



Hugy Scott

Making an



First-year director of sports nutrition Tiffany Byrd gives Sooner athletes an edge by ensuring they have proper fuel, hydration and recovery time.

At just five feet tall, Tiffany Byrd may be small in physical size, but as she flits along the sidelines of Owen Field, her stature looms large. With a backpack stocked with everything from energy chews to electrolyte hydration packets, Byrd is revolutionizing the way University of Oklahoma athletes fuel their bodies and elevate their game.

As the first-year director of sports nutrition for the OU Department of Athletics, her job extends far beyond the traditional training table. Byrd's goal is to use her extensive knowledge of diet and nutrition to have an impact on the performance of the more than 600 student-athletes who compete in 21 varsity sports for the crimson and cream.

"Our student-athletes come here for the opportunity to compete on a national stage, and I want to ensure that they are

Whenever hunger strikes, Tiffany Byrd, OU's first director of sports nutrition, is on hand to offer student-athletes a bevy of nutritious choices, carefully calculated to provide maximum performance on the field and in the classroom.

Impact

BY SUSAN GROSSMAN



Photo Provided



Hugh Scott

ABOVE LEFT - Small in stature, Byrd looms large in her influence among OU athletes who have discovered this director of sports nutrition knows her stuff. They have come to rely on her advice for guarding against dehydration, muscle cramps and other threats that can undermine peak performance. **ABOVE RIGHT** - Byrd, a licensed dietician, frequently drops by the food service area of Headington Hall to make sure all OU athletes are getting healthy menu choices. Not just football, Byrd is in charge of all OU's 600 athletes in 21 sports.

able to do that," Byrd says. "My goal is to do whatever I can to help them achieve their goals, whether that is to become an All-American or win a championship. I am here to help them gain a competitive edge through proper nutrition, hydration and recovery."

As a former gymnast at Alabama and Nebraska, Byrd understands the rigors of the student-athlete experience, going from class to practice, from tutoring to studying, and doing that all again day after day. She learned first-hand the important balance of proper nutrition and rest. Following graduation, she bounced around in the coaching world, thought about becoming a physical therapist, then found her way to graduate school to study nutrition.

"When I was at the University of Nebraska, we had a sports nutritionist, and he had a huge impact on my life," she says. "It went beyond just showing me how to eat and be in good shape. He impressed me with his knowledge that there is so much more to nutrition than just food."

After a 10-month stint at Baylor University last year, Byrd, who is a registered dietician, arrived on the OU campus this spring and literally hit the ground running. Her first order of business was to stress the foundation of her educational plan: eat breakfast, stay hydrated throughout the day, and allow the body to rest and recover.

"When I got to OU, I worked on establishing relationships and spent a lot of time educating athletes, staff, coaches, dining hall staff, administrators and students on what I planned to do," she says. "Yes, we need a lineman to be big, for example, but that does not give him the OK to eat whatever he wants. There is

good weight—muscle—and not good weight—fat—which hinders the recovery process, makes it harder to breathe and impacts overall health."

As she teaches the value of good nutrition to her teams, Byrd keeps it simple. If the process is too complex, she knows it won't be followed. So using the letters from "BOOMER," she created the following acronym: B—begin with breakfast; O—own your protein; O—optimize hydration; M—must have fruits and vegetables; E—eat often; R—rest and recover.

Byrd can be spotted at practices with fruit, electrolyte replacements and other hydration supplies. She creates menus for home and travel meals, as well as setting up halftime and post-game, as well as post-practice food tables—not only for the athletes but also for the coaches.

"When the coaches call for their players during a game, they are ready," she says. "It really is a team effort. I am just a piece of the puzzle. The whole reason I am able to be a part of the team is because of the resources provided by our athletics director Joe Castiglione, Coach [Jerry] Schmidt and the support of Coach [Bob] Stoops. [They] back me up and are huge advocates for what I am doing."

Byrd is up every morning at 4 a.m. during football season preparing for the team's morning weightlifting session. By 4:45 a.m., she is setting up a food table for the start of the 5:45 a.m. lifting session.

"I care that they eat breakfast and that they fuel their bodies before they lift in the morning," Byrd says. "The NCAA mandates what we can give as far as supplements go, but I have their meal ready when they arrive. It's mostly fruit, nuts, bagels and



Hugh Scott

Smoothies and other snacks are ready after practice for OU football players, like Ty Darlington, left, and Keith Ford. Byrd knows every student's likes and dislikes and tailors treats for "her boys" accordingly. (FYI, don't make Ford a PB&J; he doesn't like them.)



Photo Provided

Players aren't the only ones benefiting from Byrd's nutritional guidelines. Coaches, including assistant head football coach Bobby Jack Wright, are learning to fill their plates with more fruits and veggies.

energy bars. When they are done, I have smoothies prepared."


Byrd has made a believer out of All-American center Gabe Ikkard. At 6-foot-3 and weighing 298 pounds, the Oklahoma City senior says, "Coach has done a great job with providing food, shakes, supplements and snacks for the team.

"Definitely the change in our diet this year has been really good for us, and it definitely played a factor in being able to play a whole game where it is 100-degree weather almost the whole time. To have zero guys cramp or guys who felt like they were going to cramp, we are really pleased with that. It speaks to our level of conditioning with Coach Schmidt's program over the summer, but it also speaks well of Coach Byrd's nutrition plan she has got us on."

Offensive lineman Daryl Williams credits Byrd for alleviating his muscle cramps earlier this season.

"I came to the sideline during the third quarter and thought I was going to cramp," he says. "Coach has these salt packets, so I took three of them, ate a couple of oranges, and I was good to go. I'm not worried now about cramps."

Byrd is one of only a handful of registered dietitians in the country who are on the athletics department staff of a university. Her ultimate goal is that nutrition and diet will play the same important role in the life of an athlete that strength and conditioning does today.

It is a "huge" honor to be part of a tradition-rich program like OU, she says, and she hopes that what athletes learn about food during their tenure on campus will continue to influence their lifestyles long after they have retired from the playing field. 

Susan Grossman is a freelance writer living in Norman.