Competing at Altitude Senior Olympics, 2019

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The average temperatures in Albuquerque in June are predicted to be in the mid to high 80’s for highs and mid to upper 50’s for lows. Albuquerque is a desert city so there is little humidity. The city’s elevation is over 5,000 feet, about a mile high. Surrounding mountains have elevations over 10,300 feet.

For individuals that are not accustomed to high altitudes there is the possibility of experiencing altitude sickness. You may feel some fatigue and other symptoms, but most individuals adjust within a couple of weeks. Remember, that all individuals do not respond the same way.

Some tips that may help include:

Drink a lot of water and stay hydrated (recommendations are an ounce of water per pound of body weight per day). Individuals who participate in long distance events will need even more hydration. Since the humidity is low, sweat will evaporate and you may not realize how much sweat you lose. You can monitor sweat loss by weighing yourself, or by looking at the color of your urine. If urine is dark (dark yellow color) or not clear you likely have some amount of dehydration.

Another factor to consider is sun exposure. At altitude, sun/UV exposure is enhanced so take precautions and bring sun glasses and sunscreen. Also, consider the clothing you plan to take. Temperature can vary 30 degrees or more during the 24 hour day.

One of the immediate effects of altitude exposure is a change in sleep quality. Try to get some rest, and make sure you eat right related to your sporting event.

When sporting events take place at altitude there can be changes in performance depending on the demands of the sport. For sports that are anaerobic (less than a couple of minutes), you may see little change in performance, or possibly an increased performance (jumping, sprinting, shot put, etc). A number of Olympic records have been recorded at altitude. The air is less dense so there is less air resistance. Endurance activities on the other hand, may be more difficult to perform based on the body’s ability to use oxygen. The percent of oxygen in the air will be the same as sea level, but the barometric pressure will be reduced causing a decreased ability of the body to get oxygen into the arterial blood. Individuals may respond quite differently, so you may see a variety of responses. On one hand you have reduced air resistance to run against, but a decreased ability to transport oxygen to the cells. Studies have shown decreases in running performance of 6 to 8 percent when arriving at altitude.

One of the key factors related to running/cycling or longer endurance events at altitude is learning how to pace yourself. If you go out too fast your overall performance will be decreased. However, if your pace is too slow you will not perform up to your potential. You may not have enough time or the opportunity to practice your sport at altitude, but learning how pace at altitude can be beneficial. If you have an opportunity to do some runs or other aerobic events at altitude, this may help you will learn how to adjust your pace.

It normally takes about two weeks to acclimate to altitude. This does not mean that you performance will not be affected, but by that time you will likely not experience any further side effects associated with the initial altitude exposure. One approach that may help is to compete within 24 hours of arrival at altitude. Acclimatization will have not had time to take place, but most of the classical symptoms of altitude sickness will have not had time to manifest themselves. After the initial 24 hours, dehydration and sleep disturbances and plus other symptoms of altitude exposure tend to show up.

Best of luck with your training and performance and representing Alabama as a Senior Olympian.