

The Vegetarian Athlete

BY LORNA SLOUKJI

Founded in 1847, the Vegetarian Society claimed that they created the word vegetarian, stemming from the Latin “vegetus,” meaning lively. These early vegetarians asserted that their diets made them feel lively, hence the coining of the term “vegetarian.”

Over the years, vegetarianism increased in popularity for various reasons. People have switched their diets to meet vegetarian requirements for religious, health, animal rights, or other personal reasons.

Like any other group with a shared lifestyle and/or belief, vegetarians face stereotypes. What is a stereotype of a vegetarian? Perhaps a skinny, pale, tree-hugging animal rights activist—maybe even someone who lives in a secluded cabin and writes lyrical poetry.

And, like anything else, stereotyping vegetarians limits perception and comprehension. Vegetarianism flourishes every year, as more restaurants

use of fur, leather, and wool, as well as cosmetic products treated on animals.

Benefits of Going Vegan

While it may be difficult to “go vegan,” most experts and long-time vegans highly encourage that people introduce the new lifestyle slowly and steadily. At a slower pace, the body can then welcome such dramatic diet changes with more ease.

Vegans generally report experiencing less stress with their natural diets, as they remove the consumption of animal products from their diets.

In fact, the American Dietetic Association and Dietitians of Canada state that vegetarian diets

provide health benefits by helping to prevent diseases. Dietitians of Canada also assert that vegetarian and vegan diets offer many nutritional benefits such as lower levels of cholesterol and fat, higher levels of fibre, folate, potassium, magnesium, and antioxidants such as Vitamin C and E. Studies have shown that vegetarians tend to have

lower rates of death from heart disease than non-vegetarians. Moreover, studies have shown that vegetarians exhibit lower levels of type 2 diabetes and hypertension.

The Vitamin B-12 Factor

One of the largest concerns regarding the vegan diet resides in the threat of vitamin B-12 deficiency. Vitamin B-12—a member of the vitamin-B complex responsible for the synthesis of red blood cells and nervous system maintenance—is found predominantly in eggs, meat, and dairy.

Vitamin B-12 deficiency can lead to anemia and even nervous system damage.

Vegans can receive an adequate supply of vitamin B-12 by incorporating vitamin B-12 fortified foods like soy milk, veggie burgers, and breakfast cereals. To enjoy the benefits of vitamin B-12, consume fortified foods two to three times a day or take one vitamin B-12 supplement with at least 10 micrograms every day.

Five Types of Vegetarians

DIET	MEAT (inc. fish)	EGGS	DAIRY
Veganism	No	No	No
Lacto-vegetarianism	No	No	Yes
Ovo-lacto vegetarianism	No	Yes	Yes
Ovo-vegetarianism	No	Yes	No
Pesco-vegetarianism	Yes (fish and shellfish)	Yes	Yes

and schools cater to their dietary needs.

Even with the rise of vegetarianism, many still face raised eyebrows or questions like “how do you get enough protein?” and “don’t you get more tired if you never eat meat?”

What do Vegetarians Eat?

To get their daily protein requirements fulfilled, vegetarians choose foods like tofu, tempeh, miso, seitan, soy proteins such as soy milk, and protein powders made from soy concentrate. For ovo-lacto vegetarians, protein intake consists of the above with the addition of cheese, milk, eggs, and whey protein.

The Vegan

Vegans follow a plant-based diet, avoiding the consumption of any animal products. While vegetarians avoid eating meat, vegans omit all animal products such as dairy from their diets. Many vegans also focus on animal rights, eliminating the



A closer look at Veganism—talking with Brendan Brazier

Lorna Sloukji: Can you describe your involvement in the fitness and health industry?

Brendan Brazier: I got into the fitness industry simply by living the lifestyle. I exercise everyday because I enjoy it. Fortunately for me, I was able to make a career out of it, racing professionally for six years.

I got into the health industry by way of formulating Vega, my line of whole food products. Essentially, Vega is a replica of what I had been consuming for years that had allowed me to recover faster than most and advance my athletic career quickly.



LS: Why did you decide to go vegan? How long have you been following the vegan diet?

BB: I became vegan in 1990, when I was 15. So it's been 17 years now. My goal right from the start was not specifically to become vegan—it was to perform as well as I possibly could in sport.

I enjoyed running and then I got into cycling and swimming. From this point, I decided that I wanted to make a career out of them and race Ironman triathlons professionally. Since an Ironman triathlon consists of a 3.8km swim, 180km bike ride and a 42.2km run (a marathon), I knew that I had my work cut out for me. I wanted to make sure that I began with the most effective training program possible. I looked at training programs of some of the top professional Ironman triathletes in the world with the intention of mimicking their routine.

