Sports nutrition for all: the evolution of a category

Sports nutrition as a category is one that, traditionally at least, has been stereotyped by bodybuilding and an association to muscle.

But as consumers adopt more positive habits and behaviours towards exercise and nutrition, we're seeing an increased interest in the role and benefits of products that are intrinsically sports nutrition related.

As a result, the relevance of the category is broadening at pace.

And the audience? Well it's stretching beyond that core bodybuilding consumer to one that uses products as part of a lifestyle where exercise is important, but performance is not their main motivation.

Similarly, endurance has often been stereotyped by its association to elite athletes – typically swimmers, runners or cyclists – who achieve feats few can realistically aspire to.

But again, it's a category that's changing as mass participation events become more popular and consumers recognise the need to find solutions that meet their energy and hydration needs, whether that's simply finishing or setting a new personal best.

Consumers are recognising the need to find solutions that meet their energy and hydration needs

The consumer continuum – from performance to active consumers

PERFORMANCE

A performance-orientated consumer uses a moderate to high repertoire of products, principally before, during or after exercise, with the motivation to support or enhance their training, event or performance.
These consumers tend to choose the more traditional sports nutrition brands, where product quality is an important factor.

ACTIVE

An active-orientated consumer uses products to improve their health and wellness as part of a lifestyle where exercise is important, but performance is not, nor is it their motivation.
Traditional sports nutrition brands are less relevant to this audience due to a pre-existing stereotype. Quality is important, but taste is fundamental.

A category democratised

This evolution of the category to include 'active' consumers is, unsurprisingly, driving significant growth. And as the audience gets less specialised, so too must the products.

And so we're seeing an explosion of products that are more convenient – think ready to eat bars and drinks – natural and plant based, and that taste good. What's more, within these product categories, brands are increasingly recognising the opportunities in under-served populations like women and the ageing athlete.

Combine this innovation and convenience with market dynamics such as smaller pack sizes, retail proliferation and the growth of online retail, and sports nutrition products are more accessible than ever.

A category primed for growth

According to Euromonitor, the sports nutrition sector in North America alone was worth $16.3bn in 2023, with a CAGR of 8% that means it's expected to reach $23.4bn by 2028. Western Europe, the second biggest geography, is worth €3.9bn and is set to grow at 7.5% CAGR over the same period, with 76% of revenue here driven by protein products, primarily powder.

Beyond protein, the performance of product categories is less clear, due to poor data availability and/or inadequate categorisation. However, it is suggested and likely that performance-related products like pre-workout, creatine and amino acids, and endurance products including carbohydrate drinks, bars, gels and electrolytes are also growing.

Blurred boundaries

However, interpreting the growth of the sports nutrition category and the opportunities it presents comes with a challenge: many of the products being launched to engage with active consumers are, as a result, dissociating themselves from the core consumer and the exercise occasion.

While this may be a logical approach, it raises questions.

Should these types of products be categorised as sports nutrition products? Do consumers want or expect to buy these kinds of products from a sports nutrition brand? And do the brands that are winning in these areas even define themselves as being sports nutrition?

