

“Dark leafy greens are also high in protein, because of the amino acids in chlorophyll. You have to eat more, but it’s much better quality, and you don’t have to do as much work to break down the proteins during digestion. It’s an ‘energy conserving’ versus an ‘energy consuming’ food type. I eat a big green salad every day.”

Erin Weiss-Trainor

Ask nearly any young vegan athlete about their role models, and along with the elite athletes of their own sport, they’ll also probably agree on one name: Brendan Brazier. He’s been a staunch and tireless advocate for vegan athletes, and broken new ground in identifying and meeting active vegans’ nutritional needs. You might say... he’s a trail-Brazier. (Ouch. Sorry.)

Unlike the loud ads that come with the latest and greatest nutritional fads, the ones that seem to reach out and fight for your attention, Brazier’s book *The Thrive Diet* (or *Thrive: The Vegan Nutrition Guide* in the US) seems to patiently sit back, waiting to unveil its own self worth. One might think that a diet book touting the best route to optimal health and weight loss is through Walnut Hemp burgers, Spicy Black-Eyed Pea Quinoa pizza and Kale Calcium Boost Smoothies would need a little more of a push to compete with more mainstream nutritional plans. But perhaps its apparent confidence is really just a perfect example of following its own advice: lowered stress leads to increased vitality.

And I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised that the author Brendan Brazier exuded this same quiet confidence when we spoke. It’s the same confidence that this accomplished professional triathlete, two-time Canadian 50 km ultramarathon champion, and formulator of Vega protein supplements has obviously had since he was just fifteen years old, when he started to challenge

the received wisdom of sports nutrition.

Brazier first began to question the status quo as a high school track athlete. He looked at what separated the best athletes from those who were just average, and was surprised to discover that the main difference was their recovery. The best athletes were able to train harder and faster because they were more quickly able to recover between workouts. The key determinant of recovery? Good nutrition.

As a teenager, Brazier simply ate whatever his mom fed him. It wasn’t Froot Loops and Chef Boyardee, but it wasn’t ideal for a growing athlete either. He began to experiment with different ratios and types of food, and found that the better he ate, the better his performance became.

When he first made the leap to remove animal products and go completely plant-based, his performance suffered. His old-school coach at the time claimed that Brazier would have to include meat to succeed. Brazier didn’t get mad, he got even. He tackled the project of plant-based eating with renewed enthusiasm.

He dissected his diet with clinical precision. He noticed he was lacking particular elements: complete proteins, vitamin B12, omega-3 fatty acids, iron, calcium, and other minerals. Athletes need more of these and other nutrients than sedentary people. Brazier simply tinkered till he got the ratios right. Within six weeks of making modifications, his performance

improved and recovery skyrocketed.

From these initial experiments, he developed a base diet that has evolved over the years to where he is now, a diet quite similar to what he endorses in his Thrive Diet. (See the Thrive Diet analysis elsewhere in this issue.)

Many years and self-experiments later, Brazier keeps his diet as simple as possible. This makes it easier when eating on the road; makes him feel good without devoting too much attention to food preparation; allows him to “keep to his roots”; and lets him focus on what he loves and wants out of life while enjoying a high quality of life.

Not everyone needs to be a high-powered endurance athlete to benefit. Even a couple of Thrive-style meals a day can provide noticeable improvements. Plant-based foods are fibre-rich and thus portion sizes are automatically controlled: Brazier simply stops eating when he’s full. In addition, the high nutrient density means that the eater is less likely to be undernourished – eating according to hunger matches nutrient needs more closely, unlike the standard North American diet that is high in calories from fats and starches but low in actual nutrients such as vitamins, minerals and phytonutrients (aka plant nutrients) such as carotenoids.

The most common question Brazier faces is about protein. He uses his own proprietary blend of hemp, pea, and rice, Vega. Hemp is low in the amino acid tryptophan, but rice balances this out, while the glutamic acid



Brendan Brazier LEAFY GREENS

in pea protein converts carbohydrate to energy more readily.

While people who start including more high-quality plant foods in their diet often feel better immediately, says Brazier, the results from this way of eating are not “instant”. This can deter many people who are looking for quick fixes. Indeed, some may feel temporarily worse as their body adjusts. “If you’ve been eating the standard American diet for your whole life, it might take you a year or more to feel better,” he warns.

Brazier’s ultimate goal, besides dominating his competition, is to help people change their attitudes about change itself. Avoid treating the symptoms of problems such as poor recovery and address fundamental causes, he says – even if it means throwing out or rethinking treasured paradigms. “There might be a better way to do anything,” he says. “Just because it’s steeped in tradition or has been done for a long time, whatever the reasons, doesn’t mean it’s the best way. Have an open mind and look for a new path.”

As he promotes his way of eating, Brazier continues to work on developing new Vega products, particularly ones that are as convenient as possible for busy people and athletes. He’s committed to his project.

“It’s rewarding when it works,” he reports. “Your body just starts to crave good things. You get to the point where it’s easy and you have no desire to ‘cheat’, because your body forgets what it tastes like – or it doesn’t want the bad stuff any more.”