

John Boccacino:

Hello, and welcome back to the Cuse Conversations podcast. The winter Olympics are underway in Beijing and team USA's top athletes have their sights set on winning gold on the world stage. As the food and nutrition registered dietician for the US Olympic and Paralympic committee, Maggie McCrudden leads team USA's nutrition program that helps these world class athletes at the Olympic training center in Lake Placid rise to their potential.

Maggie McCrudden:

I've always been pretty much a foodie. And then, one year, I just grew like six inches in my eighth grade, and that's when I started to kind of take off in sports. I did basketball, volleyball, swimming, and then I started rowing in eighth grade when I had this big growth spurt. And I was my own Guinea pig. I was going to a few basketball practices in a day. And when I didn't drink water, I felt this way. And I took notice, oh, when I don't eat well, I really feel lousy. I'm so tired. My next day, I'm so much more sore. It's really hard for me to focus in school. And I just started to do my own research and kind of play around with food, and it just got me really interested in it. So I've been lucky to know that I wanted to do something with food and nutrition from a young age.

John Boccacino:

Hi, I'm John Boccacino, senior internal communication specialist at Syracuse University. On this Cuse Conversation, we sit down with Maggie to discuss how she developed a lifelong appreciation for food and its impact on our bodies. We also discuss how her approach to nutrition incorporates data and science with meeting people where they are.

John Boccacino:

Maggie, we appreciate you making the time to join us today. How are you holding up these days?

Maggie McCrudden:

I'm doing great. Thanks for that warm welcome. It's great here. So I live in Lake Placid, and I'm at the Lake Placid winter USOPC center.

John Boccacino:

We've all put on some weight due to either bad food choices, lack of activity. What advice would you give to people who maybe have put on that COVID 15 and they're looking to change their lifestyle. They're looking to pick up healthier eating habits. What kind of advice do you give to them?

Maggie McCrudden:

Typically as a dietician, I like to work with everyone individually, because there's no one diet that fits for everyone, but I would just take a look at your day to day and see what your repeated food consumptions are and kind of just see what you don't really care about out, I would say. If your coffee is your go-to and you're saying, I have to have my coffee with two pumps of caramel, whatever it is, and that starts your day right, and that's how I get through my morning meetings, however it is. So that stays. But if you're, oh, I didn't realize I was grabbing two scoops of peanut butter every day. Those little things add up. So I would just kind of be more mindful of the different little things that you do and see what you can live without.

John Boccacino:

How important is it for individuals who want to seek change, to establish a healthy, lifelong relationship with food, and what are the keys to making sure that you reach those strategies and you reach those goals?

Maggie McCrudden:

That's a great question. So I am with you. There's a lot of fad diets and a lot of misleading information. Every other year eggs are good for you, eggs are bad for you. Milk, you should drink milk, you shouldn't drink milk. It's just a lot of conflicting information out there. And that's one of the reasons why I liked getting into nutrition and food is I was just like you. I tried a lot of different diets or different ways of eating to fuel myself to see what worked. I was my own guinea pig. So I would just kind of, after all the years of school, is keep it simple is my main advice. If it's too good to be true, it's too good to be true. You don't gain weight overnight and it's the same way with losing weight or maintaining a healthy weight.

Maggie McCrudden:

It's just balance. So that's why we work with the athletes here and just general eating well is down. So there's the choose my plate diagram, where you're aiming simply to have half your plate is vegetable or fruit, fruit and vegetables, and then some protein, some starch. So it's simple. It is really easy to fall into a trap, especially in this time where we're all on Instagram a lot or all on Facebook or whatever social media platform you like. There's a lot of different conflicting ideas out there, but just try to keep it simple. If you are really interested in looking into your nutrition, write it down, see what you're eating over a day. And sometimes that actually just helps little things pop out to you. And then you're, oh, I didn't realize that every day I was getting this or I could actually have this and it's a lot more nourishing.

John Boccacino:

And how important, too, is it... Are you a believer in the school of thought of in moderation you can have peanut butter or having the pump of caramel in your coffee before the morning. I guess how important is it to still have those little sweet items if you have a sweet tooth and not deprive yourself of things, because it seems like that makes it harder to achieve your goals if you're depriving yourself.