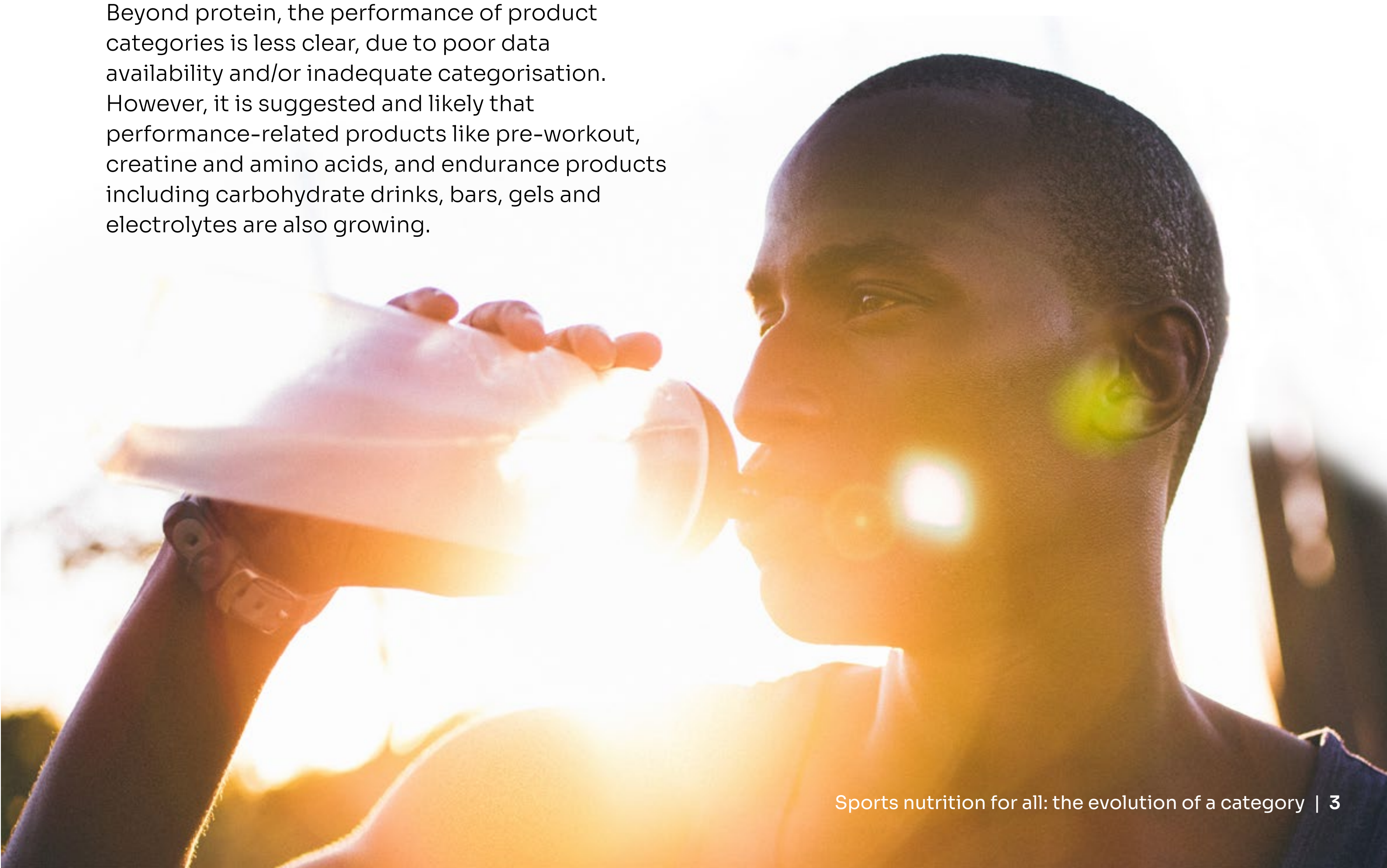
Sector worth

North America 2023

$16.3bn

Western Europe 2023

€3.9bn



Sports nutrition redefined and reimagined

Let's look at four brands that perfectly encapsulate the kinds of products that are winning. While all these products are intrinsically part of the sports nutrition product repertoire, they have been reimagined and redefined to create a focused proposition that targets active consumers in a non-sports nutrition context. All four brands have defined new categories where they are not inhibited by stereotype.

Convenient food: Huel

Huel is a traditional meal replacement, albeit a modernised one, that has repurposed its positioning away from weight-focused consumers to those looking for a positive way to manage food intake as part of a busy lifestyle. It has defined a new category of convenient food.

