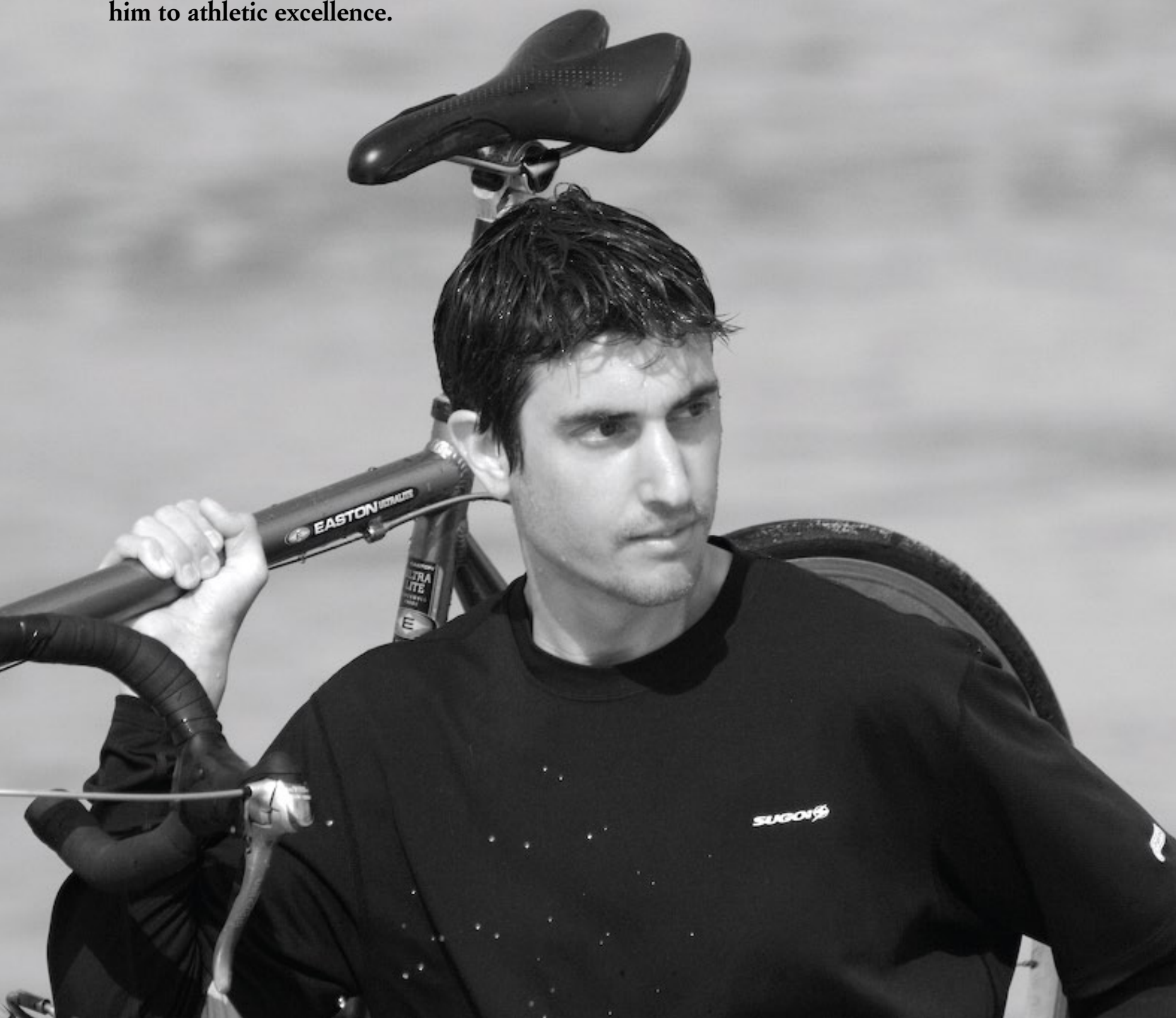


Healthy body,

healthy planet

Ironman triathlete Brendan Brazier talks to Sarah Best about his journey to plant-based peak performance, and his campaigning activities to raise awareness of the health and environmental benefits of the diet that propelled him to athletic excellence.



