March Madness Muscle Meals

It’s that time of year where madness is in the air, college basketball madness that is! With such excitement comes countless opportunities for you to be with friends, family, and even strangers to wear your alumni spirit, your hometown heroes, your favorite team’s colors, all to root and holler at the flat screen TV as they showcase a comeback in the final minutes of the second half! Me personally? I will never forget where I was, what I was wearing, how I felt, when Kansas Jayhawk, Mario Chalmers, scrambled around the 3-point line with 2 seconds left and fired a completely guarded shot that magically fell into the bottom of the net taking the 2008 NCAA Championship into overtime against Memphis.

The issue that comes about March Madness is that the tournament presents opportunities of social engagement mixed with high emotion. These two combined can spell disaster for your dieting goals that can last a month long. Plenty of time to ruin your hard work that you have worked so hard for since the beginning of the year. Now I’m not here to tell you that you cannot enjoy the tournament by turning down invitations from friends to come to their party, not go to your local bar/restaurant with friends, or really anything for that matter. I simply want to provide both smart strategies, and food options that will help you reduce your overall caloric intake, while not reducing the amount of fun. This in turn, should get you through March Madness with the least amount of weight gain and ready to continue your goals for that summer body.

Understanding Weight Gain

While the majority of us fear weight gain in general, most of us simply do not understand food beyond the most basic level of “it tastes good” or “this food is bad for me” and “this food is good for me”. Understanding the basics of nutrition will allow for you to remove the labels of “good” and “bad” from your vocabulary and change your mindset to “I can make this work”.

So what do I mean by this? The body when digesting food does not recognize a plate of nachos as a nachos, but instead recognizes what the nachos and its ingredients are made of; fats, proteins, and carbohydrates. These are called macronutrients, macro meaning you need them in large quantities. Not the nachos, but the fats, proteins, and carbohydrates haha! Each macronutrient yields a specific amount of energy; known commonly as a calorie. For the sake of keeping this article universally easy to understand, just know that fat contains more calories per gram than both carbohydrates and protein.

* Fat: 1 gram equals 9 calories
* Protein and Carbohydrates: 1 gram equals 4 calories
* Alcohol: 1 gram equals 7 calories

Now that we have the first step of understanding calories, let’s talk about what specifically causes weight gain. In terms of strictly weight loss and weight gain, the amount of calories you consume vs. the amount of calories you burn throughout your day will control the swing of the scale. Meaning, if you were to eat 3000 calories in a day, but only burnt 2000 calories, then you would be on your way to gain weight. Simple enough right? Maybe not what you wanted to hear, but it’s pretty straight forward!

It’s important to also understand that your body burns hundreds, if not thousands of calories just keeping you alive daily, so do not think you have to stay on the treadmill or lift weights until you see 1000+ calories burnt to avoid weight gain! In fact, by utilizing the tips in this article, you can save yourself the heartache of gaining all those unneeded pounds without having to spend all March Madness in the gym!

The Pre Plate Strategy:

Learn how to read nutrition labels! You don’t need to understand everything, but simply by turning that box, can, or package around and scanning the nutrition label for the macronutrients will create awareness of what you are about to put in your body. This is extremely important when you are having your own March Madness Party, as you can pick and choose which ingredients you want to use the full caloric version of and when you want to substitute for the low calorie/fat-free version. The nutrition label will also inform you of the serving size, which may shock you, and will help you begin to identify foods that are high and low in specific macronutrients

One secret that is huge to success with getting through March Madness is to aim for high protein foods throughout your day before heading to the party or bar! Protein is a great macronutrient to keep you full and will prepare you for the dishes ahead since most will be high in fats and carbohydrates! In fact, I highly recommend consuming a high protein snack immediately before heading to your party to keep you satisfied and less tempted to over indulge in “finger-foods”. This can be a protein shake or bar, Greek yogurt, or even a deli rollup.