Healthy snacking: Grenade

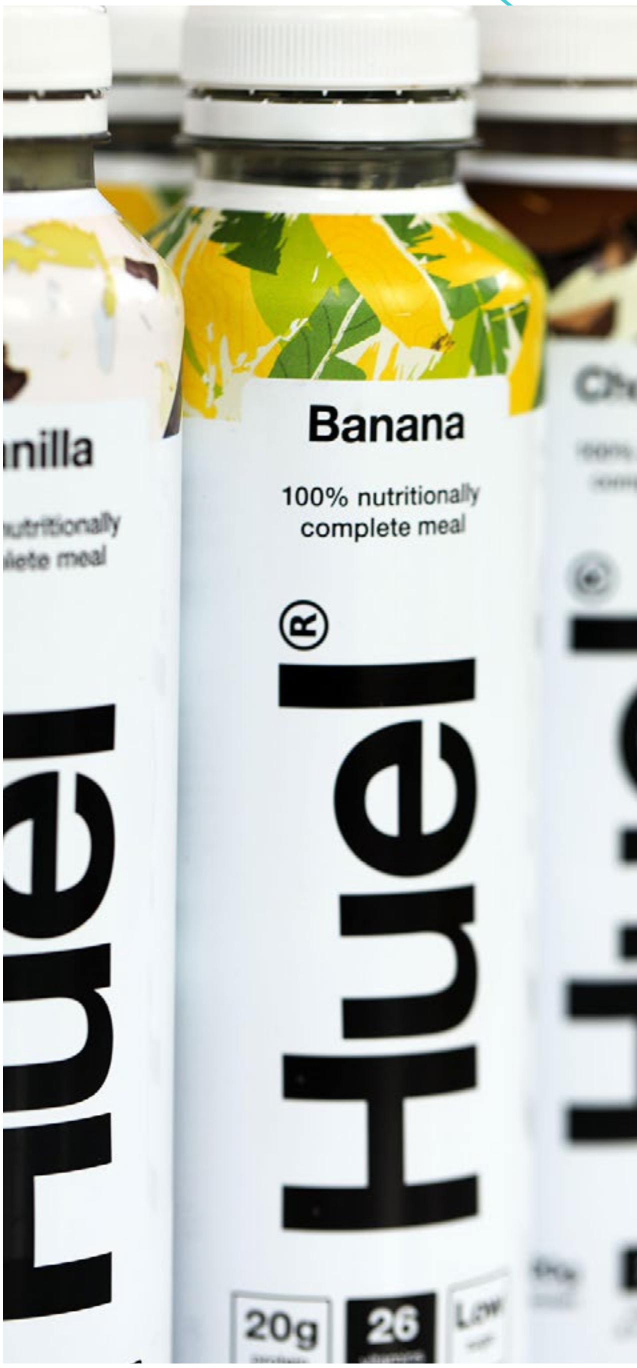
The classic high protein bar has evolved in taste and texture to offer an indulgent high protein, low sugar treat. Positioned as a better for you alternative to a chocolate bar, Grenade has successfully pivoted its brand from sports nutrition to healthy snacking.

Hydration: Waterdrop

Electrolytes have always been the traditional domain of endurance brands. However, Waterdrop has reimagined the role of hydration and electrolyte tablets and turned it into a positive daily habit, complete with beautifully branded water bottles and an aspirational lifestyle positioning.

Superfoods: Athletic Greens

It might be athletic in naming convention, but Athletic Greens' proposition is all about foundational nutrition and providing a healthy micronutrient start to the day for any consumer looking to be proactive about their diet and nutrition.



The emergence of proactive nutrition

As the sports nutrition category widens to encompass more active consumers, and brands launch health-based products that are dissociated from the exercise occasion, it becomes harder to draw defining lines between what is and what isn't sports nutrition.

Which brings us to the term proactive nutrition.

Better capturing a landscape of nutrition that improves performance and health, it encompasses four primary quadrants: sports nutrition, dietary supplements, convenient food and snacks, and the drive for positive energy.

Unequivocally, the emergence of proactive nutrition is positive, bringing with it a bigger landscape of both consumers and product opportunities. But sports nutrition is only a part of it, rather than being representative of all of it.