Maggie McCrudden:

For sure. I mean a lot of the nutrition research says as soon as you say no, that's all you want, it's no more ice cream. It's all I think about is ice cream. So yeah, everything in moderation and even moderation. So if it's your birthday, I wouldn't say don't have cake ever. I'm not a person to ever say that. Have cake, have ice cream cake, have both cakes, whatever. It's your friend's birthday enjoy. But we did learn this in Syracuse, too. One of the great classes I took was intuitive eating and mindfulness. So when you are enjoying something like a cake or your caramel coffee, just be totally mindful of that. Be aware, this is not the most nourishing item, but I love it.

Maggie McCrudden:

It tastes delicious and I'm going to drink it slowly. I'm going to enjoy the flavors that are in my palette. I'm going to take my time with it, because it does take time for your stomach to recognize, or your brain to recognize, that you are full. So really just enjoy it. That's the main thing. There's a bunch of different exercises you could do, like letting a piece of chocolate melt on your tongue and just slowly enjoying

that piece of chocolate. And that is really satisfying. Just take your time with it, really enjoy it, savor it. Turn off the distractions. That helps. Put everything... Take the popcorn out of the bag, put it in a smaller bowl, so you are aware of your portion or just aware that you're enjoying the snack and that's totally fine and awesome. You should enjoy your snacks.

John Boccacino:

What is the connection between what we eat and how we feel?

Maggie McCrudden:

That's like a deep rooted question. I think there's a lot of nutrition that comes with mental health too, and also where you grew up. So my background, my grandpa came from China. My grandma was Polish. They met in English speaking school in New York City, which is so cute, but they developed this cuisine of a mix of Polish and Chinese food. So when I grew up, we were mixing like pierogies with dumplings, just making a weird concoction. Our Thanksgiving has the turkey stuffed with rice. Just our culture, what I grew up with is very food centered and different cultures have different ideas about food or just who's in the household. Everyone grows up with different concepts of food. So food, for me, makes me feel loved.

Maggie McCrudden:

When my grandma cook for me, she's, why didn't you finish? You not love me? That's just my family. But other families are... My husband, he eats... They're very athletic and he really eats for fuel. He's like this is awesome. It tastes great. But I'm done, I'm satisfied. And there was no clean plate club at his dinner table. Ours was very clean plate club. So I feel like it has to do a lot with growing up. And I definitely think there's obviously connection with like the dopamine that your body releases when you have something that's pleasurable like sweets, or greasy or fatty foods that taste good. Your brain says, oh, that was nice. I want to have more. So there's definitely that relationship to the science part, but a lot of it's culture and how you grow up and how you have been taught to be around food, I would say.

John Boccacino:

When people think of nutrition, there're typical tropes that kind of come to mind of, again, eating more veggies, cutting back on salty snacks, but it's so much more than those tropes. It's about meeting people where they are and it's about hard facts and science and data. Describe your approach of how you incorporate that data that goes into nutrition with meeting people where they are.

Maggie McCrudden:

I work with different age groups. So sometimes we have the junior national teams in, that are nine years old to 18. Or sometimes we have athletes that have been through the Olympics cycle multiple times. So they're in their thirties or forties. So we have a very big range of nutrition education. And, again, what their parents told them, or what they learned in school. Nutrition doesn't get that much attention in school, so the nutrition facts part of it, it's kind of meeting the person where they're at, basically what you just said. So understanding what they already know. Letting the person you're talking to kind of guide you and give you some insight of, okay, you could be talking to one person that knows the amount of macros in everything because they track their food.

Maggie McCrudden:

They look at that all the time, versus someone who has never looked at a nutrition label, doesn't know a carbohydrate from a fat, or doesn't really have any concept of nutrition. So you kind of just have to feel that out. I'm not going to be talking to someone who doesn't know what a carb is to count the amount of grams of carbs they're having per day. I feel like that is too far out for them. We're going to tone it back and just go over, these are carbs and this is what a healthy portion would look like. And just aiming to hit a variety of them, versus, we have someone who's trying to put on weight and they need to hit 200 grams of something per day. Then we're going to go into the nitty gritty and kind of talk more about if you are not hungry, but you need to hit a little bit more carbs, why don't we put a little bit more into your smoothie, just little sneaky ways to get to where you want to be.

John Boccacino:

What can we do to improve nutritional education in schools and get kids learning about this from an early age?

