



# Leave the Fat Kid Alone

If you're like me, you wonder what the baserunner and first baseman talk about between pitches. When an athlete meets a peer, the dynamic is presumably different from an interaction with a fan that likely centers around an autograph.

When dietitians get together, chances are that we will touch on whatever nutrition-related myths and stereotypes are currently being bandied about — such as those reflected in the abuse Pablo Sandoval received for his weight upon arriving at spring training.

Let's consider the following separate, but related, questions:

***If Pablo Sandoval lost weight, would he play better?***

Not necessarily.

Many Red Sox fans seem to believe that Sandoval would perform better at the plate and in the field if only he bore a closer resemblance to Adrian Beltre or Evan Longoria. These fantasies have some merit; a leaner, smaller, or lighter body can certainly have an athletic upside.

However, there's a difference between an athlete who naturally has a given size or shape and someone who tries to force his body into that mold. Weight loss doesn't happen by magic. The behaviors Sandoval might adopt to lose weight could negatively impact his game.

We've seen examples of athletes who played worse after losing weight, in part because over-exercise and/or food restriction left them depleted and vulnerable to fatigue, injury, impaired concentration, nutrient deficiencies, depression, sleeping difficulties, eating disorders, and other unintended consequences, none of which are conducive to top performance.

***If Sandoval decides to lose weight, will he be able to do so?***

In the short term, probably. But in the long run, he'll most likely gain it back — and then some.

Approximately 95% of people who attempt to lose weight will regain it one to five years down the road, and roughly 60% of these individuals will end up heavier than they were at baseline. Weight regain is common *even if someone maintains the*

*behaviors that promoted the weight loss in the first place.*

Contrary to popular myth, our weight is largely out of our hands. The calories-in-versus-calories-out paradigm is a gross oversimplification of the complexities affecting weight regulation. We



might be able to manipulate our body size through behavior changes for a short while, but biological mechanisms promoting weight regain almost always win out in the end.

If you think Sandoval's weight is affecting his play now, what level of performance do you expect out of him in the most likely scenario that he ends up bigger?

***What does our treatment of Sandoval say about society?***

Fans and media have labeled Sandoval "disgusting," "lazy," and "pathetic," implying that those same terms apply to everyone who has a body type similar to his.

The message is that fat is to be loathed, that larger individuals are not worthy of the respect enjoyed by the rest of us. We reject stereotypes based on race, religion, ethnicity, or sexual orientation but we inexplicably tolerate those based on body size.

The idea that we can tell how someone eats or exercises based on his shape or weight is a myth. Some people built like

linebackers never lift weights. Some skinny-as-a-rail folks subsist on fast food. And some obese individuals are more active and have a healthier relationship with food than any of them, but inhabit bigger bodies for other reasons.

As we all know, pressure to be thin leads to dieting, which can lead to a variety of problems, including eating disorders. These life-threatening illnesses are so common in Massachusetts that if the crowd at a sold-out Fenway Park represented a random sample of the state's population, those in attendance with a diagnosed eating disorder would fill section 41.

***OK, but pro athletes like Sandoval constitute a different and special class of people, right?***

Sandoval is a professional athlete because his talent, practice, and opportunities have coalesced into a skill set that lends itself to strong performance in an activity mankind recently created called baseball. And luckily for him, he lives in a culture in which we pay such people to play it for our entertainment.

None of that means he can manipulate his weight any better than the general population. Sandoval is a product of evolution, just like the rest of us. He's here because his ancestors' physiological mechanisms that resisted weight loss allowed them to survive periods of starvation and reproduce while others perished. In this regard, professional athletes and spectators are all in the same boat.

If fans want to get on someone for not performing, they've got every right to do so. However, I would encourage fans to criticize athletes for lack of production or work ethic directly, rather than using body size, weight, or shape as a proxy. When people talk about weight, they often don't know what they're talking about, and they're sending a dangerous message to everyone who hears them. **BB**

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