While the broader landscape offers a range of innovation opportunities, it challenges the permission of a sports nutrition brand. Can it stretch to be relevant to health-based lifestyle consumers while simultaneously remaining relevant to its core audience?

Of course, it's not that a sports nutrition brand can't stretch its permissions – Grenade did just that. However, Grenade represents a fundamental brand pivot that emphasises the degree of focus and financial commitment that is required to be successful.

It is a game of risk and reward, where understanding brand permissions has never been so important, including the specific challenge facing sports nutrition brands – to offer everything or own something.

The proactive nutrition landscape

The original domain of sports nutrition. Products focused on improving performance, consumed before, during and after exercise.

[Accessibility]

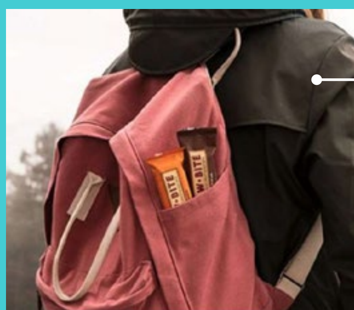
A vibrant world of functional nutrition. Products that improve health (body and mind; "wellness") and promote the agelessness.

PERFORMANCE

HEALTH

[Benefit]

Everyday Energy. Products focused on providing energy (mental and physical) to keep you going throughout the day.



Convenient food and snacks. Products that are a better for you and healthy alternatives to everyday snacking and daily food choices.

ENJOYMENT

Performance remains at the core

So how should we be defining sports nutrition?

The traditional products and needs that have underpinned the growth of the sports nutrition category to date remain relevant today. Protein (predominantly powder), performance-based supplements such as creatine, and pre-workouts focused on muscle and performance remain the top selling products, typically representing ~80% of revenue, depending on the brand. The same is true of endurance.

But this doesn't mean sports nutrition brands aren't under pressure to evolve. On the contrary, they are.

And a particular consideration needs to be given to the generational shift of consumers; whether the consumer target group is 18–25 or 25-35, it's likely a different generation to the one with which many brands built their legacies.

As such, it becomes about evolving the relevance of a brand and the benefits that the products offer, rather than simply dissociating from sport.

Sports nutrition brands can, and have, increased the breadth of products to cover more needs and occasions to support the performance lifestyle of their core consumer. But while this can increase revenue, selling more products to an existing consumer group should not be misinterpreted as an ability to achieve the same size of prize associated with a new product category.

Growth platforms inclusive of sport

One factor that defines successful brands in nutrition is ownership – that is, being known for something specific.

Brands that are winning are the ones that own a particular occasion, population, ingredient or need that may be core to sports nutrition, but also has a broader application.

High protein snacking, hydration, collagen, convenient foods, superfoods, women's health and the female athlete are key areas of ownership, but the most prominent example of this is energy.

Energy is the primary role of a pre-workout powder, but the benefit is also relevant to daily performance, whether at work or to manage a busy lifestyle. It is also generational, with energy the primary nutrition need that engages with younger consumers, particularly a digitally native generation.

Brands like Cellucor, which has built its legacy on energy and pre-workouts, have demonstrated the ability to transition that expertise into a broader market. This is not sports nutrition going mainstream, rather a brand known to be a leader in energy targeting more consumers who want that specific benefit.