Maggie McCrudden:

So in my dietetic internship, one of my rotations was in the school, and we did a lot of plate weight studies, which is basically seeing what kids throw out. And the school lunch program, you have to offer a certain amount of vegetables and fruit per day, per week. I think to get kids more interested in food, I'm not a huge fan of the clean plate club, just because I think it leads to problems later on. And when you're teaching children how to eat, it's introducing foods multiple times, and then also mirroring as an adult. So if you're a parent that has a very limited diet, I would fake it, eat the broccoli, broccoli tastes great. Broccoli tastes great. I love broccoli. Just kind of showing your child or whoever you're mirroring for, that it tastes really good.

Maggie McCrudden:

And then usually, when a kid falls, you're, oh no, you're okay. You're good. And they're fine. It's just kind of introducing foods and showing them green vegetables can taste good because there's a lot of media or the attractive commercials and attractive boxes in the supermarket are usually the super sweet ones. So it's the attractive, shiny new toys in the supermarket, sometimes not the best option for them, and fruits and vegetables taste really good. Usually children love fruit because it's sweet and mixing a little bit of fruit with some less ideal vegetable that child has, is definitely a good way to improve their interest in fruits and vegetables. In the school level, I think it's just exciting. Try to show more exciting foods. And I think that kind of stems from at home. If you're eating fruits and vegetables at home, you'll eat it at school.

John Boccacino:

How did you become interested in nutrition in the first place, and how is your career as a registered dietician unfolded?

Maggie McCrudden:

I've always been pretty much a foodie growing up. I spent a lot of time with my grandma and my grandpa. Actually, he was a diabetic. So from an early age, we worked on just different ways to get grandpa to eat and then, as he aged, we had to make softer foods, just so it's more easy for him to swallow. And that played a little bit of a role, but it really just got me with my hands into food. I just loved cooking. I'd come home from school and make pancakes. I would make muffins, just make a bunch

of different foods and work with my mom and just was always involved in the kitchen. And then one year I grew like six inches in my eighth grade, and that's when I started to kind of take off in sports.

Maggie McCrudden:

I did basketball, volleyball, swimming. And then I started rowing in eighth grade when I had this big growth spurt, and I was my own guinea pig. I was going to a few basketball practices in a day. And when I didn't drink water, I felt this way, and I took notice. Oh, when I don't eat well, I really feel lousy. I'm so tired. My next day, I'm so much more sore. It's really hard for me to focus in school. And I just started to do my own research and kind of play around with food and it just got me really interested in it. So I've been lucky to know that I wanted to do something with food and nutrition from a young age, because that kept me on the right direction because to become a registered dietician, it's a lot of planning.

Maggie McCrudden:

So when I was looking at universities to come to, Syracuse definitely stuck out. My sister also is an alum, so that made it easy just to look at Syracuse and it was fun to visit. And then I went and I met with some of the professors in the Falk school, and the Syracuse program, once you complete the program, you can get placed. Or if you match to a dietetic internship, it has all the credentials to get you into a dietetic internship. So that would be the next step. So I matched to a dietetic internship in New Jersey, the College of St. Elizabeth, which I actually took my master's at the same time. So I matched the internship, which is 1200 hours of supervised practice, which is an unpaid internship. So luckily I was able to live with my parents and I also volunteered with my high school rowing team and was their team nutritionist at that time and just kind of helped them through their...

Maggie McCrudden:

I also coached, so I coached and then did their nutrition program. So I did my 1200 supervised hours and that's broken up between clinical hours. So I was in different hospital settings, outpatient, inpatient, dialysis, diabetes, different sorts of medical nutrition therapy. Then we did some food service. Then we did just different community outreach. I did some health coaching. I did the Girl Scouts. I did nutrition in food schools, which was fun. And then we got to choose our topic of interest and mine was for counseling. So I worked at DBC and did some counseling there, which was really exciting. And from there I was able to sit for my licensing exam, which I passed the summer after my internship. And actually my first job was one of the places I did my rotations at during my internship.

Maggie McCrudden:

That was awesome. I had a very smooth transition out of my internship into work and it was fun. I had a great job. My first job was in a vent unit. So definitely different than it is for me now. Very clinical. So more of the medical side of nutrition, but I think it definitely gave me a huge understanding of the medical nutrition therapy part of nutrition. And I'm happy that I went straight into that because reading stuff in books is awesome, but it was actually dealing with patients and dealing with the family members, dealing with doctors, dealing with nurses, and understanding the interaction between medication and the body was huge for me. And then I transitioned from there. I went to New York City and I became a clinical nutrition manager.

