

# **Weighing the Evidence:**

## ***One University Takes a Hard Look at Disordered Eating Among Athletes***

**A Teaching Case From the Strategic Training Initiative  
for the Prevention of Eating Disorders**

**Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health  
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## SYNOPSIS

When a student-athlete falls ill with an eating disorder and needs treatment, chances are that many factors came into play. While some might see an eating disorder as arising only because of personal factors—such as a person’s genes or her or his family, choices in diet or priorities, or because of a particular psychological make-up—the reality is that all of these individual and family concerns are very much shaped by the larger environment, from extended family to school to media and society as a whole. For college athletes, the environment on campus, on their team, and in their sport may be pivotal. For university athletic programs that wish to do better by their students, thinking about systems and the interconnection of all aspects of student life and athletic pressures for performance is paramount.

In “Weighing the Evidence: One University Takes a Hard Look at Disordered Eating Among Athletes,” the new dean of the undergraduate college at the fictitious Colburn University, Francis Reilly, has found himself needing to peel back some of the layers embedding college athletics on the issue of eating disorders among athletes, assisted by his dean of student life, Shinique Palmer, a star athlete herself during her Colburn undergraduate years in the mid-1980s. In point of view, the narrative oscillates between a perch from “on high”—that of top-level administrators like Reilly, Palmer, and athletic director Harry Ritchie—and what might be called “ground level”: the individual students, teammates, coaches, and athletic trainers dealing every day with athletes and their issues, including some cases (not always clear or diagnosed) of eating disorders. An athletic trainer for one team, Gail Mendoza, has become the default “case manager” for such athletes across all the teams; but this may not be the best structure to get help to the students who need it. A parent’s intervention into the case of her child, a freshman gymnast, points to many problems that need thinking anew if Colburn is to create a healthy environment for its student-athletes.

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## CAST OF CHARACTERS

*In order of appearance:*

**Francis Reilly** – dean of the undergraduate college at Colburn University (a professor of Romance languages and literature).

**Harry Ritchie** – athletic director for Colburn University.

**Mary-Ann Hsu** – an associate dean in the college dean’s office.

**Eugenia Won** – a parent of two student-athletes at Colburn.

**Shinique Palmer** – dean of student life at Colburn.

**Molly Batten** – a freshman on the women’s cross-country team.

**Hillary Won** – a freshman on the women’s gymnastics team; Molly’s roommate.

**Ted Won** – a junior on the men’s wrestling team; Hillary’s brother.

**Gail Mendoza** – athletic trainer for Colburn women’s basketball team; and “case manager” for Colburn athletes dealing with eating disorders.

**Coach Cavanaugh** – head coach for women’s swimming.

**Jessie Shapiro** – also a freshman on the women’s cross-country-team; Molly’s teammate.

***And assorted other students, coaches, and staff members from Colburn University.***

## WEIGHING THE EVIDENCE

### *One University Takes a Hard Look at Disordered Eating Among Athletes*

Because an athlete talked to a teammate who talked to an athletic trainer who talked to a coach, who said something to an assistant athletic director who mentioned it, in passing, to the athletic director, or AD, who then said something offhand to a student reporter for the campus newspaper—the college dean began to think there was a world out there, right under his nose and supposedly in his care, that he needed to know much more about.

Colburn University, comprising the undergraduate college and ten graduate or professional schools, was the largest private university in the state of Columbia—so large and sprawling, and all-consuming, that people from distant parts of the country who knew it largely for its Division I teams in football, basketball, and 25 other sports often mistook it for a public university. In the copy of the newspaper that Dean Francis Reilly had open before him, the AD was mainly talking about other things: renovations to the football stadium and preseason ticket sales; “big” sports like football and basketball subsidizing smaller ones like gymnastics and diving; student use of varsity training facilities; and more, including some new hires in sports medicine:

We’ve hired two M.D.s to run all our sports medicine. They’ve hired three new trainers, so one of them can become the go-to person for all athletes with eating disorders. When there’s an issue with a gymnast, say, or the whole team, we can direct the best help faster.

At that last remark, the student reporter had pounced. Was there an issue of eating disorders on the gymnastics teams, men or women? Asked the question, athletic director Harry Ritchie seemed, in the article, to backtrack.

