

PRIME-US Student Champions Nutrition with Youth

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By Joe Cartwright, 2nd year UCSF PRIME-US Student



When my fiancée, a volleyball player, and I learned about Starlings Volleyball Clubs, USA during my first year at UCSF, I started hoping for ways that I could become involved with the organization. Starlings provides club volleyball opportunities for girls from lower-income backgrounds, helping to counteract the deterioration of physical education programs nationwide. My interest in the organization was received with immediate, adrenalized welcome—within no time, I was conversing with the National Executive Director as well as the coach of the San Francisco Starlings Club. I would soon learn about a vital piece of the Starlings mission that had been underemphasized: nutrition education. I had no idea just how fun it would be to join in on the effort to reenergize that arm of the organizational mission.

As these partnership conversations with Starlings leaders began, the UCSF PRIME-US program was incredibly supportive of my dream to combine my

connection to volleyball with my passion for underserved community health. Equipped with the lessons on community engagement that I had received throughout my first year as a PRIME student, I was able to respond to the needs of the SF Starlings Club; they were hopeful for a series of nutritional activities that could span the final five weeks of their season and culminate in a final project to be shared with the greater Starlings national volleyball community, family, friends, and beyond. Employing my experience as a classroom teacher before medical school, I was able to plan a variety of pre- and post-practice academic sessions focused on nutrition. Fueled at each session by an assortment of nutritious treats, the girls became experts in topics ranging from "How to Read a Nutrition Label" to "Good vs. Bad Fats" to "Whole vs. Refined Grains." Throughout their activities, the girls engaged enthusiastically when given opportunities to talk about the ways in which nutrition impacts their communities, themselves, and their athletic performance and recovery. We had rich conversations about the pervasiveness of fast food options, oversized portions, heavy food processing, and the link between poor nutrition and obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and other conditions.

In anticipation of the Starlings Nationals Championship Tournament in San Diego, the players came in on their summer break to work on creating a video that enabled them to share their newfound nutrition expertise with the rest of the Starlings nation. It was truly amazing to watch the girls in action, planning out the scripts for their movie, creating props, and filming.



Fortunately, the video production didn't mark my last activity with the team—the girls had asked me to make the road trip to San Diego with them for Nationals. I was honored to ride along and to make sure that healthy snacks and meals were available to them throughout the tournament. The experience was a blast! I enjoyed supporting the SF team as they competed against teams from all over the country, and there were numerous nutritional highlights of our time together. Whole wheat bread quickly became the favorite, fresh fruit was chosen over packaged snacks during our team grocery shopping, and fresh carrots and snap peas, which once turned eyes, became a quickly disappearing snack. Team parents, who had made the trip to San Diego as well, welcomed the impact of our critical thinking about food. One family shared with me that they had wanted to start eating healthier for a long time; it was now easier because their daughter was supplying the conversational spark.

Although I had no idea how I might be able to contribute to my local Starlings club, the nutritional focus that they requested was incredibly meaningful to me because of my personal struggles with thoughtless, unhealthy, Fast Food-heavy eating as a teenager. It was neat to be able to see the girls engaging in these conversations, and it was both heartwarming and promising to see that they wanted to invite me along for their road trip to ensure they were set up with healthy options throughout. I will be excited to see how the promise of the SF

Starlings translates to nutritional activities at the Starlings National level. I am incredibly thankful to the PRIME program for giving me the support to develop this partnership, and for giving us—players, coaches, and myself—a chance to have these health-promoting conversations.