"You can be an athlete or you can be a vegan – it's one or the other."

Brendan Brazier heard this verdict delivered over and over by his coaches when he first gave up meat, fish, eggs and dairy. Aged 16 at the time, Brazier was training to be a professional ironman triathlete and he was experimenting with a plant-based diet in the belief it would help his performance. But initially it seemed his coaches were absolutely right.

"I was weak, I wasn't sleeping well, I was losing muscle and I wasn't recovering well," remembers Brazier. "But being a curious person this made me determined to see if it was possible to achieve what I wanted to achieve without consuming animal products, because they were so adamant it wasn't."

Brazier not only proved his coaches wrong by becoming a *vegan* world-class ironman triathlete; he achieved his goal in a remarkably short time compared to the average for the sport. "I attribute that entirely to my attention to detail in my diet," he says. "There's nothing else I was doing differently from other athletes. I can say now that not only has a healthy plant-based whole food diet not *hurt* my performance; it has massively *helped* it compared to what I could have achieved on the traditional diet athletes follow that includes animal protein."

Brazier was just fifteen when he decided he wanted to be an ironman triathlete and his interest in nutrition grew out of his realization that success in his chosen field would require him to have an 'edge' over the competition. An ironman triathlon combines a 3.8 kilometre swim, a 180 kilometre cycle ride, and a 42.2 kilometre marathon.

Brazier started to study what it would take to get to the top in this sport. Specifically, he pored over the training programmes of the leading professional athletes and compared them to those of average amateur ones.

"What I saw really surprised me," he remembers. "They were not that different. So I started to ask: 'How come some people manage to beat world records and others get nowhere?' I worked out that it's all about recovery. If you can speed your recovery it's a huge advantage because you can train again sooner. That was how I first became interested in nutrition."

When he started out, Brazier knew nothing about the subject. His extensive knowledge – the knowledge which enabled him to write *The Thrive Diet*, a brilliant guide to the link between nutrition, health and peak performance – is the result of his tireless research, in the days before such information was available online. Anything plausible that he read, he tested out on himself. "I arrived at this diet through trial and error," he says. "I experimented with many diets. High carb, low protein and fat; high protein, low carb. You name it, I tried it. Each had one or two good points but the bad outweighed the good."

As time went on, Brazier became more and more convinced that vegetarian was the way to go, despite his initial lack of success. Further research revealed to him that such diets are often low in complete protein, vitamin B12, iron and calcium. "So I found plant-based sources of all these nutrients and built them into my diet. Within a couple of months I started feeling much better and I continued to improve from there."

"Because I'm no longer tired and I don't crave coffee and sugar I've freed up so much mental space"

Brazier has now been a complete vegan for 15 years and he's been "85% raw" for the last three. His initial experiments with raw food were prompted by a friend who was a walking advertisement for the lifestyle. He decided to see what it could do for him and started eating more fruit, more salads and more chlorophyll-rich greens. He knew immediately that he was onto something. "When I started eating high raw I felt the benefits right away," he remembers. "My weight went down a little but my strength didn't so my strength/weight ratio improved – very important for an athlete. I noticed I was leaner and had more energy. I noticed foods digested very easily and that the body doesn't need to expend much energy to get nutrients from food."

Brazier did his first ironman triathlon in 1994 and started racing ironman professionally in 1998. He continued to

race until 2004 when he was hit by a car; unable to train for a year following the accident, his athletic career was on hold. He used the time to write *The Thrive Diet* and also partnered with a sports nutrition company to develop a replica of the blender drink he'd been making for 14 years to speed his recovery, and the home-made whole food bars he used to fuel his training sessions. And so the Vega range of all raw energy bars and almost all raw meal replacement powders was born.

Says Brazier: "I used to think that because food had calories and calories were energy, I needed to eat a lot of calorie-dense foods to have energy so I'd eat things like bread and peanut butter. But these are processed cooked foods and take so much effort for the body to digest that the net energy gain from them is low."

This concept of 'net gain' is a cornerstone of Brazier's nutritional philosophy. Some foods we think of as 'healthy' actually take more energy to digest than they give the body. Brazier emphasizes what more and more in the nutrition field are now recognizing: that you can get energy from what you're *not* eating as well as from what you *are* eating. In other words, if you are eating foods that rob your body of energy, giving up those foods will increase your energy levels more than anything you could add to your diet. Or, as Brazier puts it: "You can get energy from conservation rather than from consumption."