“It’s really just an example. In sports there are always injuries, issues. These are serious and competitive individuals, and I’m trying to demonstrate the scope of our new programs.”

Dean Reilly, though, was pretty sure it was more than that—that one or both of the teams were distinctly on the AD’s mind, hence the slip that was more than a gaffe; it was the truth. Before his first meeting that morning, he asked an associate dean, Mary-Ann Hsu, what she made of it.

“I think you’d be wrong to see Harry’s remark as a single thing—one issue or scandal. I’d say it’s endemic, for most of the teams, every year, someone’s in that eating disorders gray area and needing help. We’re just more aware of it now.”

Reilly was not aware of it at all. Perhaps this was a problem with a college dean plucked from the faculty, where he had been a longtime professor of Romance languages and literature, a scholar of Dante and the Italian poets. For the duration of his administrative term, he would not be teaching. Perhaps, instead, he could be learning.

Because the next day, a parent was on the phone to Reilly’s office, complaining about Coach G.

“I’m sorry, who?” said one of the assistants to the dean.

“Coach Gheorghiu. Women’s gymnastics.”

“And what exactly did the coach say?”

“He told my daughter if she lost just 3 or 5 pounds, there’d be less pressure on her knees when she lands her vault. Is that supposed to be a helpful remark?”

The assistant wasn’t sure. Pausing carefully throughout his question, he asked, “Is it . . . unhelpful?”

That launched the parent into a five-minute speech on “triggers” and eating disorders, which had afflicted her daughter since eighth grade. The assistant, not knowing what to make of it, finally asked,

“Have you tried the athletics department?”

“I have! And they were useless. I would like to speak directly to the dean of the college.”

“The dean . . . doesn’t normally involve himself in matters of the teams. Their games, or practices.”

It was the wrong thing to say—as the parent put it, it was “not helpful.” Retreating a notch, the assistant said, “Let me take a message. I’ll make sure Dean Reilly sees it today.”

Receiving the message, the dean was also nonplussed. “There was some email about this yesterday. Has Shinique seen it?”

“I forwarded it to her, but haven’t heard back.”

“We’re all meeting this afternoon. Maybe Shinique can tell us more.”

Below Dean Reilly in the college hierarchy was Shinique Palmer, dean of student life. A hero of Colburn's championship track teams of the eighties, a near-medalist in the Seoul Olympics, she had reinvented herself as an academic administrator in what became a nearly unbroken career at Colburn: from athlete to coach to assistant athletic director to chief diversity officer to college dean of student life.

Reilly wanted to speak to Palmer before the meeting.

"So, Shinique," he said. "I'm suddenly thinking a lot about athletics."

"That story in the *Colburnian*? Our groovy new stadium and luxury boxes?"

"More the thing about sports medicine. And that email from a parent Eddy forwarded to you. Eating disorders. Is that a problem on our teams? Are we doing it wrong?"

"Doing it wrong? That's a bit severe. We may not be doing it well. Hard to think of anyone who is."

"What do you mean?"

"Thirty years ago when I was in school, we didn't talk about it. Coaches coached, athletic trainers healed. If we had one! Usually they taped ankles. On our team I remember one girl was really thin and getting thinner and she withdrew. Some of the other runners were so skinny and sometimes getting hurt. It was always kind of mysterious and not talked about. Now we know much more. But integrating what we know, changing the culture, doing education and prevention—it takes time. Some of these guys have been here a long time. Not everyone is so adaptable."

"Coach G—women's gymnastics?"

"I've never heard anything against him before. I'll call the mom. Don't worry about that one."

"What can I worry about? As you see, I'm a worrier! I need something."

"Worry about Sports Medicine. It's completely separate from CHS"—she meant Colburn Health Services, the campus health care provider for 11,000 undergrads and grad students in all schools and departments—"with over 20 doctors and trainers who report only to athletics."

"Maybe not worry about it," Palmer added, "but it needs more thinking through." She referred to the athletic director who'd been quoted in the paper on his new Sports Medicine hires. "It's not fair on Harry to be taking it all on himself, the health and well-being of each student who just happens to have been recruited for sports."

