THE CASE AGAINST CUTTING WEIGHT FOR JIU-JITSU COMPETITIONS

MAR 11

Late one Saturday afternoon, two jiu-jitsu competitors walk into the same competition. They've been training BJJ for the same number of years. They both spent months preparing for this tournament. They're the same belt level and similar in size – in fact, they're in the same bracket.

There is one difference, though. One of them cut weight to be in this weight class. This competitor restricted calories for the last several weeks, sat in the sauna for two hours yesterday, and skipped breakfast today to "make weight." Their body has slowed down its metabolism to conserve energy, causing feelings of fatigue and weakness – not to mention the other body systems straining behind the scenes. Though determined to compete and win, this competitor can't stop thinking about the burger they are going to slam as soon as it's all over.

The two competitors are equally prepared and skilled.
So what's going to make the difference in the finals?

Endurance.
Energy.
Reaction time.

The things that come from being properly fueled for peak performance.

WHAT IS CUTTING WEIGHT FOR JIU-JITSU COMPETITIONS?

Though people debate about the tactics, amount of weight, and time period required to be considered true "weight cutting," the term typically refers to losing weight on purpose 2 to 7 days before a jiu-jitsu competition. The idea is to fall within the upper limit of a lower weight class for weigh-ins and then re-nourish before the fight to gain a maximum size advantage over one's opponent.

Methods of weight cutting include:

- Fasting and restricting calories
- Dehydration by restricting fluid intake
- Dehydration by increasing sweat response – saunas, hot baths, heated exercising, plastic suits, and spitting
- Extreme/abusive medical practices – laxatives, diet pills, diuretics, enemas, vomiting

At best, weight cutting is considered a normal part of jiu-jitsu competition culture. At worst, it's built into the game.

DOES WEIGHT CUTTING SUPPORT JIU-JITSU PERFORMANCE?

Weight classes were introduced into boxing in the early 1900s to prevent dangerous size mismatches – and, let's be honest, boring fights. Unsurprisingly, weight cutting has likely been around since weight classes were first introduced. On its face, weight cutting sounds like it offers an advantage in jiu-jitsu competitions. But does it really?

There's not a ton of high-quality research in this area. But a 2022 meta-analysis looked at 17 qualifying studies about the effects of weight cutting on performance in combat athletes.

They found that **overall exercise performance, maximal strength, and repeated high-intensity effort performance** – qualities required in combat sports – **are slightly to moderately impaired following rapid weight loss (RWL).**

These results suggest that combat sport athletes (including BJJ athletes) shouldn't engage in RWL if they are not able to regain the body mass lost before the competition via rapid weight gain (RWG).

In case you're starting to think that cutting weight is fine as long as you can regain the weight back before your BJJ competition – say, if the weigh-ins are 24 hours before your match – slow your roll. The researchers found that the entire weight cutting process (RWL to RWG) may not influence overall exercise performance, anaerobic capacity, or maximal strength. In other words, **you may get no performance benefit whatsoever from cutting weight.**

EFFECTS OF RAPID WEIGHT LOSS ON HEALTH

Cutting weight doesn't just compromise strength and performance. The science is clear that cutting weight for jiu-jitsu competitions comes with **serious risks to an athlete's health.**

EXCESSIVE FATIGUE AND MUSCLE SORENESS

Restricting calories makes you feel terrible, and for good reason. Your body thinks you're starving – because you are – so it makes you **feel hungry** to try and get you to eat. It also **slows down your metabolism** to conserve energy, making you feel **lethargic and fatigued.** Carbohydrate restriction, which is popular in the world of weight cutting, leads to a **reduction of muscle glycogen,** a.k.a. the energy stores you need during a BJJ competition.

Hungry, fatigued, and depleted of energy… not exactly a recipe for a gold medal.

DEHYDRATION

Cutting weight for jiu-jitsu competitions can intentionally or unintentionally lead to **dehydration**. The risks of dehydration are serious and plentiful. Before you decide to spend two hours in a sauna, you should know the risks of even moderate dehydration.

Dehydration:

- Increases the risk of **acute cardiovascular problems**
- Causes a decrease in blood volume, **reducing the amount of oxygen and nutrients** that are delivered to the muscles
- Increases blood viscosity, which **increases the risk of ischaemic heart disease and stroke**
- Changes the shape and volume of the brain, **reducing the ability of the brain to cushion itself** from impact and potentially **increasing the risk of brain injury**
- From thermal exposure – like that from a sauna or sweatsuit – increases the risk of **heat stroke**
- **Causes kidney failure**
- Causes **death**

Dehydration can result in **reduced strength, endurance, and reaction time** – not ideal in a sport where split-second decisions can mean the difference between victory and defeat.

LOSS OF MUSCLE MASS

When you don't eat sufficient calories, your body breaks down muscle into glucose to use for energy. So during a weight cut, you're not only losing fat. **You're losing muscle and compromising your athletic performance.**

OVERTRAINING

If your BJJ competition prep involves an increase in training, a reduction of energy consumed, and insufficient recovery time, you may be overtraining. **Overtraining can include fatigue, impaired performance, and potential injury.**

HORMONAL IMBALANCE

Weight cutting for competitions has been found to influence the body's levels of2:

- testosterone
- growth hormone
- sex hormone-binding globulin
- growth-hormone binding protein
- cortisol
- insulin

These changes potentially **affect bone mineral density, blood sugar regulation, and reproductive health.**

Without enough body fat, females can experience a disruption to their reproductive cycle. Estrogen levels become so low that **menstruation becomes irregular or stops.** Males can experience the **low testosterone** levels associated with low body fat.

