

Multi-Sport Athlete, Greg Parham Talks About The Paleo Diet For Performance

Nikki Young interviews [Greg Parham](#)



Greg is an athlete based out of Austin, TX. He has been racing bikes since the fall of 2002. Since then, Greg has worked up the ranks from beginner to a Cat 1 mountain bike racer, Cat 3 roadie, Cat 2 Cyclocrosser, and Elite/Pro in 6, 12, and 24 hour events. In the fall of 2008, he began multisport racing at regional Xterra events where he was finishing at the top of his age group in less than a year. At the beginning of 2009, Greg discovered the Paleo Diet and has been committed to not only practicing it whole heartedly, but proving to others that it is a far healthier way to live. Later in 2009, Greg began to expand his Paleo experiences beyond eating into his entire lifestyle. Despite what the "experts" would call an insufficient diet for an athlete of Greg's ability, He continued to improve and live a more fulfilling life than before his discovery of Paleo practices. Greg has a regular day job, is currently engaged and otherwise immersed in typical modern American issues such as family, friends, cars, cities, electronics and schedules.

What were your main motivators for following a Paleo Diet when you first came across information about it?

Increasing athletic performance, normalizing energy levels throughout the day, and improving health for the long run.

Did you feel this would ultimately be a positive step towards improving your fitness for the endurance events you compete in as well as improving all-round general health?

The evidence and arguments were irrefutable, especially the more I learned about it. I had no doubts about either athletic performance or general health. Switching from a diet laden in processed carbs to one of unaltered natural foods just made sense.

What benefits have you seen in your athletic performance since following the Paleo Diet?

I have seen the following benefits:

1. Less recovery time following difficult workouts or races.
2. I don't have to rely on carbohydrates for long rides anymore. In fact, if I'm just out doing easy long rides, I don't have to eat anything at all because my body now relies primarily on fat, with which I have a super abundant supply, even at 6% body fat.
3. Once my body learned to metabolise fat more efficiently, I could maintain moderate levels of exercise for longer periods of time without supplementation. However, supplementation extends the length even longer. I'm less likely to "hit the wall".
4. In general, I have this huge weight lifted off my chest not having to worry so much about what I should eat and drink. Athletes are bombarded by supplement companies, all claiming their products are better than the other. Should I use Gatorade? Hammer Nutrition? Eas? Clif Bar? Cytomax? Powebar? The list goes on and on. The answer: none of them. Nature is smarter than science. By rejecting these claims and having all out faith in the Paleo Diet, I not only save a lot of money on supplements, but have a mind at ease that I don't need them.

As an endurance athlete, do you support your diet with any supplementation which may not be considered paleo, and can you talk about how you incorporate this into your diet and the need for it for the level of activity you participate in?

The main time I supplement is during races that I anticipate performing at or above 75% of my max heart rate (MHR) for 90-150 minutes (what I would consider cross country pace). At this point I'm anaerobic and relying quite heavily on carbs rather than fat. However, I don't believe in sports drinks that only have carbs, and I don't need much carbs. A little protein is nice for lots of other reasons I don't have time to mention.

I use a drink mix called Puresport that has a 2.67 to 1 Carb to Protein ratio for better nutrient absorption, minimized muscle damage, and faster recovery. Compared to a typical sports drink, Puresport is only 80 calories per serving instead of 120. The drink also has some electrolytes that are likely to be depleted in events like this.

For races in the 4-6 Hour range I definitely need more carb intake because I'm likely running at 80% MHR the whole time. I'm still burning quite a bit of fat, but also burning a lot of carbs.

In addition to more concentrated Puresport, I eat my homemade caveman energy bars (*recipe below*). At events in the 6-24 hour range, on average I'm below 75% MHR so theoretically I could just run on fat, but, mountain biking is not a steady flat sport. I might hit a steep climb that sends me to 90% MHR for a few minutes, but then have an easy descent when I'm cruising at 50% MHR. Again, I'm mostly burning fat, but I am burning carbs here and there and need to replenish them if I wish to continue at the intensity it takes to win the race.



In this case, I rely on Puresport, caveman energy bars, beef jerky, and fruit, especially grapes, strawberries, and bananas. I might even use some Organic Brown Rice Syrup (in lieu of energy goos) if I get tired of the other sources. If I need a big boost late in the race I've been known to eat pizza, bread, or other "forbidden" processed carbs like muffins or cookies just to get me through it. Admittedly, I will confess to you that 24 hour races are not the healthiest thing for you. I just really enjoy and excel at them, and I only do 1 or 2 a year, so the risk is balanced with the reward.

