

The Athletes Who Train With Soda

Aaron Rodgers, Tour de France Cyclists and Olympic Medalists Cling to Coke or Crush



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Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers sparked discussion by drinking grape-flavored Crush after a recent victory. *WLUK-TV GREEN BAY*

By

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Updated Dec. 9, 2014 2:27 p.m. ET

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The sight of a pro athlete chugging a sugary soda after a close game was bizarre enough to light up social media. When Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers drank grape-flavored Crush during a postgame news conference in November, some figured there could only be one explanation. His choice of beverage had to be a [dig at the purple-clad Minnesota Vikings](#), whom the Packers had just beaten.

Mr. Rodgers dismissed the idea as “ridiculous.” His explanation was surprising. He said he’s been drinking grape or orange soda [after every game for seven years](#).

In an era when many athletes have become [obsessed with nutrition](#), Mr. Rodgers’s soda routine reveals a surprising truth: Many high-level athletes not only drink the occasional soda, they use it strategically to fuel their performance. This persists amid the vilification of sugary soft drinks as a contributor to the [nation’s high rate of obesity](#).

French [tennis pro Gaël Monfils](#) amused spectators in September when he drank from a can of Coke during a [fourth-round victory over No. 7 seed Grigor Dimitrov](#) .

The Ironman triathlon series serves flat cola and Red Bull to competitors in its grueling swim-bike-run events. Elite marathoner Camille Herron says she drinks three to four cans of Coke a week to help provide calories for her 100-mile training regimen.

Ted King, a member of the Cannondale Pro Cycling team, estimates that 90% of the riders on the Tour de France drink Coke at some point during the race.



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French cyclist Pierre Rolland drank a soda while riding in the 2013 Tour de France. *GETTY IMAGES*

“A really cold soda on a hot day is that blast of energy you need,” Mr. King says. “There’s something about the quick caffeine and simple sugar that helps fuel the final bit of a race.”

Pro cyclists can burn 800 to 1,000 calories per hour and ride for five or six hours on a race day, Mr. King says. Riders also eat energy bars and gels and drink sports drinks. “Your palate can only take so many sports-specific things,” he says. Drinking a Coke has become a tradition among riders, he says.

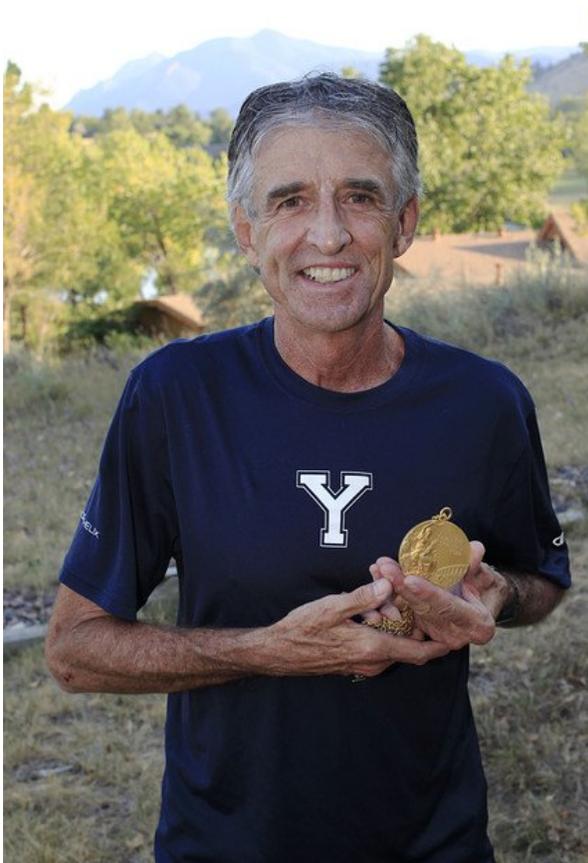
Mr. Rodgers, the quarterback, explained during a radio interview last month that he drinks soda “right after the game, when you’ve got to get those nutrients back in you.” He said he also eats a postgame peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and rarely drinks soda on non-gamedays. Mr. Rodgers was unavailable for an interview, a team spokesman said.