Palmer was being tactful. What really concerned her was conflict of interest or its perception: that clinicians who worked for athletics officials instead of doctors had a boss, or bosses, whose concerns weren't purely to do with an individual's health. She remembered a story from a mother in her daughter's playgroup. This mom was a CHS counselor, as it happened, and she had apparently recommended that a particular high-profile Colburn athlete take time away from the team to restore her weight to a healthy level, prompting the athlete's coach—and parents—to seek a “second opinion.” Since then, she'd barely seen one Colburn athlete in her clinic. “They're always saying we don't ‘get’ athletes at CHS, and that's a story that just won't get unstuck,” the mom told Palmer.

Palmer could have said a bit more about that to Dean Reilly. But not knowing her own new boss very well, she thought she should be careful in how she led or educated him.

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Shinique Palmer would call the gymnast's mother. Meanwhile a first-year runner, Molly Batten, who like most undergrads didn't read the student paper but whose confiding in a teammate created the rippling effect that went all the way to the AD's remark in the *Colburnian*, was having a hard time. Nothing about college running was what she expected. On her desk in her dorm she had a photo of herself and two teammates, from senior year in high school last fall, smiling after a meet on a rainy morning with the leaves at their feet and wearing baggy running shorts and a loose singlet over a black long-sleeved T-shirt, since it was a cool day. She looked at herself now in her mirror, in her Colburn team uniform, which looked too skimpy for even the swim team. The first time she tried on the uniform with the other first-years on the team, in the locker room, she was startled. All of a sudden legs and buttocks and the abs took a shape and a shine to which everyone could turn and compare herself. Molly did. “I feel so fat in this thing!” a teammate cried.

“I guess they make us faster,” said one of the other runners.

“Then why don't the guys wear them?”

No one had an answer. The team meal was something else it was hard getting used to. At college Molly hadn't expected cooking like Mom's, which she ate avidly and unselfconsciously through the seasons, perhaps with a little more attention to protein while she was in-season and needing to recover from training sessions.

Now, at Colburn, where there was unlimited food of astonishing abundance and variety in the new \$10 million athletes' cafeteria—look at the fancy omelet station!—she was unnerved to find for many of the runners (including, to her mind, the two fastest) dinner was: Salad. A heaping pile of lettuce, maybe some egg whites, and no-fat dressing. Eating from her own mountain of pasta, from the dedicated pasta station, she felt more than a little foolish, or, perhaps, unsophisticated. It had had an effect. Three weeks into the season, her lettuce stack was high, her pasta pile, while not disappearing, had shrunk. More than that, Molly felt herself leaner—she'd lost a couple of pounds—and, especially, she felt faster. Which the stopwatch confirmed, although it wasn't by much.

Living in the Cutler dorms, where many of the varsity athletes were housed, Molly's two roommates were also on teams: Jenna Kaplan, a rower, and Hillary Won, a gymnast. If Molly was having a hard time, Hillary was having it worse. She didn't *look* like someone with an eating disorder. Sometimes making herself vomit after meals, sometimes putting in extra workouts on the elliptical machine after dinner, the net effect, for Hillary, was a body that looked pretty "normal." With some other kind of eating disorder, a more visible one perhaps, her coach probably wouldn't have suggested such things as shedding a few pounds to ease the landing pressure on her knees, a remark that got back to Hillary's parents and prompted an email and angry phone calls to Colburn. Hillary had entered college with a diagnosis and a treatment plan—a plan that wasn't being met. She'd had stress fractures, and to her roommates it seemed that she was not getting her period. But Hillary was hard to talk to about these things; also she kept a different schedule that meant they didn't often see her. In the dorm she seemed to subsist only on water and vitamin snacks.

Colburn had started a program that some other universities had, too, for female undergraduate athletes. Middlebury College in Vermont, for instance, called it LEAP—the "low energy availability program"—a way of steering young athletes clear of the dangers of the "Female Athlete Triad" of insufficient energy, bone mineral loss and irregular menstruation<sup>1</sup>. At Colburn, where, as with the other schools, it was imperative to avoid the unfortunate acronym F.A.T., the program was called TRIUMPH, a way of turning Triad to Triumph. No female athlete enrolled at Colburn was unaware of it, since the brochure came in the mail over the summer

