

LET THEM EAT MEAT

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An ex-vegan on veganism. By Rhys Southan

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Interview With an Ex-Vegan: Devon Crosby Helms

After a vegan blog called me out for claiming that nobody becomes vegan purely for athletic purposes, I realized I could stand to learn a little more about vegan athletes. But then, my biases being what they are, I thought it might be even more interesting to learn about ex-vegan athletes. So I interviewed Devon Crosby Helms, a runner who tried out veganism and vegetarianism until she discovered that [meat improves her athletic performance](#).



Why did you become a vegan athlete?

I never set out to become vegan. When I was in a holistic natural chef program in 2007, we were focusing on a strongly vegetarian diet and I was learning to cook all sorts of fun vegetarian and vegan dishes. I realized one day that I hadn't been eating animal products for a whole month and I felt really good, so I decided that my body was responding to a vegan diet, and therefore I would make it into my lifestyle.

Was there an ethical component to your vegetarianism and veganism?

Not at all. I don't mix food and morals — my favorite post-vegan read is *The Shameless Carnivore*. I became vegan for my health and said I would listen to my body if being vegan no longer supported that. Ultimately it didn't.

Do you know of other athletes who became vegan purely because they thought it would improve their athletic abilities?

Yes, I have known plenty of people who thought becoming vegan would improve their athletic abilities. If you go vegetarian or vegan and are really eating a clean, organic, local, whole food diet, then it would help your athletic performance. But you can eat meat that meets that criteria as well.

Roger Ebert's Journal
Suicide Food
The Locavore Hunter
Vegan.com
The Vegan Police
Vegans Against PETA
vegansaurus!
Vegan Soapbox
Vegans of Color

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Absurdism
The Autobiography of Malcolm X
Creepy Crawly Cuisine
The Death of Ivan Illych
The Denial of Death
Don Quixote
Entomophagy
Ignore Everybody
Man's Search for Meaning
Moralistic Fallacy
The Myth of Sisyphus
Veg*ans in America Today
The Vegetarian Myth
What is Seen and What is Not Seen
Your Daily Vegan

Does being athletic make it easier or more difficult to stay vegan?

Much harder. Just getting in the number of calories alone on a whole food vegan diet is hard. I think it is important to note that my diet (whether or not meat is included) is predominately comprised of fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, oils and alternative (gluten-free) grains and beans. I am gluten-intolerant and don't eat soy. So when I was vegan, it was harder to get in the calories I needed.

Why did you stop being vegan?

A vegan diet stopped supporting my health and when I stayed on it anyway, I ended up with a whole host of problems that I still have to deal with now. I was rundown, anemic, [had developed hypothyroid](#) and had severe adrenal fatigue. And on top of that, being vegan made me neurotic about my food.

Since the founding principle of my veganism was listening to my body's needs, I said that if and when my body needed or wanted meat again then I would willingly reincorporate it (at least, I thought it would be that simple).

Why wasn't it that simple?

Before I went vegan, I had a healthy balanced relationship with food. I was in tune with my body's signals and ate intuitively. When you take on a strict definition of yourself as an eater, the act of eating becomes much more conscious. You become hyper-aware of what is in everything.

Knowing what is in your food is good (*In Defense of Food*-style), but being rigid and neurotic is not. Being a strict, gluten-free, soy-free vegan meant I had to check on what was in every bite of food when I didn't prepare it myself. When you exert that much control over your diet, your body's natural signals get drowned out. It has taken me a long time to re-learn the the physical awareness and eating intuition I had before I was vegan.

Did you like that the vegan label helped you to define yourself?

No, I hated that anyone would define me by my food choices. I think it is very confining and can be dangerous to be defined by food. To me, food should be about nourishing your body and being healthy. Labels are marginalizing and when I stopped being vegan, I was ridiculed by some vegans. I even had a good friend stop being friends with me because I was no longer vegan. It is kinda funny since I was a meat eater when we were first friends.

All the recent ex-vegan interviews I've posted have been with women. Maybe women are more likely to become vegan (and thus ex-vegan), but in your entry [Define to undefine to define myself](#), you mentioned talking to a doctor who said protein was an even bigger issue for women than men because women don't produce as much testosterone. Do you think it's harder for women to stay vegan than men?

I do think it is harder for women to stay vegan while participating in endurance sports. I also feel like a lot of athletic women go vegan to cut calories and lose weight, and ultimately that is going to be defeating in one way or another. It is harder for woman to retain muscle in general and I think that to be on a vegan diet and retain your lean mass, you have to be very meticulous about your nutrition.

You were vegetarian for a while after quitting veganism. Why did you get back into meat?

When I finished my first 100 mile race in 2008, I knew that my body was going to want some weird and funky things. After not craving it or desiring it for a year, suddenly all I could think about was a egg and cheese burrito. I had one and didn't crave another. Over time I got back into eggs and dairy, until I found out I was allergic to eggs (after another one and a half years, I am no longer allergic to them, thankfully).

I started eating meat about four months after my first bite of dairy and eggs. I was craving it seriously after long runs. My body was demanding it. Turkey and lamb were the usual desired meats and it's funny because before being vegan, I didn't like either.

In the entry [Peanut Butter as a Metaphor](#) a while back, you described your relationship with food as a vegan, and "neurotic" would be a good way to describe it. Have you become more relaxed about food now? Are you still afraid of a lot of foods?

I definitely fell down the rabbit hole with my feelings toward food when I was in my culinary program. After learning about all the things that are nutritionally "bad," I tried to give my body the best fuel, and I just took it too far. I got to a point where I didn't consume coffee, alcohol, animal products, gluten, soy, peanuts or sugar. And pretty much every food choice made me anxious.

Now I have a very even keel about food. I eat a healthy diet, but I know that enjoying treats and dining out is an essential part of staying balanced — body, mind and spirit. So no, I am not afraid of a lot of foods anymore. Being anxious and neurotic about food is more detrimental to your health than "bad" food is.

I still often choose vegan foods (for instance, every day I have a large salad for lunch), but now it's a real choice, rather than the only thing I am able to eat that meets my food criteria. I like being free to eat what I want and not have it be a declaration of who I am, or even who I am as an eater.



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