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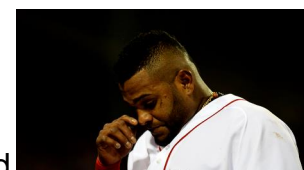
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What if Pablo Sandoval isn't overweight, but exactly where his body says it should be?

by: John Tomase on Thu, 02/25/2016 - 11:44pm

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- The images told a grisly story. Pablo Sandoval fired across the infield on Sunday, his gut hanging over his pants like a side of pork. The rage machine reacted with universal condemnation.



How could a pro athlete let himself fall into such a state of disrepair? He failed the **Red Sox**, his fans and his teammates. He should be ashamed.

Armchair nutritionists like **Giants** broadcaster Mike Krukow declared Sandoval had an eating disorder. Fans, media, and talk show hosts followed suit. It's an open-and-shut case -- the Panda's a disgrace.

But what does an actual nutritionist think? His take might surprise you.

Jonah Soolman is a registered dietitian and credentialed personal trainer who runs **Soolman Nutrition and Wellness** in Wellesley alongside his wife, Joanne. (He's also my college roommate's brother, in the interest of disclosure). When he looks at the 5-foot-11, 255-pound Sandoval, he doesn't see a fat guy. He sees a big-bodied athlete who was born that way and wouldn't automatically benefit from shedding pounds.

"There's a big fallacy in our culture about weight loss," Soolman said. "We think of it as being as easy as eat less and exercise more, calories in vs. calories out. That's nonsense. It's not that simple. Most of the factors that influence weight regulation are things that are not in our hands. It's things like genetics, our gut microbes. Yeah, behavior's a part of it, but behavior is a very small part of it. The point where people often get confused is that we can, through behaviors, manipulate our weight in the short term, sometimes, but almost always in the long term, biology is going to win out."

Soolman cites research that 95 percent of people who attempt to lose weight regain it all within one to five years. Sixty percent end up heavier than when they started.

"So if Sandoval decided, 'OK, this winter, the **Red Sox** told me to lose weight, I'm going to go lose weight,' he might, there's a 1-in-20 chance he'll be able to do it, but there's a 12-in-20 chance he'll end up heavier," Soolman said. "And I think, looking at his history, that's some of what we might be seeing."

Soolman cited Sandoval's weight loss with the **Giants** in 2014, when he reportedly dropped 42 pounds before delivering the worst season of his career. He regained the weight last year in Boston and was even worse.

"I would say that it's a big maybe in terms of, if he lost weight he might play better, and he also might not," Soolman said. "This is a very common mistake people make."

Soolman cited the example of elite marathoners, who are incredibly lean, which causes amateur runners to assume they should strive for a similar physique.

"The flaw with that is there's a big difference between someone who is well-trained, well-nourished and happens to have that body type naturally vs. someone who has a bigger body naturally and is trying to force themselves into a smaller body through depletion," Soolman said. "It's a huge difference, and that's where people often get tripped up."

Soolman points to Yankees left-hander **CC Sabathia**, who started losing weight in 2013, embraced a no-carb diet in 2014, and saw his weight drop from well over 300 pounds to about 275. His performance plummeted, too, though, and he regained the weight last year before another ineffective season that ended with a stint in alcohol rehab.

"A couple of years ago he lost a bunch of weight, he went low-carb, and then had arguably the worst two seasons of his career," Soolman said. "There were other confounding factors. I know there was an issue with alcohol, you could also say age and wear and tear and all that -- correlation is not the same thing as causation, certainly -- but it would make sense."

"He gave an interview last year talking about how fatigued he gets in games, that he gets tired so much earlier than he used to. That's a predictable consequence of following the low-carb diet that he did. Carbohydrates are your main source of energy. If you reduce them, of course you'll get tired. So that's just one example of how we see that losing weight doesn't automatically make you play better."

"So it's very tempting for someone to look at Pablo Sandoval and say, 'Well, clearly he doesn't have the body type of **Evan Longoria** or **Adrian Beltre**, but if he could lose even a little bit of weight, he could play better.' Well, maybe, but if he actually did what it took to lose the weight, would he actually play better? I don't know that that's true."

Losing weight for the sake of appeasing the scale, Soolman notes, can be counterproductive. For a big-bodied player like Sandoval to drop meaningful pounds requires either extra exercise or less eating. No mystery there. But there can be repercussions.

"That leads to fatigue, it leads to all of the things associated with nutritional deficiencies," Soolman said. "You could have things like his mental focus isn't really quite there, he could have physical breakdowns in terms of injuries. He could have trouble sleeping. There's all sorts of things that could go into it. He can experience depression. There are all sorts of things related to it, that yeah, he might be in a smaller body, but that doesn't mean he's going to play better."

So when the **Red Sox** say they're happy with Sandoval's conditioning and increased agility, there could actually be a measure of truth to it, as opposed to pure damage control.

Unflattering photos aside, genetics are a powerful force.

"It's not about willpower or anything like that," Soolman said. "Even when people maintain the behaviors that caused the weight loss, oftentimes the weight comes back. It's a survival mechanism that all of us inherited. All of us are here because our ancestors were able to get through starvation and get through famines with these mechanisms. The body is really good at gaining weight. The body really hates to lose weight. When a body starts to lose weight, all these mechanisms kick in to make sure we get the weight back."

That said, Soolman isn't absolving Sandoval of blame.

"I've never met him, but if he were my patient, I'd be helping him focus on his behaviors and not on his weight," he said. "And I think that's where the **Red Sox** have gone astray, and where all these armchair nutritionists giving their opinions on the radio are going astray, too. If we're trying to get him in a position to be capable of his best athletic performance, it's going to be through his behavior. So in other words: doing his conditioning, eating when he's hungry, stopping when he's satisfied, eating the combination of foods that's going to have him performing his best, taking care of himself that way.

"I can't look at that picture of him and say he hasn't done that. Maybe he has, maybe he hasn't. Certainly the Red Sox are paying him a boatload of money to take care of himself, and to put himself in the best position to perform. And if he's not doing those things, then of course that's on him and he's responsible for it. But we can't tell that just by looking at a guy.

"There are people built like linebackers who never lift weights. There are people who are skinny as rails who eat fast food all the time. And then there are obese people who take better care of themselves and are healthier than everyone else, but for reasons that are out of their hands, they just happen to exist in a bigger body. You can't tell someone's behaviors just by looking at them. That's a myth."

And that leads to what Soolman considers one of the more troubling aspects of the Sandoval story, the way it reinforces negative stereotypes.

"The day after that picture of him was published, I was in the locker room at the gym for less than 10 minutes, and I heard three separate conversations about that picture and about Sandoval," Soolman said. "People were throwing around words like 'disgusting' and 'lazy' and 'pathetic' and saying things like, 'Go eat a salad.'

"If you're overweight and you hear that, it teaches you that people see you as fat and disgusting and lazy and not worthy of respect. If you're lean, it teaches you that you want to avoid becoming fat at any cost, because you're going to be subject to the same kind of ridicule."

Soolman considers size discrimination "government sanctioned" via the war on obesity.

"People do things that end up sacrificing their health for size," he said. "These are huge problems in our society, and the way we're talking about Sandoval is just exacerbating it."

Soolman recognizes that even within his profession not everyone shares his perspective. He gets why the layperson would disagree with him. But he also feels it's important to speak up in the face of so much ill-informed criticism.

"My point of view is not popular," he said. "I certainly understand that."

He just thinks it's important to note the possibility that maybe Sandoval is exactly the size he's supposed to be, and if we can't deal with that, that's our problem, not Pablo's.

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