In time, it will catch up with you. It’s wonderful to look back at memories of when you were running and competing, but if you later discover you’re infertile or you will suffer from brittle bones for the rest of your life, will it all be worth it?

For Anna, who says when she didn’t get a period in her early 20s for a few years, the alarm bells started ringing and she made an appointment to see her doctor about it. Coincidentally, Anna says her menstrual cycle actually began again of its own accord and has been relatively regular ever since. Now the focus for her is maintaining a healthy weight.

“When I am a constant weight, I definitely think that helps,” she says. “If your weight goes up and down, it can affect your cycle.”

Coaches, too, have an obligation, particularly when mentoring young girls, not only to oversee an athlete’s training program but to foster an environment where there are open lines of communication. This allows the appropriate intervention to be arranged should a female athlete show signs of heading down this slippery slope. It will not only jeopardise her future in the sport but far more importantly, her long-term health.


Georgie, like many other young athletes, has been on the Pill since she was 16. Oral contraceptives are often prescribed to athletes not menstruating or to athletes who have an irregular period in an effort to restore estrogen levels, increase bone density, and decrease the risk of stress fractures. Describing it as her “life saver” through her younger years, Georgie says athletes need to be careful if they choose this course of action because it’s not without its problems.

“I went on the Pill when I was 16,” she says. “If you stay on the Pill for a long period of time and you then decide to go off the Pill, make sure (under the guidance of a healthcare professional) you supplement it with calcium and be aware of the possibility of bone mass loss when you come off it.”

Georgie’s message to other young athletes is to get professional guidance early if you’re not getting a regular period. And, whether you’re on the Pill or not, it’s critical to get regular bone scans to make sure your bone density is where it should be.

“I have had bone density scans done every year,” she says. “I have had no loss in bone mineral density.”

Ultimately, says Anna, while it might seem convenient not to get a period, there are too many reasons to make sure your cycle is okay.

“When it comes down to it, if there’s a problem, you need to do something about it,” she says. 

References:

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Georgie Clare knows only too well the complications that can arise from amenorrhea. Image by Getty Images.