Let’s Talk Alcohol:

Alcohol is a social norm for parties, events, and especially sporting events. While this social norm maybe understood to be acceptable, it still impairs us in making smart decisions and often times will cause us to reduce our willpower to avoid partaking in calorie dense foods. As I promised not to tell you what not to eat or drink during this exciting time of the year, I do want to offer suggestions on low-calorie spirits that will save your calories to use for food!

What to avoid:

Regular beer; ~150 calories/serving

Liqueurs; 190 calories/serving (very small if label is read)

Cocktails; often times the WORST in terms of calories

Coolers; 150+/serving

Margaritas; 250+/serving

Better Options:

Light beer; ~110 calories/serving (sometimes lower)

Michelob Ultra has 97 calories

Wine; 75-105 calories/serving (drier wine will have less calories)

Champagne; ~85 calories/serving

80 proof Spirits; ~65 calories/serving

Try mixing with diet options including; diet soda, water, sugar free energy drinks, sugar free flavor packets, light juices, diet tonic. While spirits are a great option, mixing them with a full sugar beverage will quickly add in 200+ calories

Try diluting your beverages with these mixers to allow more time to consume them. Comparatively, you can order spirits on the rocks to allow them to be sipped, and not drank.

Try incorporating a non-alcoholic diet beverage, or water, in between each alcoholic drink to stay hydrated and preventing you from overdrinking.

**What to Eat:**

Now that we have some calorie-friendly suggestions for what to drink, let’s talk about what to eat to ensure that you are not sacrificing your health goals for a few fun nights out!

Below are a handful of excellent recipes to make for when you are having your own watch party, or when you want make an appetizer for a friends watch party!

**Ranch Avocado Dip by Miriam Fayas-Whitfield, C.P.T, Sports Nutritionist**

**Ingredients:**

1 tbsp ranch seasoning (I get the popcorn ranch seasoning for this)

¼ cup finely chopped red onion

1 cup 0% fat plain greek yogurt

½ cup mashed avocado

1tsp pink himalayan salt

**Preparation:**

Mix all the ingredients together. You can add more ranch seasoning according to taste if desired. Use your favorite chips to dip into this low calorie high protein dip filled with excellent nutrients.

**Mozzarella Cheese Sticks**

**Ingredients:**

1 pack 2% mozzarella string cheese

2 whole eggs

½ cup of ground sunflower and flax seed mix

Oregano

Himalayan salt

**Preparation:**

Preheat oven to 325F. Combine the oregano, salt and ground sunflower/flax seed mixture together. Take the string cheese sticks and dip them in the egg then roll in seed mixture. Lay it on cookie sheet or flat pan. Bake in the oven for 15 minutes. This will give you a much lower calorie snack which has good nutrients and none of the saturated fats from the oils.

**Super Bowl Healthy Chicken Nachos by IFPA PRO Justin Williams**

**Ingredients:**

16 corn tortillas

1lbs 99% lean chicken

1 cup fat free refried beans

4 oz fat free shredded cheddar cheese

12oz Chobani plain Greek yogurt

1 cup jalapenos (if desired)

1 cup Rotel

**Preparation:**

Pre-cook chicken and season as desired and shred in a bowl

Cut each tortilla into 4-6 triangles

Spray with olive oil Pam and season lightly with sea salt

Bake chips on electric skillet or in oven at 300 degrees until crispy. Warm Rotel and refried beans in the microwave. Construct your nacho masterpiece as desired.

**Bacon Macaroni and Cheese Bites by Derek Newborn, Elite Cross Fit Trainer**

**Make ahead:** this recipe can be prepped up to the point of topping the macaroni bites with parmesan and refrigerated overnight. They may need an extra minute of baking to brown properly.

**Ingredients:**

1/2 pound elbow macaroni

1.5 tablespoons unsalted butter, plus melted butter for greasing the tins

1/4 cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese

2 tablespoons all-purpose flour

3/4 cup whole milk

4 ounces cheddar cheese, shredded (about 1 packed cup)

4 ounces deli-sliced American cheese, chopped

1 large egg yolk

1/4 teaspoon smoked Spanish paprika

2 slices thick-cut bacon (about 3 ounces), cooked and chopped

**Preparation:**

Preheat the oven to 425°F. Brush the wells of four 12-cup, nonstick mini muffin tins with melted butter. Sprinkle with 2 tablespoons of the parmesan cheese, pressing it up the sides of the wells.

