

# Too Thin to Win - Anorexia in Athletes



This article is dedicated to Helen Moros, athlete and teacher, who quietly passed away at her home on 6 February, 2003, after a life-long struggle with the “Demon Anorexia”. She was just 35 years old.

By Gary Moller

*(DipPhEd PGDipRehab PGDipSportMed (Otago) FCE Certified)*

(Gary is a non-medical consultant in sports medicine, rehabilitation, coaching and athletic conditioning)

---

Have you got the latest version? Go to the author’s web site and download the latest version now.

## Contact details:

**Web site**     [www.freerangers.org](http://www.freerangers.org)

**Email:**        [gary@freerangers.org](mailto:gary@freerangers.org)

## Copyright

© Gary Moller 2003

Gary Moller asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

## Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the valuable contributions of the following people:

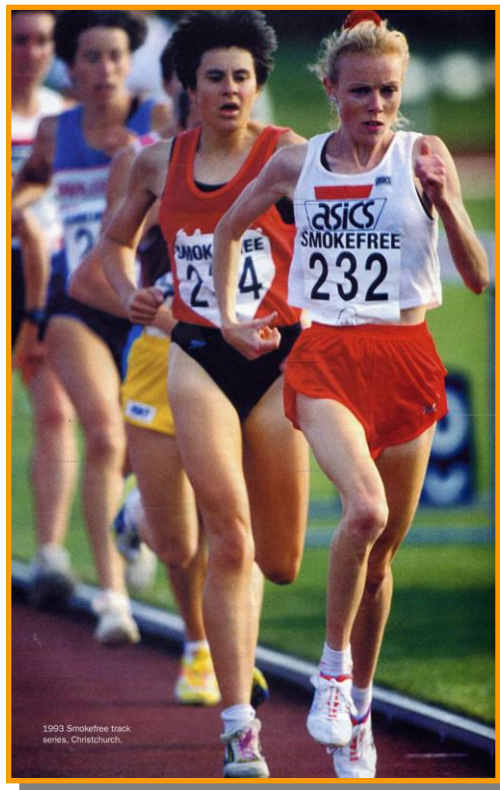
Rochelle Plank (BA), Youth, Education & Communications Worker

Eating Disorder Services,

Lorraine Moller, Olympic Marathon Bronze Medalist and Coach,

Judy and Nick Moros

Photos supplied by the Moros family and Metro Magazine



## 'Too Thin to Win - Anorexia in Athletes'

### Introduction

We may admire and secretly envy intelligent and talented athletes like Helen. They may be wildly successful in their sport and appear happy with their place in the World. What we are not aware of is what may be going on inside their heads – torment, anguish, doubt; inadequacy and low self-worth may be closer to the truth.

According to the American College of Sports Medicine, Helen was afflicted with the “Female Athlete Triad”. According to the College, the triad occurs in physically active girls and women. Its interrelated components are disordered eating, amenorrhea, and osteoporosis. Pressure placed on young women to achieve unrealistically low body weights underlies development of the Triad. Adolescents and women training in sports in which low body weight is emphasised for athletic performance and appearance are at greatest risk”.

Alone, or in combination, Female Athlete Triad disorders can decrease physical performance and cause morbidity and mortality. Girls and women with one component of the Triad should be screened for the others. All individuals working with physically active girls and women should be educated about the Female Athlete Triad and develop plans to prevent, recognise, treat and reduce its risks.

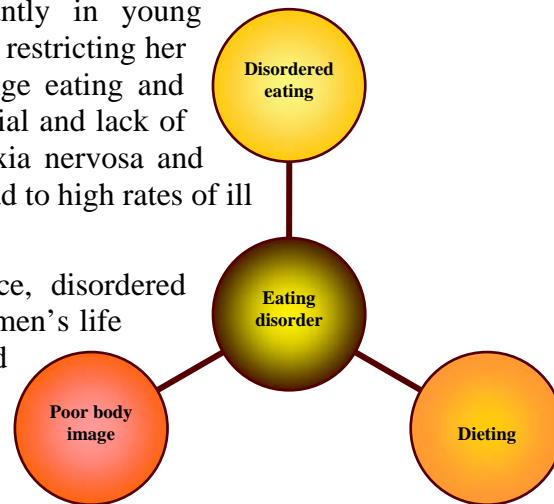


Helen and Lorraine

## Disordered Eating

Disordered eating refers to the harmful and ineffective eating behaviours used to obtain a lean appearance. It occurs predominantly in young females (95%). She may resort to severely restricting her intake (anorexia) or have episodes of binge eating and purging (bulimia). Due to the state of denial and lack of understanding, clinical disorders of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are difficult to treat and lead to high rates of ill health and mortality.

