

How Women Athletes *Should Eat*

An interview with body composition expert Francine Savard

BY **KIM GOSS, MS**

Achieving an optimal body-weight and bodyfat level is a major concern among young women athletes, as well as for young women in general. Unfortunately, there is so much misinformation circulating

about this subject that achieving this goal is a challenge. But one sure way to learn what works is to ask an expert who has helped many women achieve success in figure and physique competitions: Meet Francine Savard.

Savard was a national champion in the gymnastics discipline of sport aerobics and was a cheerleader for 10 years with the Canadian Football League. For the past 12 years Savard has been a personal trainer specializing in helping



Mary-Pier Guadet, a Canadian stunt women who recently joined the Team BFS Weightlifting Club.

Photo: Karim Ghonem



Francine Savard

women achieve their goals in optimal body composition. She offers advice about nutrition and supplements, and designs and supervises workout programs. Working

out of Proactif Fitness in Montreal, Quebec, she typically is able to help her women clients lose 10 percent bodyfat in as little as six weeks – and keep it off. Let me tell you more.

One woman Savard trained was at 32.2 percent bodyfat and had tumors in both her knees. Says Savard, “After surgery – thankfully, the tumors were benign – we started training. I trained her for seven months, and despite having two months where we had to do a lot of rehab, she achieved a bodyfat of seven percent. The following year, she went on to compete in figure competitions and represent Canada at a world competition in Italy.”

Such results have attracted the attention of many elite women athletes and those wishing to become elite. Savard has a long client list of figure and physique competitors who have competed at the national and international level. She has also worked with many elite strength athletes from Canada, including weightlifter Valérie Lefebvre and powerlifter Shany Gilbert.

Lefebvre competed in four Junior World Championships, earning two bronze medals, and two Senior World Championships. At a bodyweight of 152 pounds, Lefebvre snatched 196 pounds and clean and jerked 242 pounds to place 23rd. After less than three months of working with Savard, Lefebvre increased her total by 22 pounds. “I had been feeling tired, and my performances were worsening,” says Lefebvre. “I started to follow Francine’s recommendations in regard to my nutrition, and within a week my performances skyrocketed. My strength and my speed also greatly improved.”

This year at the Senior World

Championships Savard was able to manipulate Lefebvre’s diet so that she could reduce and qualify in the 139-pound bodyweight class. Lefebvre snatched 194 pounds and clean and jerked 248 pounds, which, pound-for-pound, was a performance superior to the previous year’s. She also moved up five places, and as such she helped Canada earn valuable points so her country could send three women to the 2012 Olympic Games, compared to the US, which at the time of this writing can send only two.

Another of Savard’s clients is powerlifter Shany Gilbert. On June 4 at the CPR Canadian Pro/Am Nationals, Gilbert squatted 600 pounds, bench pressed 403 (424 on a fourth attempt), and deadlifted 463 at a bodyweight of 176 pounds. She did these lifts at the age of 21, making her one of the most promising young powerlifters in the world.

The Diet of Champions

Asked why so many young women



Valérie Lefebvre is an Olympic hopeful from Canada who was able to successfully drop a weight class. At the World Championships this year, Lefebvre snatched 194 pounds and clean and jerked 248 pounds in the 139-pound weight class.

are overweight today, Savard responds that a primary reason is that most girls are not very active physically. “Rather than participating in sports, they are distracted with video games and other forms of entertainment. This is why we need to fight to have sports and physical fitness programs become a stronger presence in the school system. Also, girls often are not getting the correct information about nutrition and learning about other factors that can affect their weight, such as hormones. It’s a lot more complicated than just counting calories.”

Regarding hormones, Savard says that environmental problems, such as the influence of toxins in food and water, have caused young women to have higher estrogen levels. One such toxin is bisphenol A (BPA), a chemical used to make plastic products. BPA can increase levels of estrogen, and estrogen can affect metabolism, causing weight gain, especially in the thighs. Savard comments, “Women have a fragile

system, and imbalances in hormones such as estrogen can easily cause them to gain unwanted weight.”

Although we live in what has been called the “Information Age,” Savard says we are exposed to a lot of misinformation, especially from watching celebrities. “Movie and television stars who reach the top of their profession are often very slim to begin with, as this type of body suits the camera. As such, they have a genetic advantage in acquiring a desired figure. Also, these actors are often supervised, with a lot of people to take care of them to make certain they stay slim. Sure, there are shortcuts that can be taken, such as with the use of certain nutritional supplements, but they are not meant to be repeated constantly.”