DEATH

Several combat athletes have died as a direct result of weight cutting for competitions, including ONE fighter Yang Jian Bing, MMA fighters Leonardo Souza and Rondel Clark, and Muay Thai fighters Jessica Lindsay and Jordan Coe.

Though many in combat sports are desensitized to the risks of weight cutting, the stakes are incredibly high.

MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL TOLL OF CUTTING WEIGHT FOR JIU-JITSU

The starvation, exhaustion, and heat exposure involved in many weight cuts **causes significant stress** to not only the body, but also the mind. Research has shown that weight cutting negatively affects the mood of combat athletes with feelings of **fatigue, anger, anxiety, depression, tension, and confusion.** Rapid weight loss is also associated with decreased short-term memory, concentration, and self-esteem.

Athletes who cut weight tend for competitions to be preoccupied with body mass and dissatisfied with their bodies – even when they present with a very low body fat percentage. The constant attention directed at one's body increase the **risk of eating disorders and disordered eating behaviors.**

BUT WHAT ABOUT “HEALTHY” WEIGHT LOSS OVER THE LONG TERM?

As the jiu-jitsu world starts to wake up to the dangers of cutting weight, more athletes are turning to methods they perceive to be more “healthy.” This typically looks like losing weight more slowly, over a longer period of time. If you're considering this approach, let's do a cost-benefit analysis.

First, **ask yourself why** you want to lose weight.

If your answer is “to do better in competition”:

Well, you know by now that the **effect of rapid weight loss on performance is negative at worst and negligible at best.** Even longer-term weight loss likely won't move the needle for you. Even if you lose weight, you'll still be matched with competitors close enough to you in size that it won't make a difference if you're 3-5 pounds heavier than them. If you're looking for a competitive advantage, you're better off focusing on gaining skills and strength.

If your answer is “to be ‘healthier’ overall”:

Know that **weight is not an accurate indicator of health**. Contrary to popular belief, there is **no clear relationship between weight loss and health outcomes related to**

hypertension, diabetes, or cholesterol. In fact, weight loss itself is associated with increased mortality risk. And dieting is associated with a multitude of issues, including **rebound bingeing, food obsession, and weight regain.** Actually, more than just weight regain, since up to two-thirds of people who lose weight intentionally **gain back more weight than they lost**.

A NOTE ON WEIGHT CYCLING

Attempts at weight loss most often lead to a yo-yo of weight loss and regain called weight cycling. Weight cycling is a risk factor for chronic inflammation, which in turn increases the risk of many diseases associated with obesity. Weight cycling leads to cardiovascular problems, hypertension, insulin resistance, and dyslipidemia. **It increases the risk of death from all causes**.

It turns out weight cycling itself, not "excess" body fat, may be responsible for all of the mortality risks typically attributed to "overweight" and "obesity." So if you want to improve your health, best to avoid dieting and risking the dangerous cycle of weight loss and regain.

HEALTHY LIFESTYLE HABITS, NOT WEIGHT LOSS

Given what we know about the health risks of dieting and weight cycling, I don't recommend cutting weight for jiu-jitsu competitions. I suggest turning your attention to **healthy lifestyle habits** to help you meet your performance and health goals. Healthy lifestyle habits are associated with a significant decrease in mortality **regardless of body size**.

These habits include:

- eating 5 or more fruits and vegetables daily
- exercising regularly
- consuming alcohol in moderation
- not smoking

If you want to be "healthier" and perform at your peak level in a BJJ competition, **practice healthy behaviors**. Remember: Weight is not a behavior!

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD OF CUTTING WEIGHT FOR JIU-JITSU COMPETITIONS

FOCUS ON GAINING SKILLS

Take all the energy that you would put towards attaining a 3 lb advantage over your competitor and instead use it to develop your BJJ skills. When it comes down to it, better technique will take you a lot farther than a slight size advantage. Go to class, go to open mat, and practice the fundamentals until you can do them in your sleep.

GET STRONGER

Strength train at least twice a week. You can get stronger at any size, and more strength can only help. If you'd like to take the guesswork out of strength training for jiu-jitsu, check out our three-month online program, Submission Strength System. If you're strength training on your own, just make sure to avoid these strength-training mistakes.

PRIORITIZE HEALTHY BEHAVIORS

Don't eat as little as possible… **eat enough** to support all the training you're doing! **Drink plenty of water**. Rest, sleep, and **recover**. It might not sound sexy, but it works.

STRATEGIZE

Work with a coach or experienced competitor to **create your competition game plan**.

COMPETE

This may sound obvious, but compete as often as you can – even in low-stakes, local tournaments. Competition rolls are hard to mimic in training. The experience you get from competing is priceless and will help you become a better competitor.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Cutting weight for jiu-jitsu can lead to documented, serious health complications, such as:

- Fatigue
- Loss of muscle mass
- Dehydration
- Dizziness
- Overtraining
- Kidney damage
- Hormonal imbalance
- Psychological distress in the form of anxiety, stress, depression, anger
- Loss of short-term memory, concentration, and self-esteem
- Increased risk of eating disorders
- Death

Instead of cutting weight or focusing on weight loss of any kind for a competitive advantage, prioritize healthy habits. Eat enough, drink enough water, and recover enough. Gain skills and strength. Create a game plan for your jiu-jitsu competition.

If you want a competitive advantage, then don't go into the competition dehydrated, depleted, moody, and fatigued. Go in properly fueled and at the top of your game!

If you'd like to get stronger so you can dominate the competition, book a free strategy session with Victory High Performance today. We'll get you started on your personalized, proven path to winning more matches and getting injured less, so you can keep doing what you love.

Sources

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