What would an average day of meals be leading up to a race to provide you with optimal energy?

This is where the beauty of the Paleo Diet really shines. My pre-race meals are no different than any of my regular day meals. For dinner, I typically eat a decent salad with a nice piece of meat, and some good fats like sesame oil and avocado on the salad.

If I have time for breakfast (no less than 3 hours before the race) I usually down 3-4 raw free-range eggs, some mixed nuts, and an orange or apple. I don't always have means to cook eggs, so I've grown to like them raw. It seems like they digest faster this way too. So many athletes have been conditioned to believe they need to carb load the week before a race for optimal energy, including the traditional pasta dinner the night before and pancake or cereal breakfast the morning of. Does this mean we don't have optimal energy all the time with our carb laden western diets?? With the Paleo Diet, I always have optimal energy. Plain and simple. If a race or survival situation were to sneak up on me today, my body would be fully prepared for it, simply based on my day to day diet.

Reading one of your latest blog posts you have listed some changes you will make not only within your lifestyle but your diet as well, for instance the odd cup of coffee on a weekly basis. Do you think the changes you have decided to make in regards to eating an even stricter Paleo Diet will help your performance leading up to your next race - the Dirty Dozen mountain bike race, Feb 6th 2010?

I try to live and eat by the 80% rule, which states if you follow the diet 80% of the time, you will get almost all the benefit from it. There are times when it's next to impossible to follow the diet, like when you're travelling or having dinner at a friend's house and they have slaved away at preparing baked potatoes, bread, rice, etc. and it would be downright rude to not eat anything. I adhere pretty well to this 80% rule, so it's not about being even more strict about the diet. My blog comment ("Even more of the food I eat will come straight from the good earth, and less of it from a package") has a little more to do with a "spiritual" side of food sources and responsibility.

I've taken up hunting and fishing as a new hobby and hope to be fortunate enough to harvest a lot of game on my own from now on. I also hope to procure more of my vegetable sources straight from a local garden, either my own, or from a farmer's market. Maybe I can even forage fruits and nuts from friends or neighbors that have more than they can eat. In all these instances, I know directly where the food came from and can trust it has maximum nutritional value. Even buying organic produce from Whole Foods, I don't know where it came from or how early it had to be plucked in order to be ripe by the time it reached the shelf. Regarding my preparation for the upcoming 12 hour race, nutritionally I won't be doing anything different than I already am.

Are there any additional lifestyle choices that you have adopted that you have felt to improve your health, wellness and athletic performance?

Most Certainly! I feel adopting the Paleo Diet is the most significant change one can make, but adopting other primal behaviors is very beneficial. Nowadays, I'm also getting more sleep, freeing my life of

clutter, exercising my brain more (such as reading), spending less time online, and more time outside to name a few. I've also changed the way I train to reduce stress, yet promote more fitness. See *below*.

Do you find the Paleo Diet is a fairly un-touched area within endurance sports due to the amount of information out there opting for a high carbohydrate diet? And within your personal experience, are there any 'myths' or just a feeling of misconception that is passed on as being the best diet for endurance athletes?

It is fairly untouched, but I see the movement as picking up steam. People are learning about Cordain's *Paleo Diet For Athletes*, Mark Sisson's *Daily Apple* website, as well as his new book *The Primal Blueprint*. Bicycling Magazine published an article titled "Big Fat Lies" in May 2009 describing the perils of excessive carb intake and promoting the benefits of a diet similar to the Paleo Diet. Athletes like me who are having great success with the diet are spreading the word.

I'm not sure I would use the word "myth", although that's what actually is being passed down as the best diet for endurance athletes. I would call it "doctrine". The teachings of carb intake for athletic performance are so ingrained in western culture that you don't even have to be an athlete to know about carb loading. It's not uncommon for non-athletes to say things like "I've got a big 5 mile hike tomorrow, so I better carb load tonight!"



When training regularly in endurance events the body will often require a higher intake of nutrition to repair itself. How do you balance out your paleo based diet to ensure you are feeding your body enough of what it needs? Did it take much trial and error in your diet to find the right amount and of what foods, before you found what worked best?

I balance this in two ways: 1. The way I train 2. The amount I eat. So many people trying to get in shape or increase their performance are led to believe that they have to suffer and slave away at cardio machines or routines to lean up and get faster. Mark Sisson coins this as "Chronic Cardio" - working out for over an hour above 75%MHR. This drains your glycogen levels, makes you crave sugars and carbs, and releases Cortisol (the "stress hormone") The better way to workout is by simulating primal movements: moving frequently at a slow pace, lifting heavy things, and sprinting once in a while.