In working with young women, Savard says, male coaches need to be aware that women have a special relationship with food, and often tend to eat for emotional reasons. “Coaches need to be aware that it is

natural, during times of the month, for a woman’s bodyweight to fluctuate, and this can cause fatigue and affect performance.”

In regard to training, Savard notes that women respond well to weight training for weight loss, even more so than aerobic training. “Male coaches may be too soft on women, such that they will often avoid high-intensity training and focus on high repetitions with relatively lighter weights. Or have them focus on aerobic training, which is an inferior way to lose bodyfat. I have coached for a very long time all types of women, from those who want to compete in figure competitions in bikinis, to high-performance athletes, and also everyday women who want to look like a supermodel. What I’ve found is that the weight on the bar is key.”

When she is designing diets for her clients, Savard says she counsels young women athletes and their coaches to look at the big picture. “They need to focus on eating high-quality food that

Photos: Pascal Rathé



Fitness competition Myriam Tremblay has benefited from Savard’s nutrition and supplement program.



doesn't cause fluctuations in blood sugar, instead of eating a diet too high in carbohydrates. Young women also need to consume foods that will help their body detoxify. I see many young women go to weight-loss centers and buy their chemically refined meals."

During initial consultations with her clients, Savard determines not just their bodyfat percentage but also the way they store bodyfat; she says this can help determine hormone imbalances. From this data, including assessing their activity level, Savard can determine how much protein they require. "Protein requirements are determined by muscle mass, so athletes such as Shany, who can bench press over 400 pounds, will have much higher protein requirements." Adjusting Lefebvre's diet to increase her protein level was a key factor in the success Savard had with Lefebvre.

"I determined that Valérie was only consuming about 90 grams of protein a day, so increasing the protein in her diet was one of my first priorities," says Savard. "I also found that she was not eating clean; she was consuming many

products that she should not have, such as those with soy. She also told me that she was having problems with excessive fatigue, and was not recovering well from her workouts." To give you an idea of what an elite weightlifter's diet should look like, here is a typical breakfast and a snack that Savard gave to Lefebvre:

Breakfast

- 150 grams of lean red meat or 120 grams of chicken or 180 grams of white fish (such as sole) or 9 big egg whites
- 80 grams of sweet potatoes with the peel
- 140 grams of raspberries or 225 grams of tomatoes
- 1 tablespoon of salted butter or coconut butter

Snack

- 1 cup of Greek yogurt (lots of probiotics in there and no dairy byproducts)
- 1/2 scoop of whey isolate mixed in with the yogurt
- 175 grams of cucumber

- 100 grams of carrots
- 75 grams of peppers
- 2 tablespoon of ground flax seeds

Food comes first in Savard's program, and she emphasizes foods high in fiber. Savard also encourages her athletes to drink a lot of water, as this is vital for optimal health, athletic performance and weight loss. That being said, Savard is also a believer in nutritional supplements. "I always recommend a multivitamin, one that is bioavailable so that your body doesn't have to fight to absorb it. Omega 3's are a must, as is vitamin D3."

When working with young women, Savard still encounters their fear that lifting weights will build too much muscle and cause them to acquire a manly appearance. "What young women have to understand is that unless you have a naturally high level of testosterone, you are not going to build too much muscle. And even if a woman has a high level of testosterone, they are not going to grow just like that – they would have to train very hard."

Although Savard trains female bodybuilders, the goals of these women are not necessarily right for other female athletes, she emphasizes. "Bodybuilders are taking their training to an extreme in building muscle and losing fat, which is not necessarily what most of the women I train want. Yes, being lean will help an athlete become faster and more powerful because there is less friction in the muscles and less weight to carry. However, in many sports being extremely lean like a bodybuilder is not conducive to optimal performance."

Whether it's competing as elite athletes or just becoming super fit generally, women have the tools to achieve their highest physical goals. It starts with following sensible nutritional programs and training with weights. Take it from Francine Savard. **BS**



Savard has been working with powerlifter Shany Gilbert, whose best official lifts include a 600-pound squat, 424 bench press, and a 463 deadlift at 176 pounds bodyweight.