



Fitness

The Real-Life Diet of Sue Bird, Basketball Legend

Tim Clayton/Getty Images
The WNBA All-Star reveals the secrets that keep her at the top of her game.

BY CHRISTOPHER CASON

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At this point, there isn't much left to accomplish in the basketball career of Sue Bird. Yet here she is in her 16th WNBA season, still lacing up Nikes and pointedly ignoring questions about when she plans to call it quits. Instead, the 37-year-old point guard will tell you that she's never been in better shape, and with the way she orchestrates the attack for her Seattle Storm each night, it's hard to argue otherwise. We recently caught up with the league's all-time assists leader to learn how her diet and preparation have allowed her to play at such a high level for 15 professional seasons—and counting.

GQ: How sick *are* you at this point of being asked about retirement?

Sue Bird: [laughs] I think it got tiring two years ago. Now, I'm numb to it, so I just kind of ignore it.

How different is your preparation now compared to earlier in your career?

It's entirely different. You can break my career down into thirds—the first one began at 21, when I came into the league. When you're in your early 20s, you don't really care. You eat and do what you want, and it doesn't really affect you. The second third—I felt like I hit a bit of a lull. At that point, you start thinking about what things can you can control, and nutrition is one of them. It wasn't really until this last third, though, that I changed my entire diet. I met with a nutritionist, changed my workout regimen, and hired a sports performance coach. I wish I had done it all when I was 22. That's really the message I give to all my young teammates: “You can never start too soon.” That's the reason I'm able to play at 37.

When you first came into the league, was there anyone you could look up to as far as taking care of one's body?

Not really. The life of a women's basketball player—the way it is now—wasn't what was happening in 2002. That's when overseas money got big, and everyone started playing year-round. At the time, not many people older than me had lived that life, so there wasn't really

much to tap into. For [Phoenix Mercury head coach] Sandy Brondello, playing year-round was the norm for her. She was my teammate during my second year—she might have been 36 at the time, and I was 23. I remember she was getting massages, and watching the way she ate. That was first time I ever really saw it.

Were there any particular habits or skills you acquired during the 10 years you played in Russia?

When you're overseas, you're truly on your own, and so I learned how to be self-sufficient in terms of taking care of myself. They provide healthcare, trainers, and a masseuse, but it's really up to you to make sure that you're still lifting, doing your rehab, and making sure those little nagging injuries don't turn into bigger ones. Let's put it this way: I personally don't tape my ankles, but I know a lot of players that learn how to tape them when they go overseas.

Have you noticed a shift in the way players are now? Do they take care of their bodies earlier?

A 21-year-old is still a 21-year-old. They're still young. Whatever affects them at that age is not going to be as impactful as it would be at 37. I still think that when people come out of college, they're not thinking about taking care of their bodies, but the conversation is starting to gain more headway. You see all the conversations about LeBron James and how he takes care of himself—on our side, the league's older players are myself, Diana Taurasi, and Rebekkah Brunson, and a lot of the storylines behind us today are about how we changed our diets and workout regimens.

By year two and three—that's when it starts to click. Breanna Stewart is a great example. I talked to her during her rookie year about changing her diet. She talked to someone, but I don't know if she truly made a change. Now, in year three, *I don't have to go to her*. She's proactively asking questions, and working with a sports performance coach. It's happening earlier for players because there is more information available.

What are some of the things you're doing to help your body recover?

It varies, but it generally involves some sort of activation series to get my muscles moving. Something I've been starting to use almost every day is a **blood flow restriction system** for my legs. It's good for recovery and strength. I also use **NormaTec**, and I do 15 minutes of yoga stretching every night.

I know you subscribe to the 80/20 rule of dieting, but are there any foods you avoid?

I don't eat dairy, and I've been gluten-free ever since I took a blood test that showed I have a mild allergy to gluten. I stick with all anti-inflammatory foods: tons of veggies, eggs, chicken and fish. I will have some red meat, but only every now and then. There's very little sugar, if any, because I save that for my cheat days. I like rice bowls a lot. That's been my new thing this year—I'll have some brown rice, sweet potatoes, chicken, and mixed veggies.

What are some of your favorite restaurants in Seattle? Is it easy going out as Sue Bird?

For lunch, my two favorite places are Homegrown—they have gluten-free bread, which makes my life easy—and a local spot called Bounty Kitchen, which has a great menu of healthy options. For dinner, Ethan Stowell is a very popular chef in town. He has a place in my neighborhood called How To Cook A Wolf that I love. It's a really small place, and they're very nice. They'll make some dishes where they'll leave the cheese out and remix it for me. And there's a Vietnamese place called Stateside that has great stuff. Those are my top three.

I definitely use Postmates and Uber Eats, too. Every now and then, someone will come to the door to drop off food and they'll be like, "Are you the basketball player?" Sometimes, I'll open up the bag, and on the box will be written something like, "Hey Sue! Go Storm!" When I'm out and about, though, I blend in. When I do get stopped, it's out of respect. It's not a nuisance.

What's your game-day routine?

I pretty much do the same thing every day: Breakfast is two eggs and some veggies. I'll either do a scramble or make a sandwich out of it with a couple pieces of toast and a cup of coffee. We'll have shootaround, and I'm able to get in some stretching and do my activation stuff. Right after shootaround, I'll come home and have a little snack around 2:30 or 3:00. It's usually one banana and a tablespoon of peanut butter to hold me over, because I won't eat my pregame meal until about four hours before the game. I'll have half a plate of whatever carb I'm going to have for that day, too.

From there, I'll take a nap, and then have another cup of coffee to wake me up. The nutritionist that I work with has me drinking a little smoothie that consists of lactose-free milk and some fruit on my way to the gym.

Between 30 and 45 minutes before a game, I'll have half of a supplement drink called **Vitargo**, a quick and easy-to-digest source of carbs. I'll drink the rest of it at halftime. Postgame, I'll have a protein shake, which will consist of almond milk, orange juice, fruit, and whey protein. Last but not least, I have dinner—a lot of green vegetables, some protein, and some carbs to get the recovery going.

How do treat yourself?

If we have three or four days before a game, *that's* where the 20 percent comes in. I definitely eat carbs. I repeat: I *do* eat carbs. [*laughs*] I'm just selective on which carbs I eat and when. I won't eat things like pasta and bread at night, but in terms of fueling a workout and recovering from one, carbs are great.

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