If I'm doing a long slow workout such as hiking, I'm efficiently burning fat, not working up a huge appetite, and building a strong base for sprinting. My weight training workouts are less than an hour, and are not sustained. Sprint workouts (done maybe once a week) last less than 15 minutes and then I'm done for the rest of the day! So, with my new training regiment, I just don't get as hungry as I used to, yet I'm realizing greater fitness benefits. Compared to a sedentary individual though, I will still require several more calories. All I do is eat more when I'm hungry.

I have no set eating times or amounts. As long as whatever I'm eating is Paleo approved, I'll eat until I'm not hungry anymore, but not necessarily til I'm full, notice the difference there. If it's one of those days where I'm just super hungry, I might go to an all you can eat salad bar and pig out, or indulge on really fatty foods like avocados, fatty brisket, nuts, eggs, etc. Keep in mind that the Paleo Diet is not really a "low carb" diet. It's low by modern standards, but these standards are just grossly out of proportion. Fruits and vegetables do indeed have carbs, they just also have an abundance of vitamins and minerals and are lower glycemic carbs. So, if I find myself craving carbs, I'll just eat more fruits and sweet vegetables like carrots and capsicums.

What is your favourite paleo recipe?

While I enjoy several of the recipes from the Paleo Cookbooks, it's tough to pick a favorite one. A lot of people always ask me what's in my homemade Caveman energy bars, so I'd like to provide that recipe for all your readers!

Caveman energy bars

There is no real magic to the amount of each ingredient. I never measure anything out, so I can only tell you what I use and how I do it.

<i>Dates (preferably pitted)</i> <i>Finely chopped Cashews</i> <i>Coconut flakes or ground coconut</i>	<i>Local honey</i> <i>100% Cocoa powder</i>
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I start by heating the dates until I can peel the skins off. I mash them flat on a plate. Pour some honey on top, then place cashew pieces, then more honey, then coconut, followed by more honey and then the cocoa powder.

Then I just start mashing together with my hands and forming into squares, trying to squeeze as much air out from the mixture as I can. If the bars feel too sticky (too much dates or honey) then add more nuts and coconut. If it's too dry and the nuts aren't sticking, add more dates or honey. If you really like dark chocolate, add more cocoa! Enjoy!

"Leaner. Stronger. Faster. I made the switch to the Paleo Diet in January 09 and these are but a few of the benefits I've experienced. As an elite athlete, I was looking to take my performance to the next level. I didn't buy all the marketing junk about high carb intake, sports drinks, powerbars, goos, protein drinks, you name it. My body needed real food. Making the switch was easy, but keeping meals interesting was hard. That's when I discovered the Paleo Cookbooks, Chock full of tasty and easy recipes, the books gave me the variety I needed to keep the diet going strong. Thanks Nikki!"

~ Greg "Caveman" Parham
Elite Athlete

<http://www.gregparham.wordpress.com>



The Paleo Cookbooks provide you with a range of dishes for every occasion - from light no-fuss meals through to dinner parties, family celebrations and summer salads.

Using foods provided by Mother Nature that provide the framework and principles for healthy living, these exciting and flavorsome recipes using foods which are basic to our biology and our digestive system will help you experience wonderful results in your health and help to achieve positive results such as:

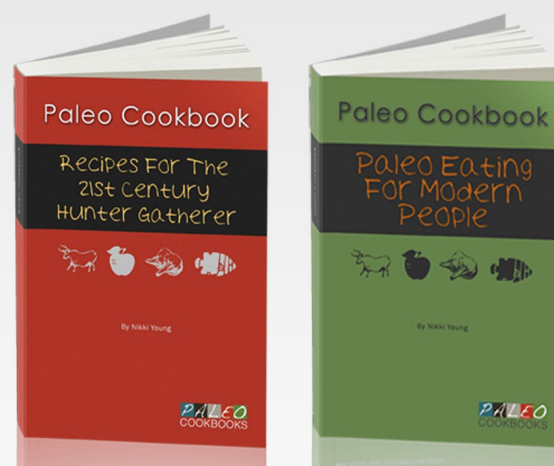
Increased Energy - Increased Sex Drive - Clearer, Smoother Skin - Weight Loss Results - Better Performance and Recovery from Exercise - Stronger Immune System

These paleo recipes are easy to follow and use wonderfully fresh ingredients, with the emphasis on flavor and visual appeal. The Paleo Cookbook provides a wealth of ideas and recipes for a collection of mouth watering meals.

Simple and Easy to Create Recipes with clear step by step instructions you will be able to produce paleo friendly meals that get rave reviews from friends and family every- time!

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