



Playing Big-Time Sports on Their Period

For a long time, periods were used as excuses to keep menstruators from competing. But top athletes challenged that stigma — and broke world records while menstruating.

Narration: This is Feeling My Flo, a podcast where we see menstruation as an event that happens to all types of bodies. I'm Kamilah Kashanie...my pronouns are she and her.

When I was a kid, I did ballet and modern dance. As a menstruator, I started out using pads. And let me just say...it was super uncomfortable leaping and stretching with bulky pads stuck to my underwear!

My experiences as a dancer got the Feeling My Flo team thinking about what it's like to menstruate when playing sports. Let's start by going back to two pretty big moments in recent sports history...where big-time athletes talked about playing while on their period.

Narration: It's the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil...and 20-year-old Chinese swimmer Fu Yuanhui is racing for the gold. She's competing alongside her teammates in the 4x100 meter medley relay.

Despite all the training and preparation, Fu's team finishes in fourth place. After the race, a reporter for a Chinese news outlet asks her how she's feeling.

Fu Yuanhui: [Speaking Chinese.]

Narration: In the video, Fu is hunched over. She tells the reporter that her period started the night before.

Fu Yuanhui: [Speaking Chinese.]

Narration: She adds that she's feeling pretty weak and really tired. But, she says, this isn't an excuse...because at the end of the day, she just didn't swim very well.

The clip ended up going viral...because an Olympics-level athlete was being open about what it's like to have her period. In the next few days, people on a major Chinese social media site praised Fu for her honesty. By the way, Fu also won a bronze medal that summer in the hundred-meter backstroke. She's a boss.

A more recent big period-in-sports moment comes from soccer. In 2019, the U.S. women's team headed to Lyon, France to compete in their fourth World Cup final...

Clip: We have four stars on our shirt...we have four stars...

Narration: It was the U.S. versus the Netherlands...and by the second half, the score was still zero-zero...until Megan Rapinoe and Rose Lavelle each scored a goal to take the title.

Clip: ...to Rose Lavelle...the game's opening up...Rose Lavelle...lovely run...great goal! Brilliant goal!"

Narration: U.S. women's soccer is the top-ranked team in the world...they've taken home four FIFA World Cup championship titles since 1991.

Clip: Are you ready to celebrate...the game-changing, record-breaking, back-to-back World Cup-winning US soccer team!"

Narration: After the World Cup, we learned that the coaches consider the players' periods as they plan their training.

That's mainly thanks to Dawn Scott. Until 2019, she was the U.S. women's performance coach. During practice, Dawn started noticing that certain players were especially tired in the days leading up to their period. She started observing where each player was in their menstrual cycle...and how or if their period affected how they played.

But leading up to the World Cup, Dawn wanted to try something smarter. So she called Dr. Georgie Bruinvels.

Narration: Dr. Bruinvels is a research scientist based in the United Kingdom. In 2018, she invented an app called FitrWomen. The app allows a menstruator to log the date of their latest period and how long their bleeding lasted. It takes that info and creates a personalized profile for the menstruator...with tips on how to exercise and what to eat before, during, and in between periods.

For the women's soccer team, the overall goal was to be more open about periods, so players could feel more supported in training and do their best on the field.

When the Feeling My Flo team first heard about athletes tracking their periods, we wanted to see if this was a common thing. So we asked producer Isabeth Mendoza to look into it.

Katy Cambell: My name is Katy Campbell. I'm 25, my sport is open water swimming and I'm affiliated with Team USA and Team Santa Monica.

Narration: Katy uses she/her pronouns. Growing up by the ocean, she was an active kid. Her parents were both swimmers too.

Katy: I really enjoy, like, the ability, like, to push yourself because it is a very personal sport. Especially swimming for a long time, like, with your head underwater, like, you just only have thoughts to yourself and you get to judge how far you're going to push yourself that day.

Narration: Katy's been swimming competitively since she was 11.

In 2014, she gained a spot on the U.S. National team. A year later, she traveled to Russia to compete in the 2015 World Aquatics Championships.

Katy says when she was young, her family was pretty straightforward about menstruation.

Katy: I was 13 years old when I first got my period. My mom was pretty open with them, um...I mean, it wasn't really discussed, but I'm one of three girls, plus I have a mother. So it wasn't really hidden from us. It was like, okay, like, 'You're on your period, this is what you do, this is how you take care of it.'

Narration: Katy never felt periods were something to hide, but she still needed some guidance figuring out how to handle her period while swimming.

Katy: One time I did wear a pad while swimming and I didn't tell my mom and that was, like, not a good idea.

Narration: Pads fill up with water in the pool, so one of the things Katy had to get used to was using tampons when she was swimming.

Another big part of learning to manage her period while swimming was tracking it. Katy has used apps and paper calendars.