The initial positive effects Brazier noticed on going high raw were, it turns out, only the tip of the iceberg. Since then, he has noticed a whole host of other benefits, most of them wholly unexpected. Number one on the list: better sleep. "The line is no longer blurred between being asleep and being awake as it is for a lot of people who don't sleep that well during the night and don't feel fully awake during the day either," he observes.

"When you remove nutritional stress by eating the right way your cortisol level comes down meaning the body can get into delta sleep. This is the deep, rejuvenating sleep, when the body repairs tissues and cells. It can only do that when cortisol levels are low enough. When I wake up I'm rested and I can go all day, and I'll sleep as soon as I want to. I don't have to sleep as much these days. It's a huge benefit to have an extra hour or more in the day to play with."

Another knock-on effect of this: no more coffee or sugar cravings. "When people have such cravings it's often not because they're hungry, it's because they're tired,"



he says. "Many people who are not sleeping properly are in a spiral of using these substances to borrow energy all the time, so they're stimulating their adrenals temporarily, then they're fatigued again. Breaking the cycle can be done with a good plant-based diet."

A further benefit – the one that excites him most of all – has accrued from the combination of the first two: "Because I'm no longer tired and I don't crave coffee and sugar I've freed up so much mental space. Cravings are mental clutter. They may not always be at the forefront of the mind but they can be there in the background distracting you meaning that ideas don't flow as easily. In this state, solutions to problems that may come to you from the subconscious whether you're awake or asleep, don't come. Remove that clutter and suddenly they do. It has really made a big difference to me in this area and to others I've spoken to also."

A fourth marked improvement Brazier has noticed: in his pre-raw days he used to suffer from inflammation in his joints after training. That is now a thing of the past, meaning he can get away with much shorter gaps between training sessions.

Today, he eats a simple diet centred around lots of fruit, salads, leaves, avocados and sprouts. He also includes the powders and bars from his own range. "Before Vega bars came out I used to spend an hour or two every few months making a huge batch of bars to put in freezer," he remembers.

The cooked part of his diet? "Sometimes I drink pasteurized coconut water when I can't get fresh. It's such a great source of electrolytes. Once in a while I'll eat brown rice with avocado and lemon juice, or a baked sweet potato. I make a pizza unlike anything you've tasted before. The crust is made of lentils and wild rice, and it's topped with marinara sauce and veggies. You can do it in the dehydrator but I usually bake it in the oven at a low temperature. I'll have that once a month or so."

He doesn't juice much as he has found that on such a high-raw diet he needs to drink a lot less than he used to. "I don't drink much of anything because I get so much fluid in what I eat and I'm not consuming the kinds of foods that dry you out by taking water from the body," he observes.

So what advice does Brazier have for those who are inspired to follow in his footsteps – whether to achieve athletic greatness, or simply better health and more energy?

His first tip is to take it slowly: "Any kind of change is stressful for the body. If you allow yourself the time to change, you'll have a greater chance of success than if you try to do it overnight with a 'new year's resolution' mentality."

His other top tip: focus on inclusion not exclusion, because: "Once you eat enough good foods you have no room for the bad ones. Add a smoothie each day and a salad each day. Even with just one healthy meal and a healthy snack a day you start to feel so much better that you want to do more. It happens naturally; you don't have to force it. One raw meal and one raw snack a day and you start to appreciate natural flavours; you develop a different palate."

"Take the person who is addicted to potato chips and thinks they can't live without them. If they can stop eating them for a while and focus on natural flavours they will soon find the potato chips taste so synthetic they can't eat them anymore. This change of palate can take anything from six weeks to six months. But once you get there things are so much easier for life."

The bigger picture

Born in March 1975 in Vancouver, British Columbia, Brazier continues to call the city home. These days he is on the road a lot, not only promoting his nutritional philosophy and his range of products, but also campaigning. Although he initially adopted a plant-based diet purely for health reasons, like many he has become passionate about the wider benefits and he dedicated a whole chapter of *The Thrive Diet* to a discussion of the impact of our food choices on the world around us. As Brazier stresses, you can't separate health and environment; the two are intertwined.