In a large pot of boiling salted water, cook the macaroni until al dente, about 5 minutes. Drain, shaking off the excess water.

Meanwhile, in a large saucepan, melt the 1 1/2 tablespoons of butter over medium heat. Whisk in the flour and cook for 2 minutes. Whisk in the milk and cook, whisking constantly, until boiling and thickened, about 5 minutes. Add the cheddar and American cheeses and whisk until melted. Off the heat, whisk in the egg yolk and paprika. Fold in the bacon and macaroni.

Fill the wells of the muffin tins to the top with macaroni, using damp fingertips to pack the macaroni into the tins. Sprinkle the remaining parmesan on top.

Bake the mini macs in the upper and middle thirds of the oven for about 10 minutes, until golden and sizzling, rotating the pans halfway through cooking. Let cool for 5 min­utes. Using a spoon, carefully loosen the mini macs, transfer to a platter and serve.

**Sweet Potato Fries by Gunnar Anderson, C.P.T. a.k.a TheOnePecWoner**

**Ingredients:**

Sweet Potatoes

Avocado Oil

Garlic Powder

Salt

Pepper

Paprika

**Preparation:**

Peel, cut, and toss the sweet potatooes in avocado oil. Bake them at 450 degrees for 12 minutes then flip’em. Bake at 450 for an additional 8-12 minutes. Haven't perfected the cooking time yet, but this is a ball park range. It depends if you want them nice and juicy or more on the crispier side.

\*Keep in mind that this is something I eat almost daily so it does adhere to a body building diet. The only difference here is the amount of seasoning and salts used.

For more excellent meals and appetizers to make, click [here](https://www.healthost.com/blog/view/306866/eat-what-you-want-and-stay-lean-17-healthy-recipes-to-start-your-2017-health-journey).

Having appetizer options like these will be sure to keep your health priority, while “fitting in” at the party! While these are great options, it’s undeniable that you may be headed to the bar/restaurant for one of those games, so now let’s look at some of the lighter options we can go for when eating out. Remember, that nearly all bigger chain restaurants these days have a “lighter-side” menu option, so always be on the lookout for that section as the calories are typically 500 and under, while many other options can be well over 1300 calories! Did you know the Sante Fe Chicken Salad at Chili’s has a whopping 97g fat! For a salad!

**Applebee's**  
Note: They have tons of veggie side combos, basically all are 0F/8-10C/1-2P (besides anything w/ potatoes obviously)  
    1. 7oz House Sirloin – 270kcal: 15F/1C/34P  
    2. 12oz New York Strip – 480kcal: 25F/1C/65P  
    3. Napa Chicken & Portobellos – 500kcal: 16F/38C/50P  
    4. Pepper-crusted Sirloin & Whole Grains – 350kcal: 10F/41C/28P  
    5. Thai Shrimp Salad – 390kcal: 19F/33C/23P

**Buffalo Wild Wings**  
\*UPDATE (3/12/2016) BWW finally has their nutrition up! YUS. The only weird thing is they do not have macros for the wings by themselves, just wings with "ave sauce" which is crazy high in fat. Correct me if I'm wrong, though, and I will add wings. :)  
    1. Grilled Chicken Salad - 420kcal: 18F/27C/41P  
    2. Grilled Chicken Sandwich (no toppings) - 360kcal: 9F/38C/34P  
    3. Naked Tenders (4) - 170kcal: 1F/1C/37P  
    4. Grilled Chicken Buffalito Wrap w/ Ave Sauce - 410kcal: 18F/25C/36P