Katy: So, like, I know when everything's going to happen, but I also, like, track it on my phone in case I miss it...'cause sometimes when you're training so much or, like, you're stressed or especially when I'm, like, flying to different countries to compete...everything can get a little messed up. So I have it on my phone in case I have noticed, like, 'Oh, like, it hasn't come in awhile. I need to get my body, like, checked out.'

Narration: We were curious to know if tracking periods was recommended by a doctor. So producer Isabeth Mendoza talked to Dr. Jasmine Patel.

Dr. Jasmine Patel: I am a family planning trained obstetrician and gynecologist in Los Angeles as well as a fellow for Physicians for Reproductive Health. I like to go by she, her and hers.

Narration: Dr. Patel isn't Katy's doctor, but she said tracking can be really helpful for athletes.

Jasmine: Yeah, so it's really important for anybody really that menstruates to track or monitor their periods because monitoring your periods means that you have a little bit more awareness about your body and as an athlete, knowing your body is super important, especially to help prevent from hurting yourself.

Narration: Throughout history, periods have often been used as an excuse to keep menstruators from doing everyday things...including participating in sports.

In the 1800s, physical activities like horseback riding or swimming were considered dangerous because people believed menstruators were QUOTE "periodically weakened" by the loss of blood they experienced once a month.

For generations, these attitudes kept menstruators from competing in sports professionally. Up until the 1960s, doctors believed that running was bad for women's health...so cis women weren't allowed to compete in professional long-distance running, like marathons.

Jasmine: So I don't know how or when the idea or notion came forward that you would not be at your best when you're bleeding. I believe it came from the thought process that if you are bleeding, then you are losing blood that should be going to your muscles and so therefore are not going to be able to perform at your best.

However, that blood that is being released has been collecting there and you know, hanging out in your uterus, so it wasn't really going to your muscles anyway.

Narration: Dr. Patel also talked about the importance of looking at the whole cycle...not just the days when an athlete is menstruating.

Jasmine: So the first part is actually the first day that you get your period and it being your full flow...so during that time is when your estrogen, so one of the hormones that is in your cycle, starts to rise.

But then after you ovulate, you're in your progesterone-dominant part of the cycle...that's when your body wants you to kind of take it easy, a little bit more. You might feel a little sluggish, you may feel a little bloated, um, you may not want to exercise so much or for as long as you normally do. And then when that progesterone drops, which is actually when your period starts, your energy does return.

Narration: Not everyone feels the same way at different parts of their cycle. But Dr. Patel said that for many menstruators, in the first few days they start to bleed, they actually feel more energetic.

Jasmine: So estrogen actually, you know, makes your bones stronger, makes you, um, have a little bit more energy and are a little bit more active. So when you have that extra energy boost, you might be in your estrogen-dominant cycle.

Narration: And sometimes, menstruators get some help tracking their periods. At 18 years old, Katy was prescribed the contraceptive pill for acne. The pill made Katy's cycle more predictable, which helped her keep track of her periods by knowing exactly when to expect them.

Katy: After dealing with them for so long...you find ways to work with them and you find ways to, like, okay, this is, it's going to happen this week. Like, I need to eat extra iron, I need to get, like, extra sleep or I just, like, supplement my body to what's going to happen.

Narration: Tracking her period also helps Katy prepare for competitions.

Katy: If I'm at a meet and I'm on it, I'm more worried because, like, I'll have cramps and I don't want to deal with that, plus the added stress of competing. But if I'm just practicing, I'm usually just, like, a little more lethargic and I just know I need to rest my body a bit more.

Narration: When I was dancing, I didn't always have the energy during certain parts of my cycle. But that's just me.

The idea that bleeding always weakens an athlete's performance just isn't true. And we know that because menstruating athletes win all the time...like in 2002, when Paula Radcliffe broke the women's marathon world record...on the first day of her period.

Or a pretty famous period moment from 2015...when Kiran Gandhi ran the London Marathon while she was free-bleeding through her pants. That means she decided not to use a product to catch her menstrual fluid. She was making a point that periods shouldn't be treated with such secrecy all the time.

Staying aware of my own cycle is just one way to help me understand more about what my body is doing. I just give my tracking app a look every now and again.

The bottom line is...athletes, just like anyone else, benefit from knowing what's going on with their bodies.

Narration: Feeling My Flo wants to help you start important conversations at critical moments...like when you're putting on your game face.

Feeling My Flo is a production of Lantigua Williams & Co. We're here to inform, entertain, and empower.

We'd love to know if you track your period — and how you do it. Ask your parents or an adult if you can visit us at feelingmyflo.com or connect with us on social media, at [flo_pod on Twitter](#) and [feelingmyflo on Instagram](#).

This episode was produced by Mia Warren. She's our executive producer. Field reporting was done by Isabeth Mendoza. It was mixed by Kojin Tashiro. Our lead producer is Cedric Wilson. Our assistant producer is Emma Forbes. I'm Kamilah Kashanie.



CITATION

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