To see what separated the best from the

typical, I also looked at training programs of average-performing armature triathletes. What I found surprised me. The average athlete's programs differed very little from the elite. If training discrepancies were minimal, what then caused some athletes to become great while others remained average?

As I discovered, training wasn't the only factor. In fact, the most significant difference between the upper echelon of elites and the basic moderately-performing armature had nothing to do with training. But rather, recovery.

As I learned, the difference between average and breakthrough performances hinged on the rate at which the body could recover from physical training. On reflection, this stood to reason. It makes perfect sense that since training is really nothing more than breaking down muscle tissue; the one who can restore theirs the quickest will have an advantage. The quick-

recovering athletes will be able to schedule workouts closer together, therefore enabling them to train more than their competition.

Over the course of a few months the extra workouts will translate into a significant performance gain. Having solidified this in my mind, recovery became my focus.

As I learned, food choices can account for up to 80 percent of the total recovery process. Having this new-found appreciation for diet, I decided to take mine more seriously. Never having an interest in nutrition before, I now had a reason to learn about it.

If cleaning my diet was an integral part of becoming a professional athlete, as I speculated it might be, I wanted to learn more. This is why I adopted a plant-based diet. At first it didn't work well, but as I learned the subtleties of it, my recovery rate dramatically improved and so did my performance.

LS: What have been the biggest challenges in the vegan lifestyle?

BB: At first, it was simply a matter of trying to figure out what to eat and what would keep me feeling good and energized. I was always hungry and rarely felt “on.” Then, through trial and research I discovered that I was lacking many nutrients, and that was therefore the reason for my lethargy.

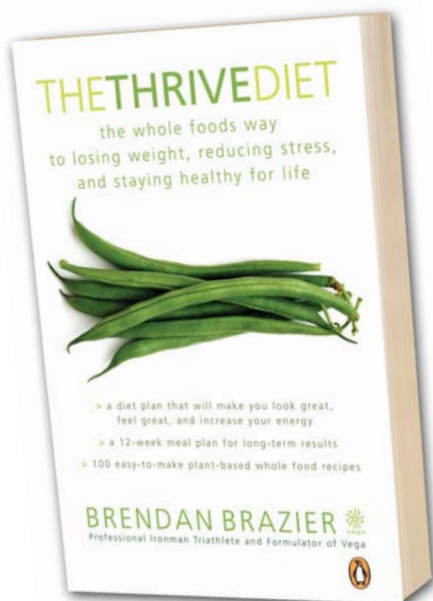
I found plant-based sources of each component that I theorized was lacking from my diet and made a blender drink that contained them all. I drank it each day after my workouts and within three weeks I started to see results. Within four weeks, my performance was improving at an above-average rate.

LS: What are the 3 most irritating questions you receive when people learn you follow a vegan diet?

BB: 1. How do you get enough calories?
2. Why don't you look pasty? I thought all vegans were pasty looking.
3. Since you're vegan, you must have to eat a lot of fish to get your protein, eh?

LS: What are your thoughts on the common belief that vegans face a vitamin B-12 deficiency threat? How can vegans overcome this threat?

BB: Some vegans certainly do face a B-12 deficiency. I used to take a supplement, but then I began adding chlorella to my blender drink. Chlorella is a fresh-water algae that's almost 70 percent protein, extremely chlorophyll-rich, and highly alkaline forming as well as cleansing. But its high B-12 content is what initially caught my attention. I began adding 2.5 grams to my blender drink and stopped taking a B-12 supplement. In fact, I stopped



Brendan Brazier

Photo courtesy The G Living Network—www.gliving.com

taking all supplements since my diet—including my whole food blender drink—contained everything that I needed.

Any easy way to ensure that B-12 requirements are being met is to simply take a supplement. This can put the minds of some at ease. However, it's not necessary if you prefer not to. As long as your diet is whole-food-based with a large raw component, you'll be fine.

LS: What is your product, Vega, all about? How does it surpass other vegan products?

BB: I began making a blender drink back when I was 15 in an effort to cover all my bases nutritionally and improve recovery after exercise. This blender drink developed into what's now known as Vega Complete Whole Food Health Optimizer.