According to the Eating Disorder Service, disordered eating is common. It is a part of most women's life experiences and it is nothing to be ashamed of. Most will get through without harm while a few go on to develop a serious eating disorder.



## Amenorrhea

The starving female body responds by shutting down its fertility – a condition called amenorrhea. The underlying hormonal changes associated with amenorrhea are associated with decreased bone mineral density.

## Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis is characterised by deterioration of bone leading to skeletal fragility (Often seen in the athlete as repeated stress fractures). The restriction of energy and nutrient intake, and consequent amenorrhea, combine to place the athlete at risk of developing osteoporosis.

## Prevalence

We do not know for sure how prevalent eating disorders are in sport, but we do know that it is under-reported. It is common in sports that:

- √ Subjectively score performance
- √ Favour a pre-pubertal body type for performance success
- √ Favour a low body weight and small size
- √ Require body contour-revealing clothing for competition
- √ That use weight categories for selection

## Triggers

### Body changes associated with puberty

While growing taller and stronger, a young woman will tend to increase her body fat - most noticeably about the hips and thighs. Her power to weight ratio may decline significantly. Puberty is a period characterised by heightened self-awareness and emotional turmoil. She may respond to these profound changes by restricting her food intake.

### The Counter

Be aware that puberty may turn the once perfectly suited physique into one less suited for a particular sport.

Prepare by:

1. Keeping the pre-adolescent athlete involved in a variety of sports
2. Discouraging over-specialisation until after the pubertal growth spurt is complete
3. Emphasise the intrinsic rewards of doing a job well done and to the best of her abilities.

The multiple sports and recreation-exposed athlete can shift and adapt to sports and activities that she feels most comfortable with as her body undergoes change.

### Comments about appearance

Many adolescents experience intense self-doubt, but do not engage in harmful actions. However, a thoughtless comment about appearance may hurt - causing anxiety, depression, self-harming behaviours and eating disorders.

### The Counter

1. Never make smart-alec or negative comments about appearance, or compare them with another person's looks.
2. Media, including sports commentators, need to be aware of the harm comments about appearance can cause. Focus on her performance.

### Unrealistic expectations placed on the young athlete

Young women who are struggling to meet the high expectations of those about them are highly vulnerable. The close association of winning with extreme leanness, can flick from being a healthy pursuit to being distinctly unhealthy, if pressure to succeed exceeds the physical and psychological abilities of the athlete.

### The Counter

Those who are important to the athlete need to demonstrate that their approval and love is unconditional.

### Focus on Weight

Rigid body composition requirements, group weigh-ins or disclosing fat measures to others can be damaging. The athlete may be deeply ashamed and embarrassed and may resort to drastic measures to lose weight – laxatives, stimulants, purging and starvation – and excessive workouts.

### The Counter

1. Appreciate that the training regimes and body compositions of mature elite athletes and those for developing teenage athletes differ. A healthy young

athlete needs spare energy, including extra fat reserves, whereas a mature athlete can become quite thin and stay healthy.

### **Ideal Body Composition Guidelines**

	Fatness - Male	Fatness - Female
Adolescent Athlete	10-15%	18-25%
Mature Athlete	8-15%	15-20%
Average 20 year old	15-20%	20-30%

*These are indicative guidelines only; make allowances for the type of sport, the ethnic and body type of each athlete, and adjust accordingly.*

2. Avoid group weigh-ins - do so in private and keep the results totally confidential.
3. Prevent lean weight loss. If the athlete is losing lean muscle, health, strength and athletic performance will suffer.
4. Never tell a young athlete that she is “too fat” or “over-weight”.

### Excessive focus on winning

A lithe, active pre-adolescent can usually win well nowadays in just about any age-group sport. It is a different story when she enters the growth spurt of puberty and, at the same time, moves into the senior ranks. After years of easy winning, she may resort to desperate measures, including excess weight loss.

### The Counter

1. Focus on attaining and refining general and specific physical skills, developing the basics of strength, speed, stamina and agility, and experiencing the joy and exhilaration of healthy athletic past-times.
2. Physical maturity is at about 28 years of age, so why thrash a kid so early? Focus on the physical and psychological foundations for heavy-duty training later on.