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.middlebury.edu/studentlife/services/health/sportsmed/hwr/leap>

and new students joining teams were screened each fall, with a form that needed updating, so that it wasn't just asking questions about nutrition and hardly anything relevant about eating disorders.<sup>2</sup>

TRIUMPH was the program meant, ideally, to keep Hillary the gymnast healthy and competitive. Borrowing from a range of initiatives from one in Australia to the National Collegiate Athletic Association,<sup>3</sup> the program focused on educating athletes and coaches about the warning signs of eating disorders and on the importance of adequate “fueling” for sports to avoid injuries, while suggesting resources for additional help. But in reality TRIUMPH's success depended on such factors as funding, staffing, and coaches' enthusiasm. The coaches had to buy into it; they had to be around. Coach G, for instance, wasn't on email—an assistant handled all of that back and forth—and seldom answered his phone. A mysterious Romanian who had, it was rumored, spent time in Ceausescu's jails during the Communist era, he came and went as he wished and, if he wasn't right in the room with you, was impossible to reach. Whereas Molly's running coach, Lavonda Talley, was all over “her girls,” as she called them. Many nights there came on an athlete's phone a text from Coach Talley, something about running hard or eating well or resting up. Her emails arrived with pithy exhortations at the bottom from the likes of Churchill, various poets, and Whoopi Goldberg. The one time Hillary had leveled with her roommates about her unhappiness she said, “I just wish my coach cared about us like your coaches do.”

There was more to it: eating and weighing were vexing issues in Hillary's family. Her brother Ted, a Colburn junior, wrestled in the 149-pound class, which meant that several times a day, toward the weekend, he was on a scale that could disqualify him if he were so much as a few ounces over. Starting the week on a Monday having made up for lost time—lost meals—since a Saturday afternoon meet, he might weigh 155 to 158 pounds five days before his next meet. Depending on how he'd done between Monday and Friday morning, he might only sip a little soup or eat a single popsicle in the 24 hours before noon Saturday. On Saturday morning, he might wake up at 151 pounds and don added layers for his morning workout to make him

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<sup>2</sup> A short paper on screening female collegiate athletes for the Triad can be found at: <http://mcworthopaedics.com/pdf/hoch-anne-publications/female-athlete-triad-screening-ncaa-division-athletes.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> See <https://mhfa.com.au/cms/guidelines> and <http://www.ncaapublications.com/productdownloads/MD15.pdf> (pages 48-50 for sports nutrition information)

really sweat and come in just below 149 pounds; and thus be able to compete.<sup>4</sup> The one time he'd been "lazy," as his captain put it, and not paid the strict attention to detail his sport required, he'd cost the team valuable points by being withheld from competition and Colburn had lost the meet.

Hillary knew all this history, because her brother told her; the siblings were close. But telling her the facts wasn't the same thing as showing emotion, and Ted Won was notably buttoned-up in that regard, concealing profound anxiety with what seemed like an admirable stoicism. Hillary didn't necessarily learn the right lesson from her brother's travails. The thing that stuck with her, bugged her, distressed her no end, was that a coach or captain or teammate might call her "lazy," too.

Meanwhile, Gail Mendoza, who had gone just fine by the name "Gail" for the seven years she'd been the athletic trainer for Colburn's women's basketball team, became known around the office as G.T. Short for "Go To," as in "the go-to person" for eating disorders invoked by the AD in the *Colburnian* article, the nickname bestowed by one cheeky student intern had stuck. Mendoza didn't especially mind, because it was what she did; what she minded was the suggestion that it was somehow a new position or task. She'd been doing it for years! Calling herself a case manager for TRIUMPH and anything to do with eating disorders, she'd slid into the role before it became an official one; but she was surprised the AD didn't have a firmer grasp on the current state of affairs. Currently she was tracking 13 varsity athletes across 6 teams, one of whom was the gymnast Hillary Won. Ted Won was on her radar, too, not for any official reason much less a confirmed diagnosis; but just because she'd happened to notice that wrestling at Colburn had a weird eating culture, and she wanted to keep her eye on it. Their end-of-season party at an off-campus apartment was a notorious binge: Last year, one wrestler, turning 20 on the day, consumed 20 bananas in about 20 minutes, something Mendoza heard about through her trainers' grapevine.