After six years of racing Ironman Triathlon professionally, toward the end of 2003, I was hit by a car while cycling. As a result, I wasn't able to race that year and therefore had lots of time on my hands for the first time in recent memory, so I wrote and self-published a short book called *Thrive*. It was basically an outline of the nutrition program that I developed for myself that had allowed me to start my professional career sooner than most. I then partnered with a North Vancouver nutrition company called Sequel Naturals to make a replica of my whole food blender drink. We launched Vega later that year.

It's basically an all-in-one that's 1/3 raw,

alkaline forming, and made with organic and non-GMO ingredients. It contains 25g of protein per serving from hemp, rice protein, and yellow pea protein to balance the amino acid profile.

It also contains EFAs, including 3500mg of omega-3, 9 grams of soluble and insoluble fibre, enzymes, probiotics, antioxidants from a berry complex with an 800+ ORAC value, maca (which helps rebuild the adrenal glands after elevated stress or heavy training) and chlorella, (for cleansing, to speed cellular regeneration and supply natural vitamin B-12 and chlorophyll).

Plus, what makes it unique is that it's wheat, gluten, sugar, and soy free. It's lightly sweetened with stevia so it does not cause a blood sugar spike, and therefore also good for diabetics.

LS: How does a vegan diet enhance your performance as an athlete?

BB: I can recover faster after exercise; therefore can train more, which of course makes me a better athlete. Speeding recovery rate is the number-one way to improve as an athlete.

LS: What kinds of mental and physical changes have you experienced after following a vegan diet?

BB: Mentally, I can think more clearly since my digestion has enhanced. When easily-digestible food is eaten, not as much blood needs

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to travel to the stomach to aid in the digestion process. This frees it up to circulate throughout the body and the brain, which improves mental clarity.

But what I most appreciate is that I don't have cravings for any specific foods. Cravings are a form of mental clutter. A well-balanced plant-based diet can eliminate them. This is one of the best ways to become a better problem-solver. If, however, your brain regularly craves something, it is focused on that one thing and therefore will not allow thoughts to flow. Without cravings for any food, I find I'm also more alert and productive.

On the physical side, I'm leaner, yet able to retain strength, which makes my strength-to-weight ratio better and therefore, improves my efficiency and ultimately my endurance. I also find that I don't need to sleep as much as most people who eat a more traditional diet. I sleep very soundly, and wake up refreshed.

The line between being asleep and awake has become blurred for many. They don't sleep soundly and when they're awake, sometimes it seems as though they're not 100 percent awake. A properly balanced plant-based diet helps keep that line starkly defined.

LS: What is one of your favourite vegan recipes from your book, *The Thrive Diet: The Whole Foods way to Losing Weight, Reducing Stress, and Staying Healthy for Life*?

BB: *The Thrive Diet* has over 100 recipes, so it's hard to choose just one. All the recipes are vegan of course. They're also all gluten, wheat, and soy free, so no common allergens at all. I make the smoothies on a regular basis for breakfast or after a hard workout. I also make the sport drinks most days and the energy gels on long workout days.

For dinner I really like one of the big salads and the black-eyed pea quinoa pizza with pesto sauce and vegetables.

LS: What advice do you have for those interested in converting to a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle?

BB: Start slow, but start. In my book I write about the transition phase. Not just the transition phase of adopting a new diet, but transitions in general. Change is stress, even if it's a positive one. The body needs time to adapt.

Taking small incremental steps is the best approach. For example, replacing a traditional breakfast with a complete whole food smoothie such as Vega is an easy way to start. This will ensure that all your nutritional needs are being met.

Then you will acutely begin to want to eat foods that are good for you and lose your desire to eat ones that are not as healthy. Even small changes such as this can lead to significant results over the course of a few weeks. From this point, everything is easy. □

Brendan Brazier is one of only a few professional athletes in the world whose diet is 100 percent plant-based. He's a professional Ironman triathlete, bestselling author (*The Thrive Diet*, Penguin 2007), and the creator of an award-winning line of whole food nutritional products called Vega. He is also the 2003 and 2006 Canadian 50km Ultra Marathon Champion.

Nominated in 2006 for the Manning Innovation Award, Canada's most prestigious award for innovation, Brendan was short-listed for the formulation of Vega.

In 2006, Brendan was invited to address the US Congress on Capitol Hill, where he spoke of the signifi-

cant social and economic benefits that could be achieved by improving personal health through better diet. The focus of his speech was to draw attention to the role that food plays in the prevention of most chronic diseases currently plaguing North Americans.

In 2007, VegNews Magazine named Brendan one of the "25 Most Fascinating Vegetarians."

Brendan is from North Vancouver, BC.

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