### Low weight = performance

Of two athletes with identical total oxygen uptakes, the lighter one usually has the performance advantage when running any distance further than about 400m. The pressure then, is to improve performance through weight reduction.

### The Counter

Being lighter will help an athlete run faster – up to a point. Here are a few tips to help obtain a healthy high-performance weight:

1. Assess body composition about every three months to ensure she is keeping within healthy ranges. Take time to explain the results. Be wary of any lean weight losses.

2. Do not entertain going for thinness until the athlete has fully matured, demonstrates healthy eating and training habits, and demonstrates a thorough understanding of the relationship between body composition, health and performance.
3. Ensure that your athlete has a nutrient-rich diet from a wide variety of whole foods, while low in empty calories such as found in sports drinks and most processed foods.
4. If your older athlete is carrying excess weight, have her shed it slowly by a healthy whole-food diet and gradual increases in energy output through modest, incremental increases in total training volume and intensity.
5. If your athlete is thin but still has a healthy complexion, is full of energy and enthusiasm to train, is free of injury and illness, and she has regular periods, then you are probably safely on track.

**Warning signs to look for:**

- √ Dramatic weight loss
- √ A preoccupation with food calories and weight
- √ Wearing baggy or layered clothing
- √ Always feeling cold
- √ Relentless or excessive exercise
- √ Mood swings
- √ Avoiding food-related social events
- √ Stress fractures
- √ Persistent viral infections

Helen Moros's parents called it the "Demon Anorexia" – don't let it get hold of new victims. Estimates of mortality rates vary from 5-18%, so early intervention is critical – so be aware and act.

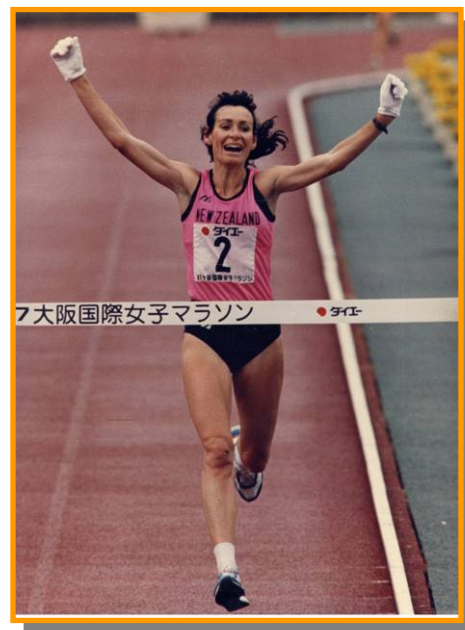
### Action

Intervention is not a job for amateurs. If you suspect one or more of your athletes may be developing unhealthy eating habits, seek the advice and guidance of the Eating Disorder Service, which gives national coverage. They have an excellent educational website.

Eating Disorder Service  
PO Box 13-807  
Johnsonville, Wellington  
Phone: 04 478 6674  
Fax: 04 477 4160  
Email: [education@eatingdisorders.org.nz](mailto:education@eatingdisorders.org.nz)  
Website: [www.eatingdisorders.org.nz](http://www.eatingdisorders.org.nz)

Seeking advice is not an admission of failure as a coach, parent or athlete.

*Olympic Marathon Bronze Medalist, Lorraine Moller, produced winning performances for an incredible 28 years of international competition before retiring healthy and injury-free. Through trial and error, she settled into four-year training cycles during which she mostly trained and competed while a little overweigh. During the months leading up to the "Big One", she would lose any extra weight through small changes in diet and extra miles in training. She entered these important races very lean, but did not remain in this condition long enough for it to affect her health. She kept free of stress fractures during her punishing running career. A recent bone density test indicated a density that was 110% of the average for women her age – testimony of the benefits of exercise with a healthy diet.*



## References

ACSM, *The female athlete triad*. Med. Sci. Sports Exerc., 1997. **29**(5): p. i-ix.

---

The FreeRangers web site has other papers and articles and lots of other interesting stuff being added all the time about health, fitness, injury prevention, rehabilitation and high performance sports.

## Contact details:

**Web site**     <http://www.freerangers.org/>

**Email:**        [gary@freerangers.org](mailto:gary@freerangers.org)

---