Navigating future opportunity

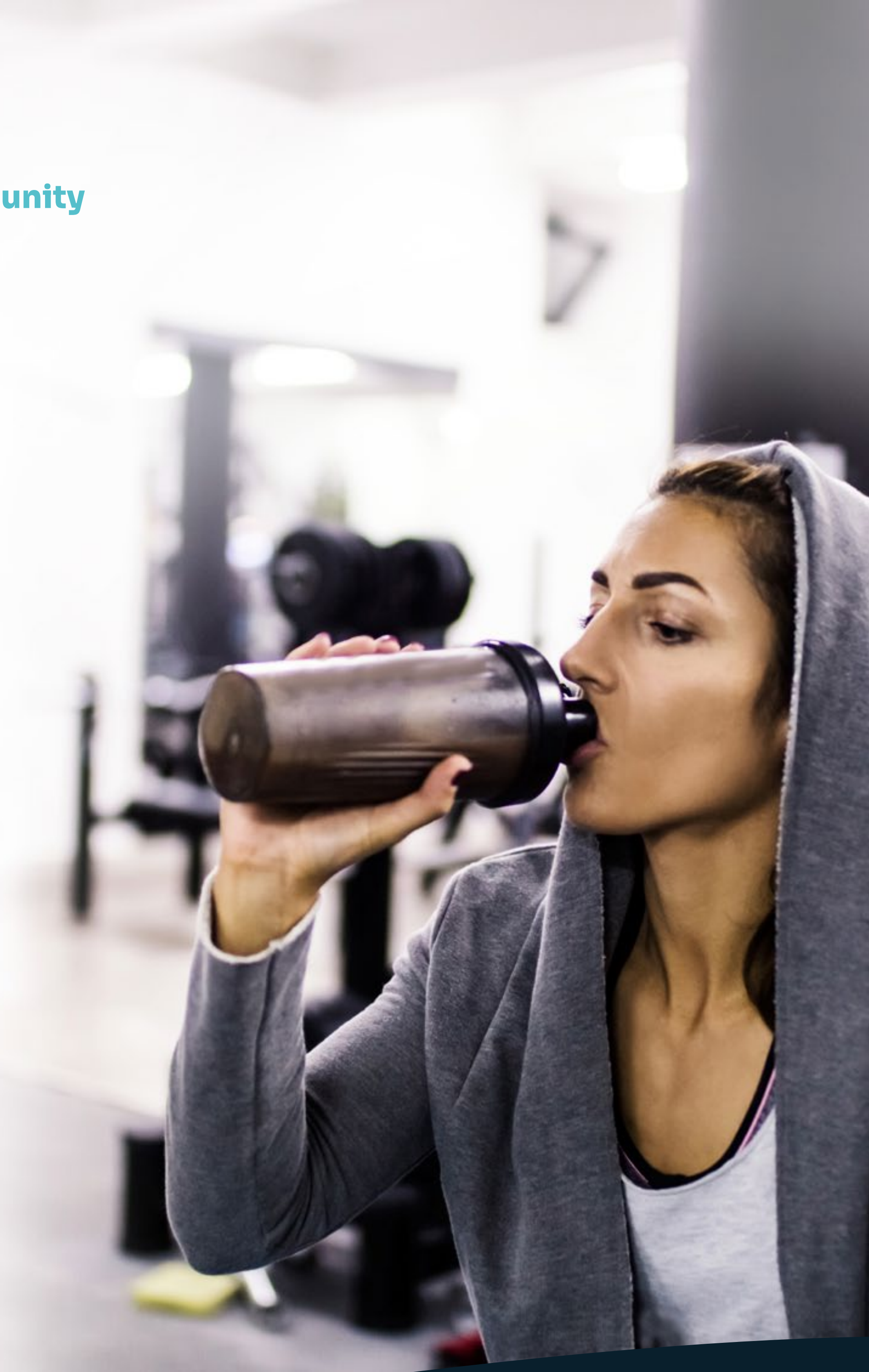
In order to stay relevant, brands must evolve; it's a universally accepted truth.

In the world of sports nutrition specifically, there are two approaches.

For brands that have a broad sports nutrition offering, evolution and continued growth is less about targeting products away from the exercise occasion, and instead about better educating consumers on the benefit of consuming products to support their lifestyle and exercise goals.

Alternatively, brands can develop and evolve a known expertise linked to a particular occasion, population, ingredient or need that is core to sports nutrition, but with a broader application, such as energy.

By choosing an approach and ensuring total relevance and understanding of an audience – whether that's a wider or more specialist one – brands can look to take advantage of the opportunities that the evolving category presents.



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