Soda has added sugars and calories, but few if any essential nutrients. Daily consumption is [associated with chronic health conditions](#), experts say.

High-intensity exercise depletes a person’s supply of glycogen, the body’s store of energy-giving carbohydrates. Experts say that to aid muscle recovery, athletes should replenish that fuel within 30 to 60 minutes of finishing a workout. That’s why tables of snacks greet runners at the end of a race.

Some experts have advocated [chocolate milk after exercise](#) for its combination of carbohydrates and protein, low cost and widespread availability.

Many wouldn’t dream of encouraging soda as part of an athlete’s diet. Steve Hess, assistant coach, strength and conditioning for the NBA’s Denver Nuggets, says he is “absolutely against” athletes drinking soda. “I don’t want anything to take up space that doesn’t have nutrient density.”



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U.S. Olympian Frank Shorter displays the gold medal that he won in the 1972 Summer Olympics in 2012 in Boulder, Colo. *ASSOCIATED PRESS*

Full-calorie soda has been [pulled from many schools](#) and [soda sales have slumped](#) as consumers opt for bottled water and other natural or lower-calorie beverages. New York City Mayor [Bill de Blasio](#) has renewed a push by previous Mayor [Michael Bloomberg](#) to [limit the size of sodas](#) sold in the city.

“As a kid, we were always told Coke is bad for you,” says Ms. Herron, the marathon runner. But she says she has seen successful international runners drinking Coke, and wrote an [impassioned defense of soda](#) on her blog last year. “There’s definitely a place for drinking soda and it being beneficial to your performance,” she says.

Distance runner Kenny Moore recalled University of Oregon track coach Bill Bowerman, later the co-founder of Nike, handing him and his teammates various beverages during long training runs in the mid-1960s. Compared with orange juice, lemonade, coffee and others, Coke “gave me a little lift, a feeling of being a little stronger as I ran,” Mr. Moore recalls.

Frank Shorter, Mr. Moore’s teammate on the 1972 Olympic team, adopted his regimen of drinking Coke during races. They allowed it to go flat. Mr. Shorter swigged Coke along the Olympic marathon course in Munich and won the gold medal. Mr. Moore finished fourth.

“You go with what works,” Mr. Shorter says. He says he drank flat soda in dozens of other marathons. His Olympic victory is credited with helping spark the 1970s and ‘80s running boom.

Julie Burns is a registered dietitian who has worked with professional athletes in the Chicago area for decades. She recommends that athletes drink coconut water or another organic sports beverage during exercise rather than soft drinks full of artificial additives and low-quality sugars. But, she acknowledges, “I do think you’ve got to meet people where they’re at, and athletes do have these rituals.”

Coke’s availability anywhere in the world makes it convenient and attractive to cyclists who often travel and compete overseas, Mr. King says. It’s not uncommon for riders on remote training rides to buy one at a gas station and drink it, carbonation and all.

“If that means you’re burping, so be it,” he says.

One advantage that soda has over some traditional sports drinks is caffeine, which studies have shown can [improve endurance and cognitive ability](#) during and after exercise and [decrease perceptions of fatigue](#).

Soda isn't a daily habit for plenty of athletes. Heather Simpson, a 44-year-old mother of five in Indianapolis, says she drinks Coke generally only while competing in triathlons.

“Part of the thought behind that is you don't drink caffeine on a regular basis, and then when you drink it during the race, it's a big pick-me-up,” she says.

Tom Fleming fueled himself with a mix of water and Coke syrup from a soda fountain while winning marathons in the 1970s, including New York City's in 1973 and 1975. Now a high school track and cross-country coach in Montclair, N.J., Mr. Fleming says several adult runners he is coaching are using a similar cola concoction in training.

“Now that I've been running or been a coach for 46 years, I've seen everything,” says Mr. Fleming, who is 63. “And I'm finally seeing things coming full circle.”

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