"The quality of food depends greatly on the quality of soil it is grown in. When the food-producing-earth becomes polluted, so do our bodies. Since food acts as a conduit for nutrients in the soil, each time we take a bite of food, part of the environment becomes part of our bodies. Not to care for the environment is not to care for our personal health."

Brazier belongs to campaign group The Physicians Committee for Responsible

Medicine (PCRM), which works to raise awareness of the role nutrition plays in preventative health care and advocates a plant-based diet – both controversial stances in the US political arena. On behalf of PCRM he was invited to speak at a congressional briefing on Capitol Hill in Washington DC last year, sharing his expertise on the benefits of healthy food choices and the role a nutritious diet can play in the prevention of most chronic diseases currently plaguing Americans.

Earlier this year he was again summoned to Washington along with other PCRM representatives to attend meetings to encourage Congress to vote against the notorious Farm Bill – the bill which grants massive subsidies for the meat and dairy industries and also subsidises a substantial part of the corn and grain destined to become livestock feed.

“The Farm Bill allows an industry that can’t survive on its own to continue to exist,” says Brazier. “It provides the crutch that keeps it going. This is not a sustainable approach and the Farm Bill is not beneficial long term since many of these foods are the root cause of mild to major health problems.”

“How is it that fast food restaurants can sell a hamburger that took several gallons of oil to produce for a dollar, yet an organic apple costs more?”

“With the current price of oil being what it is, and the amount of energy that is required to produce meat, the cost would be exceedingly high if government subsidies didn’t exist. How is it that fast food restaurants can sell a hamburger that took several gallons of oil to produce for a dollar, yet an organic apple costs more?” It’s now becoming more widely known that food production and transportation guzzle more fossil fuel than anything else, and are therefore the number one contributor to artificial global warming. The message that is not quite out there in the mainstream



yet is that each of us can significantly reduce our personal use of fossil fuel by shifting to a plant-based diet. “Simply put, it takes less energy to grow plants for food than it does to raise animals,” says Brazier. “Ten times more fossil fuel is needed to create a calorie of meat than a calorie of plant protein.”

He adds: “Energy cost and burning fossil fuel aside, a 2006 UN report found that cows and methane-producing manure piles from cattle contribute to 18 percent of all greenhouse gases. That’s the equivalent of 33 million cars. Additionally, 11 pounds of grain and 2,500 gallons of water are needed to produce one pound of beef. More calories are needed to produce meat than it returns to its consumer; this results in a net energy loss which of course is not sustainable.”

Although it is over a decade since Brazier challenged his coaches’ outdated views on nutrition and proved them wrong, little has changed in the sports world. Professional athletes are among the biggest consumers of animal protein due to the enduring myth that you can’t build sufficient muscle or reach your athletic potential without consuming plentiful amounts of meat, fish, eggs and dairy.

Brazier is living proof that this theory is wrong. In fact, his experience and research have led him to the conclusion that there is no better way to meet the body’s protein needs than a high-ratio plant-based diet, as

it provides it in a form that is so easy for the body to digest and utilize.

“Most people can get away with eating about 20% less protein on this diet,” he says. “I now eat less than half the recommended RDA of protein for someone of my size but at no cost to my strength or endurance and I am still able to build muscle.”

Is he an anomaly, or could anyone thrive on his diet – from the world class athlete to the average person who wants to feel better and have more energy? “I really do believe a healthy vegan diet will work for anyone but you do have to transition properly. More people are trying plant-based diets than ever before but fewer are sticking to them because there are so many vegan junk food items available. Tofu burgers, soy ice cream and so on. Eat too many of these processed foods and of course you’re not going to feel great. People go back to how they used to eat and say the vegan diet didn’t work for them. But a whole food vegan diet with a lot of raw – that *will* work.”

Brendan Brazier is the author of The Thrive Diet and the creator of the Vega range of meal replacement powders and bars, available in the UK from www.fresh-network.com. He writes a weekly blog on glivingtv.com. From the next issue of Get Fresh!, Brendan will be writing a regular column on optimum nutrition and peak performance.