To the people who worked most closely with Mendoza, or G.T., no one knew the world of student athletes better. She knew rowing coaches and gymnasts and runners and swimmers; she knew all the trainers (she knew the assistant coaches less well, and head coaches of the big sports least of all). She knew the doctors and nurses in Sports Medicine, run by the athletics

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<sup>4</sup> These real-life details are based on reporting in the *Harvard Crimson* ("Disorderly Conduct," by Orlea Miller and Juliet Spies-Gans, May 2, 2014, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2014/5/2/disorderly-conduct/?page=single>)

department for Colburn's athletes, and the deputy director of Colburn Health Services, which provided care for everyone else—this was the division, or split, that Shinique Palmer worried about and expressed in her brief chat with Dean Reilly. Having no assistant or database or even much of a record-keeping system outside her own head, Mendoza sometimes reflected on what would happen to Colburn if she were hit by the proverbial bus. With her into that grave or hospital bed would go all that knowledge and monitoring of Hillary Won and the dozen others.

Mendoza knew Shinique Palmer, too, a little bit. And now it was Palmer calling to request a meeting. Her conversation with Eugenia Won, the gymnast's mother, had proved illuminating.

"She wants to pull Hillary out of school," Palmer told Mendoza when they met the next day at the women's basketball office where Mendoza kept her desk, a virtual hat-rack—for all of the hats she wore around Colburn.

"Yes, Hillary's told me that," Mendoza replied.

As they talked, a certain congeniality or comfort between them grew. For Mendoza it was an epiphany, in a career spent so far on a campus with athletes and their bodies and spirits and games, to talk to someone "on the academic side" of the school. The academic side! Both burst out laughing as soon as she said it. For Palmer, the perennial jock, it was a pleasure to be back where she used to be, for so long, in a world of athletes and athletic trainers.

What they found themselves talking about was the topic of resident advisors, or RAs. Colburn had 11,000 undergraduates, sixty percent of whom lived in student housing, mostly high rises on the main drag, Alexander Avenue. On every floor of each high-rise was a male RA and a female one; a building's RAs were, in turn, supervised by one RD, or residential director. The six RDs were directly accountable to the dean of student life, Shinique Palmer.

"I depend on them, Shinique," Mendoza said. "You mentioned Hillary's mom and pulling her out of school. I'd say the single person doing the most to keep her here and being healthy is Monica Whelan, her RA."

Monica Whelan, Mendoza explained, was a junior ex-rower. Ex, because she'd quit the team after one season. Like Ted, Hillary's wrestler-brother, Monica's life had been dominated by careful eating and weighing leading to a big weigh-in, on which her teammates depended, each weekend before competition. So she binged on a Sunday and starved herself on a Friday, often enough. Until she grew sick of it, and stopped crew altogether.

Monica had never been diagnosed with an eating disorder. She did not feel, nor did the others who paid attention to her, that she had emotional problems deriving from food or weight or appearance. She was fortunate that way, but her experience made her an excellent adviser for the Cutler dorms where so many varsity athletes lived.

“I don’t really know her,” Palmer said. “I’ve heard the name, seen it on meeting lists.”

“She works for you!” Mendoza exclaimed.

“In theory, yes. But there are about 60 of them across all the dorms. Really they work for the RDs, and the RDs work for me. I *manage* ‘em!” They both laughed.

“Thank you for this tutorial, Gail. I learned a lot.”

“Can we work together?” Mendoza asked, in earnest. “Shouldn’t we?”

“It seems we should. It’s student life, after all. What would help most?”

“Maybe just this. We talk, regularly. So that if you sit down with CHS”—Colburn Health Services—“you can explain to them what you hear goes on with athletes. And maybe that will help when they talk to Sports Medicine.”

Palmer held up her hand. “They don’t talk. Not at all. Each would say their cases—their patients—are different, with no overlap.”

“Someone like Hillary Won doesn’t belong to CHS, too?”

“Nope. She belongs to you.”

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Molly Batten’s confidante on the women’s cross-country team was another first-year student, Jessie Shapiro.

“I think my roommate has some eating problems,” she said to Jessie. “She’s on the gymnastics team.”

“Do you talk to her about it?”

“She doesn’t talk to us, not really. But I know she’s struggling. She’s often in the room of our RA, and they talk.”