**Chili's**  
Note: Some great side item choices -- Full Seared Shrimp 40kcal: 2F/4C/12P ; Spinach & Garlic Roasted Tomatoes 45kcal: 0F/9C/3P  
    1. 6oz Sirloin w/ Grilled Avocado – 410kcal: 20F/21C/39P  
    2. Ancho Salmon – 600kcal: 27F/43C/48P  
    3. Grilled Chicken Salad – 430kcal: 23F/23C/39P  
    4. Mango-Chile Tilapia – 520kcal: 18F/ 56C/38P (chicken is almost same macros)  
    5. Margarita Grilled Chicken – 580kcal: 13F/66C/51P

**LongHorn Steakhouse**  
Note: Some great side item choices – Steamed Broccoli (90kcal: 4F/7C/4P), Steamed Asparagus: (90kcal: 5F/6C/5P)  
Also, all of the fillets and sirloins have amazing macros. I only listed a few because there are so many variations.  
    1. 6oz Smoky Bacon Sirloin – 370kcal: 21F/5C/40P  
    2. Shrimp & Lobster Chowder (Bowl) – 250kcal: 15F/23C/10P  
    3. Grilled Chicken Salad – 410kcal: 15F/21C/44P  
    4. Longhorn Salmon – 300kcal: 16F/2C/33P  
    5. Half-breaded Chicken Tenders – 420kcal: 22F/19C/36P  
    6. Spinach Fetta Chicken – 220kcal: 6F/5C/37P  
    7. Rosemary Cabernet Fillet – 370kcal: 15F/9C/46P  
    8. Flo’s Filet & Lobster Tail – 460kcal: 21F/1C/56P

**Outback Steakhouse**  
    1. Chicken Tortilla Soup (bowl) - 299kcal: 16F/23C/16F  
    2. Grilled Chicken on the Barbie w/ Mixed Veggies - 460kcal: 13F/26C/61P  
    3. 4oz Lobster Tails w/ Mixed Veggies & House salad w/ Light Balsamic - 572kcal: 24F/35C/53P  
    4. 6oz Outback Special Sirloin w/ Mixed Veggies & House salad w/ Tangy Tomato - 552kcal: 20F/42C/53P  
    5. Sesame Ahi Salad - 252kcal: 8F/15C/33P  
    6. Simply Grilled Mahi w/ Mixed Veggies - 375kcal: 13F/17C/51P

**Texas Roadhouse**  
Note: Great side options – House Salad (121kcal: 5F/8C/9P), Steamed Veggies (90kcal: 0F/20C/4P)  
    1. Sirloin Kabob – 190kcal: 7F/0C/24P  
    2. Grilled Shrimp Skewer (1) – 90kcal: 4F/0C/14P  
    3. Oven Roasted Chicken – 267kcal: 7F/0C/51C  
    4. Pulled Pork w/ BBQ Sauce (half) – 332kcal: 14F/13C/43P  
    5. Dallas Fillet – 304kcal: 11F/0C/48P  
  
**T.G.I. Friday's**  
Sides – Broccoli (50kcal: .5F/10C/3P), Spinach (180kcal: 14F/8C/4P), Coleslaw (90kcal: 6F/7C/0P), Tomato Mozzarella Salad (110kcal: 8F/5C/5P)  
    1. Sizzling Chicken & Spinach – 410kcal: 15F/18C/50P  
    2. Sizzling Sirloin & Spinach – 410kcal: 19F/11C/49P  
    3. Tortilla Soup – 210kcal: 10F/18C/14P  
    4. 6oz Sirloin – 330kcal: 19F/2C/38P  
    5. Jack Daniel’s Sirloin – 610kcal: 14F/58C/64P

These are just a handful of options you can choose from as there are thousands more! If you find yourself at a restaurant that is a local establishment, opt for sauces on the side, grilled chicken, ask for fat free dressings, and pick healthy sides.

Ultimately it will be your mindset and desire to stay on top of your goals that will control how March Madness affects your weight. The tips in this article can be extremely helpful in allowing you to fully enjoy the joys of the tournament, while staying on track for that summer body! Creating a healthy relationship with food while recognizing how to eat to reach your goals is a fundamental concept that will lead to long term success beyond the holiday season.

Stay active, eat responsibly, and best of luck on your bracket this year!