

Listen To Your Body

Recent research on female athletes shows signs of benefits to adjusting training to their menstrual cycles.

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By Gunnhildur Baldursdottir

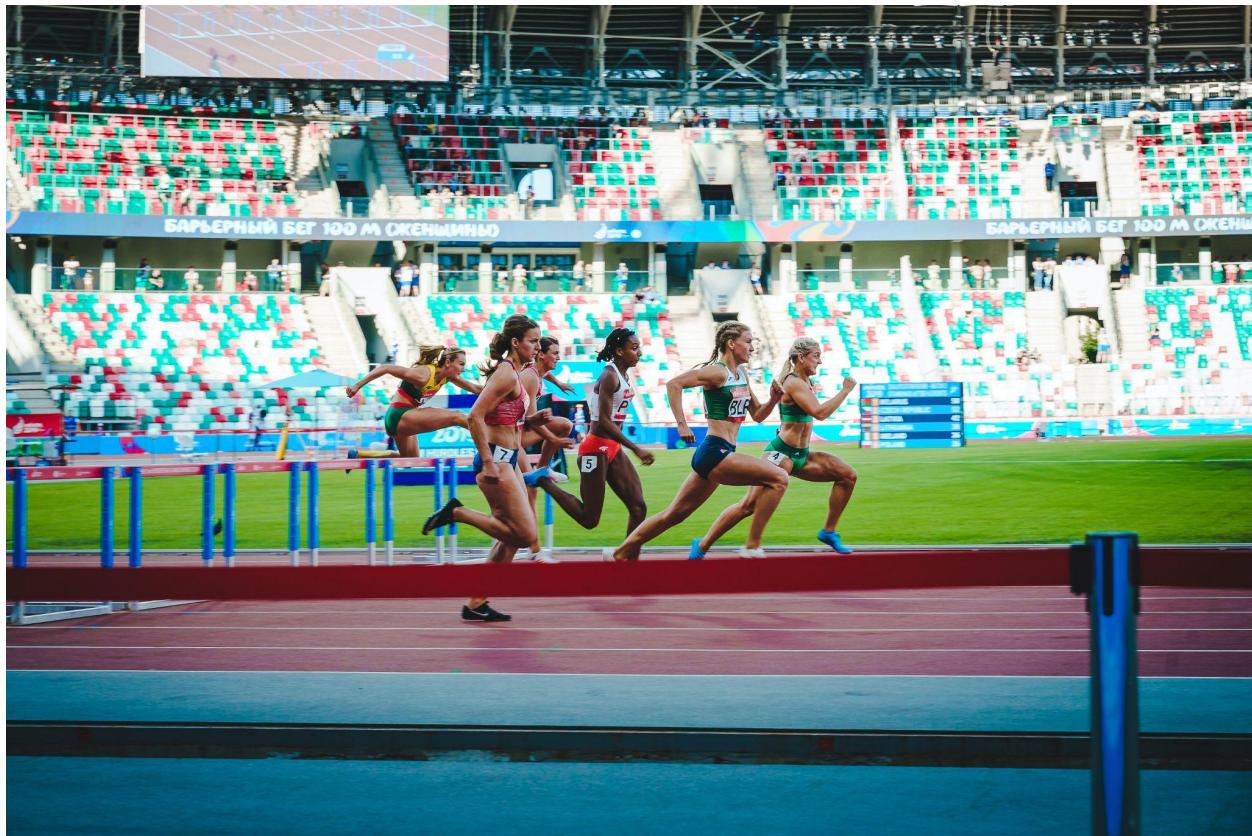


Photo courtesy of Pixaby and Pexels.

The increasing research on the effects of the menstrual cycle on female athletes is something to celebrate. Many recent studies have shown evidence that at a certain point in the cycle, female athletes experience symptoms that might affect their performances. However, many questions remain regarding how to best work around the signs and maximize success for female athletes.

A head coach of a cross-country skiing club and doctoral candidate at the University of Agder in Norway, Ådne Ausland, is currently developing a research center specifically for female athletes called FIDES, or Female Inclusion and Development in Exercise and Sports Coach Education Program.

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Among the most successful examples of elite female athletes tracking their menstrual cycle individually is the Norwegian athlete Tirirl Eckhoff, a two-time Olympic champion and a 10-time world championship gold medalist in biathlon, which combines cross-country skiing and rifle shooting.