During practice, Jessie mentioned to their team’s athletic trainer that a gymnast had an eating disorder. “Why would a gymnast have issues like that?” Jessie asked. “They’re not so thin as we have to be to perform well.”

“Anyone can have issues,” the trainer replied. “You think gymnastics isn’t a body-conscious sport?”

The athletic trainer worked for many teams—Gail Mendoza was a rarity working for just one—among them, swimming and volleyball. After evening practice at the pool, Jessie and Molly’s trainer fell to chatting, as she often did, with the swim team’s Coach Cavanaugh.

“I was telling one of the runners that yes, gymnasts have eating disorders, too. Can you imagine? People know so little. Even athletes.”

“We’re dealing with that right now. Gail is. One of our swimmers.”

The next day, at a coaches meeting held by the assistant athletic director for programs and special projects, Coach Cavanaugh of women’s swimming piped up, “I’d love to have a presentation on eating disorders. The latest research, best practices, all that. I’m always hearing of new cases in all the sports—just now, gymnastics—and it just makes my head spin. How do we talk to kids? What role do athletic trainers play? When do we need to get a doctor involved, proper counseling? What do we say to the group about eating and diet? And how about the fact that sometimes body composition *does* matter for sports performance?”

After a pause, she added, “I know we call Gail. That’s about all I know.”

“Who’s Gail?” asked another assistant athletic director who was sitting in.

Which is how the AD happened to mention to a student reporter from the *Colburnian* a subject that never previously passed his lips. The assistant AD always passed on minutes of his coaches’ meetings for inclusion in a weekly briefing book that the AD’s assistant compiled for her boss. Among the “action items,” helpfully bulleted, was to schedule some kind of eating disorders presentation for the coaches. Which consultant could be found, at what cost: a contracting issue.

The weekly press meeting, in his glass-cornered conference room, was always the Friday morning after he received his briefing book, so that Harry Ritchie’s head would be brimming with facts, knowledge, when he spoke over coffee to the student reporters and the handful who showed up from other local media. It lasted the usual 30 minutes, and went well enough. Afterward, he chided himself, thinking he’d been sloppy in what he said about sports medicine. He just wasn’t sure how.

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In administrative life, at any university or college, one was always moving on. One learned new facts or approaches and stored them away. There would or should be time to come back to them. Shinique Palmer was thinking about RAs; Dean Reilly about Colburn Health Services, which his office funded; and Sports Medicine, which it didn't. Gail Mendoza thought about her baker's dozen caseload—soon to go from 13 to 14 students, with a volleyballer now added. Harry Ritchie was thinking he might just have landed a big-name donor to renovate the field house and athletics track.

Hillary Won of women's gymnastics was doing better. Her brother, Ted, though, had fainted the afternoon of a wrestling meet and been rushed to hospital. On the cross-country team, Molly Batten and Jessie Shapiro ate more salad, and Molly, still noting that the fastest girls never touched it, tried not to eat pasta every day.

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**PRE-PARTICIPATION EVALUATION (PPE) FOR INCOMING FRESHMEN AND TRANSFER ATHLETES –  
(PART III, NUTRITION)**

<b>Name</b>					<b>Date</b>				
Allergies					<b>DOB</b>			<b>Age</b>	
Height		Weight		Blood pressure		Class	Fr / So / Jr / Sr / Transf.		

<b>TEAM</b>	<b>SEASON (FALL/WINTER/SPRING)</b>	<b>FIRST PRACTICE DATE</b>

**QUESTIONS REGARDING EATING DISORDER DIAGNOSIS OR TREATMENT**

1.	Have you ever been <b>diagnosed</b> with an eating disorder? If <b>yes</b> , please provide details:	
2.	Have you ever been <b>treated</b> for an eating disorder? If <b>yes</b> , please provide details of your care:	

**QUESTIONS REGARDING SPORTS NUTRITION**

1.	Do you eat at least five servings of fruits or vegetables on an average day?	
2.	Do you consume at least eight cups of water on an average day?	
3.	Are you preoccupied with food or body size/image much of the day, most days?	

**OTHER RELATED INFORMATION YOUR COLBURN SPORTS MEDICINE TEAM SHOULD KNOW**


<b>Follow-up</b> (staff only)		<b>Next physical</b>	
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