Maggie McCrudden:

So I managed a team of three dietitians and a diet technician. And then from there I moved to Lake Placid, and it's been an awesome transition to here. And I think the reason I got this position was

because I have this support background and the USOPC is super team oriented. And I think Syracuse completely prepared me for each step of the way to get from just the high school graduate to passing through bio, chem, all these hard science classes into the world of nutrition.

John Boccacino:

What's the biggest way that your Syracuse education impacted your current career as a dietician and in nutrition?

Maggie McCrudden:

Right now, I'm doing a lot of stuff with food service-ish work and food science. We do a lot of cooking here and it's a lot of introducing athletes to different foods. I feel a lot of our classes, in the higher level nutrition level, we did the counseling sessions. In Syracuse, students could access a nutrition student and go through nutrition counseling, which I felt was awesome for students and awesome for us. So we could work with a client, or patient, one on one, and I felt like that was so helpful for me, because, again, you can read things in books, but then you got into a conversation with someone and you think it's going to go one way and it goes in a completely different way. And I feel having exposure and access to different opportunities and professors to kind of guide us through just what it is like to be a dietician, because you're dealing with people. You're not dealing with the perfect patient and nobody eats the perfect diet.

Maggie McCrudden:

So you have to kind of be adaptable and flexible. And I feel being at Syracuse, for me, being an athlete, we are juggling so many different things, being on a team with 40 women, having coaching meetings, having all the school, and all the different clubs and stuff you were in, it really helped you kind of just go into a situation or a conversation and kind of go with the flow. And that's a lot of being a dietician is understanding who you're talking to and see what they want. Because I feel like I could talk forever about food, but what do you want to gain out of the conversation? Maybe you just have a quick question or maybe you really need to sit down and talk once a week for months, just to kind of break some hard habits.

John Boccacino:

You are the dietician for the US Olympic team stationed in Lake Placid, a beautiful part of the country. Take us through what you're doing to help prepare these athletes for competition and what your job really entails.

Maggie McCrudden:

Our main athletes here are bobsled, skeleton, luge, biathlon. Those are our main resident athletes right now. My day to day job is really just to work closely with the executive chef and the kitchen staff to kind of make sure that we are providing a balance, and a variety of different foods to fuel all the different types of athletes that we have. What I aim to do is to have a nice variety of foods. And like you said, these athletes aren't just average person. Some of them are super specific and they're tracking their meals. They're trying to hit a certain amount of protein carbs per day. So it's making sure that we have the ability to supply all that for them and then make it easy. My main focus is making sure that we can nourish them day in and day out because nutrition isn't just, what you eat one meal. It's the repeated action of fueling yourself, recovering, resting, staying hydrated.

Maggie McCrudden:

It's a full circle of nourishment for your body, and wellness. Stress is high, competition is super high. I also find a lot of compassion for the athletes because I try to put myself in their shoes. I was a student athlete myself, and they have just what I had time two, times five. They have a lot of things going on. This is an Olympic year. They've been training for... Some of them have been here since... They grow up coming to the center since they were juniors. So it's just a high stress environment. So once a week we do a really fun food activity.

Maggie McCrudden:

In the beginning, when I first started here, it was like all about different cooking methods. So sometimes it would be related to food science. So it would be the muffin method or the biscuit method of just mixing different cupcake sort of batter and try to see how those change with baking, just sort of nutrition education variety. Then I did some dumplings for when we were doing different hype events. We tried to do a lot of Asian cooking. We did sushi rolling, but one of my favorite things about this job, is the access and the flexibility that I have with cooking with the athletes is just so fun. You get a bunch of national team or just competitive athletes together with their teammates who they've known for their whole lives or just met.

Maggie McCrudden:

But it's such a funny competitive environment. You think you're just rolling sushi, but it's really turns into who can roll the largest sushi role. Who can eat the most sushi. And here I am, okay, so we're talking about different forms of protein, right guys, and they're yeah. And they're putting all this sushi rice down. Okay, this turned really quick. Sushi became a competitive sport, but it's just fun. And it's nice to have a lighter environment for them. And sometimes it turns into like team building. And for me, I feel like it gives a nice window of opportunity to see where education is lacking or sometimes it's stressful and you don't want to ask for anything. Our athletes are so grateful and I feel like that's across the board with athletes.