Eckhoff retired in March 2023, and she not only left her sport with a glorious career, but she left her mark as one of the first elite athletes to adjust her training to her menstrual cycle and share her knowledge openly.

According to the [Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation](#), after Eckhoff stopped taking birth control pills in 2017, she started reading about how menstruation can affect sports. Eckhoff decided to start prioritizing her training according to her cycle for her 2020-2021 season, which became the most successful season of her career, securing 13 World Cup victories, four World Championship gold medals, and her first Crystal Globe.

“I think that one must use their cycle to bring out the best in themselves,” Eckhoff said on Oct 13. 2020 in the podcast show “Kant ut” that she and her biathlon friend used to host. The episode’s name was “La oss snakke om mensen og trening,” or “Let's talk about periods and exercise,” but they stopped making the podcast in October 2022.

Ausland said there is also evidence that this can be done in team sports.

According to [Chelsea FC Women](#), based in Kingston upon Thames, London, became one of the first soccer club teams to individually adjust the training to their players' menstrual cycles in 2020. The main goal was to maximize their performances and reduce injuries.

The players have used an app where they enter information about their menstrual health. With the player's consent, coaches can access the information and adjust training programs accordingly.

In addition to using the app, the coaches have created a positive environment to discuss periods, and players have become well-educated about the different menstrual phases.



Youngstown State University softball team started their 2023 to 2024 season with a home game against Cuyahoga Community College Sept 15. The team won seven of its last 10 games and played valiantly in the Horizon League Tournament in May. Photo by Gunnhildur Baldursdottir.

This type of research remains expensive, and the results remain unclear because of the many factors involved in women's health.

Birna Varðardóttir is a Ph.D. student in sports and health science at the University of Iceland. She was among the researchers who established the first Icelandic research project about relative deficiency in sports, REDs, among athletes. She said in cooperation with coaches, female athletes can track their cycles independently and ask themselves what symptoms they have and when they appear.

"It's also important to not demonize the menstrual cycle, that it's not a monthly disturbance and just a complete hassle. We should rather try to educate people about where the changes happen and how important the menstrual cycle is," Varðardóttir said.

Ausland said the next step is to educate coaches on how to best communicate with their athletes. During his own research data collection through interviewing sports coaches, Ausland experienced significant ignorance about the menstrual cycle among male coaches.

Part of the problem is the taboo of talking about the menstruation cycle as a natural phenomenon that 50% of all humanity experiences during their lifetime. Most Western societies still have a hard time talking about it openly.

However, Varðardóttir has experienced positive development during her teaching in recent years at the University of Iceland. She says male coaches and others attending the courses are moving in the right direction regarding knowing how to ask athletes about their periods and find the correct information.

"This [menstrual cycles and women's training] is something students are incredibly interested in, and those are the most attended and lively classes... Not least among male sports coaches who want more information and want to support their athletes the best way possible," Varðardóttir said.

Varðardóttir adds that even if the conversation is essential, respecting female athletes will is also important. Not everyone wants to talk about their periods or are interested in discussing it with their coaches.

“Some are just lucky that it has little effect on them, and they aren't among those who feel this affects their success or capacity. It's unnecessary to put too much power on something that's otherwise not bothering them,” Varðardóttir said.

Aron Gauti Laxdal, an Icelandic associate professor in sports science at the University of Agder in Norway, said awareness and education about menstrual cycles need to happen earlier.

“Let's think about young girls in swimming. Those who have experienced a great upswing for years, but out of nowhere, there comes a flat line. Their improvements go backward because suddenly their bodies have changed...This affects their motivation extremely, so many of them quit,” Laxdal said.

In addition to adjusting to increased responsibilities during the teen years, Laxdal said more young girls in sports must know that puberty is something they need to get through with patience if the desire is to reach elite level.

Imagining the future in women's sports, Varðardóttir is confident that individual research will be the most successful way to help female athletes track their cycles and use it to their advantage. It is hard to expect sports teams to book a whole weight room depending on which teammate has her period.

“I think we will always work with the individual,” Varðardóttir said. “Depending on the sport and the desired outcome, we can look at endurance, alertness, and risk of injury.”

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4. Women's Chelsea Football Club website:
<https://www.chelseafc.com/en/news/article/chelsea-women-tailor-training-to-players-menstrual-cycles>
5. Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation website:
<https://www.nrk.no/sport/eckhoff-og-tandrevold-hylles-for-apenhet-om-kvinnehelse-syklus-og-manglende-menstruasjon-1.15200741>