

## Muslim athletes face fasting dilemma as Ramadan coincides with Olympics

THE CANADIAN PRESS 

By Lauren La Rose, The Canadian Press | The Canadian Press – Fri, 29 Jun, 2012 10:00 AM EDT

As he laced up his shoes and headed out to train last summer, Mohammed Ahmed would often end up logging 160 kilometres or more in a given week — all while fasting.

It's been a familiar routine for the 21-year-old Muslim distance runner since he was in high school and found his training schedule coinciding with the month of Ramadan.

"Every single year, I fast, I do the training. But it would give me a couple of months where the important races, the races I was preparing for, where I can gain any weight that I've lost, any energy that I've lost .... But training-wise, it didn't really affect me," Ahmed said in an interview from the University of Wisconsin in Madison where he attends school and competes for the Badgers.

"It actually got me stronger," he added. "Mentally, I was very, very strong. I've been training through it. But training and racing at the same time is not an easy thing."

So when Ahmed races for Canada at the London Olympics, the St. Catharines, Ont., native will forgo fasting until after he's finished competing.

"It's very tough," said Ahmed, who qualified for London this week after winning the 10,000 metres at the Canadian trails in Calgary. "I'm not going to be in an environment where my fasting is going to be beneficial.

"Once I'm finished with my races ... then I'm going to start fasting. But the days leading up to it, obviously, my energy levels have to be high, my glycogen levels have to be high. And with fasting and training and travelling, it's going to be very hard."

It's a dilemma facing many Muslim Olympians as they prepare to descend on London to compete on the world's biggest sports stage: To fast or not to fast?

The Summer Games kick off July 27, a mere seven days after the start of Ramadan. Muslims refrain from eating or drinking from dawn until dusk during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar.

"(Fasting in Ramadan) is one of the five pillars of Islam," said Sikander Hashmi, an imam based in Kingston, Ont. "It's an obligation for anyone who is an adult and who's able to do so safely and without compromising their health in a major way."

Hashmi said the main reason behind fasting is to increase piety and consciousness of God. But there are exceptions that can be made with respect to abstaining from food and drink during Ramadan.

Hashmi said travel, illness and endangerment to a person's health due to a lack of food and drink are all valid reasons to postpone the practice.

Under the "most generous allowances" travellers intending to stay in a city less than 15 days can postpone fasts. But Hashmi noted concessions normally aren't granted for sports and other activities which are not considered essential to one's well-being.

With no central authority in Islam, Muslim athletes are likely to turn to Islamic scholars in their respective countries for guidance on fast-breaking or wait for a fatwa, or religious edict, to be issued.

The United Arab Emirates's soccer team received approval to break its fast by the country's Department of Islamic Affairs.

The department said while competing isn't an excuse for breaking the fast, travelling was — provided the athletes don't remain in one place for longer than four days.

It won't be the first time in recent memory that Ramadan has coincided with a major sporting event. It fell during the track and field world championships in South Korea last year, as well as during the 2010 Youth Olympics in Singapore.

"Certainly, Muslim athletes are competing every single year during Ramadan," said Canadian exercise physiologist and sports nutritionist Trent Stellingwerff. "But obviously the Olympics brings a certain focus and highlight, all of a sudden, to the parameters that they need to play with to ensure that they're satisfying and they're staying true to their faith."

Stellingwerff will be working with Canada's rowing and track teams in London. He said the International Olympic Committee convened nutrition experts for a meeting in 2009.

"A major take-home message was the fact that we're talking about short-term fasts here," said Stellingwerff, senior physiologist with Canadian Sport Centre Pacific in Victoria.

"Each and every single one of us fasts every single night when we sleep — and we aren't talking about a two or three or four-day cleansing fast here. We're talking about shifting fasting hours and basically flipping the day so they can eat all they want drink all they want in the evenings and at night," he added.

"But, it does offer another layer of complexity and another layer of choices and considerations that the athlete and their coach and anyone that's advising them needs to consider."

Stellingwerff said he would be a little less worried about the amount of calories being consumed but more focused on when athletes would be training during the day.

With the first and last meal before sunrise and after sunset, it would offer different potential pockets of time to train, like at 4 a.m. followed by a meal. But if deciding to eat and then train four hours later, for example, recovery can't be optimized because athletes can't eat or drink after training, he noted.

Stellingwerff said there's good research to show if someone can stay in a relatively cool environment and not be very active during the entire day that they'll only lose one per cent of their body water — which isn't much. Some athletes can lose one per cent of their body weight in a half-hour of exercise, he noted.

"We know that once athletes get to two per cent of their body weight or further that performance can be compromised, so body weight tracking is one way we look at hydration status," he said.

Hydrating with electrolytes, such as sodium and potassium, will allow the body to retain water more effectively than pure H<sub>2</sub>O, which will go through the system quickly, he noted.

Stellingwerff said the effects of Ramadan fasting on performance will be "incredibly dependent" on which sport athletes are competing in and the time their events are scheduled.

For example, if there is an Olympic final that is a shorter event taking place at 9:30 or 10 in the morning, it would have absolutely minimal impact on performance since the athlete would be up early anyway to prepare, he noted.

A competition that may pose a challenge is a longer endurance contest, such as the marathon.

Stellingwerff explains that taking in fluids and carbohydrates during a 42.195-kilometre marathon will improve performance, but if the race is during the day — as it is in London — a Muslim athlete can't eat or drink.

"That will certainly pose a massive challenge and it will be hard for those athletes to perform at their very, very best," he said. "So when watching the women's and men's marathons, that's something to think of."

With the inability to hydrate, particularly on a warm day, athletes will have to be more conservative with their race plan, he added.

"If you didn't hydrate in a hot race, it would be pretty easy to lose five to eight per cent of your body weight in sweat in warm

conditions — or even more," he said. "There's no question about that. It will be challenging."


However, Stellingwerff noted there's emerging data saying periodic fasted training can be of benefit to the endurance athlete.

He has worked with some who periodically wake up in the morning and not have breakfast — just a cup of coffee and some water — forcing the body to rely on fat instead of carbohydrates.

"You get an altered training stimulus which appears — more research needs to be done — ... to help the body adapt to fat oxidation and fat metabolism, which is important to marathon success or road cycling success, as an example," he said.

"Ironically enough, at least as a training tool, periodic fasting — although early — could offer some benefits to training."

— With files from The Associated Press

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