Maggie McCrudden:

A lot of times they'll never complain. Sometimes they do, but sometimes they're this is the best food I've ever had in my entire life. And you're, all right, no, be real. What could you use? Is there anything that you're missing? Is there something you really would value if we had that every day and then doing these little food activities, you get a little bit more personal and they'll share some more information that I'll bring back to the executive chef and say we need to order different protein bars because most of ours contain soy. And we're really looking for whey. Something simple like that, which I wouldn't have really thought twice of. Also, it's fun to teach athletes how to cook because when I actually did a summer internship with the Giants dietitian, and that also started me off thinking about nutrition and sports as a career, and working with the football team, there was a few Syracuse alumni in that rookie camp and Syracuse is awesome.

Maggie McCrudden:

And it was my first time seeing how little nutrition of actually cooking some of the athletes had, because at Syracuse they went to the dining hall, breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and then they had snacks made for them at practice. So they weren't really understanding how to actually make their own snacks. So I really feel there's a lot of value to doing these cooking classes because some athletes, yeah, they're like

making their own bread at home or in the resident kitchen, the dining. But some athletes really are, I don't know how to make a smoothie.

John Boccacino:

Knowing that athletes are creatures of habit and it's hard to get into their inner circle of trust, how much do you think it helps with your relatability and credibility being a former division one student athlete?

Maggie McCrudden:

I think it helps a lot. I try to put myself in their shoes a lot and I have so much compassion for the amount of work and the exhaustion that they are really living through day to day. Our coach, Justin Moore, used to always say you're an athlete when you're thinking about your sport all the time, not just at practice. And I really take that to heart, working with these athletes. They are an athlete all the time. It's a full-time job. They're thinking about it day in, day out, off season. There is really no off season. They're always training. It's a competitive environment where they're competing against their friends, which is what we did at Syracuse too. In rowing, you're as fast as the slowest person in your boat.

Maggie McCrudden:

And we're always pushing each other to be their best. And if that means that you race me out of the varsity eight, then good for you. I'm not mad at you. I'm happy that our boats are going to go fast. And I feel that mentality really helps me relate to the athletes. A lot of them know that I was an athlete in college, and I think it's nice to just have that camaraderie with the athletes. And they know that I understand that they're going through a lot and I know how hard it is to juggle a crazy schedule. So I think it really does help me just put myself in their shoes and kind of really understand their timeline, because a lot of nutrition is not just what you eat. It's the timing and how you're recovering and through different training cycles. So I feel like being an athlete helps me prepare them because I have an idea of what they're going through.

John Boccacino:

I know you mentioned earlier that your sister is also a proud Syracuse alum and you obviously earned your degree in 2014 from Falk. What does it mean to you to be a Syracuse University graduate?

Maggie McCrudden:

It means the world. Also my husband I met. He was a men's rower as well. So we have a huge Cuse alumni network. So all of my closest friends, I would say, are Syracuse alum. I love it. I think back to those four years and I'm, how is it only four years? I accomplished so much. I met so many people, everyone I know is Syracuse. We all are obsessed with Syracuse. I am so grateful for my four years at Syracuse and rowing was probably one of the most impactful things that I ever did, being on the Syracuse team. And I think my experience with Syracuse was so memorable and amazing is because we had so many international students on our team and just like the network and community that Syracuse fosters, it totally influenced how I developed as a student athlete.

Maggie McCrudden:

I never knew how strong I was going to be until I sat next to these awesome women who pushed me every single day. And we pushed each other in the classroom as well. Some of my close school friends, I would say, I have my athlete friends, school friends, and it's an awesome network. If I ever have

questions or even if it's... I always call my co-captain Miranda Williams, every lifetime event. Do you think I should take this job? She's you have to take that. And she lives in Australia and she's up at two in the morning, on our wedding morning, I called her and she's, I knew you were going to call me and it's 2:00 AM.

Maggie McCrudden:

And we're all getting ready. And she's on zoom, or on my FaceTime, being I'm so excited for you guys. We have a great alumni group where we watched Hattie, who is our teammate, row in the Olympics. We had a watch party, because at work we do watch parties all the time. So I was, anyone who wants to join my zoom call, come on. We're going to be cheering Hattie on. So we had a big group, all cheering around from all over the country. And again, I feel like Syracuse is a big school, but you make it so small by all the network and all the different communities you join and different things that you do. We're definitely a bleeding orange family.

John Boccacino:

She's Maggie McCrudden, the official dietician for the US Olympic team based in Lake Placid. Maggie, thank you for making the time and keep up the great work.

Maggie McCrudden:

Thank you guys for having me. It's been a pleasure. Go Cuse.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the Cuse Conversations podcast. My name is John Boccacino signing off for the Cuse Conversations podcast.