



# An Athlete's Journey from Vegan Protein Addict to Plant-Based Whole Foods

By Robert Cheeke  
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I consider myself one of the lucky people who stumbled upon a plant-based diet early on in life, at age 15, while growing up on a farm in an agricultural town in western Oregon. I adopted a plant-based lifestyle before the Internet came of age, and I learned how to fuel my high school athletic career (I played five sports) largely on my own, through trial and error, by eating plants. Throughout my teen years, my diet and lifestyle evolved through new experiences, education, and experimentation with different types of foods and approaches to sports nutrition. All along the way, I was a pretty good athlete too, ranked #1 in my high school for the fastest one-mile run, and I pursued team and individual sports including soccer, basketball, wrestling, cross country, and track and field.

## Becoming a Vegan Athlete and Bodybuilder

When my pursuit of endurance sports ran its course after one year of running cross-country in college, I followed my heart, started weight training, and became a bodybuilder. It had been a dream of mine since childhood to look like my wrestling and cartoon character idols of Hulk Hogan, He-Man, and Captain Planet, and I was able to transform my body into one similar to what I saw on television growing up. At age 15, I weighed 120 pounds; at age 23, I weighed 195 pounds. I was living proof that one could build muscle on a plant-based diet. I built a website called [Vegan Bodybuilding](#) in 2002; directed and produced a documentary called *Vegan Fitness Built Naturally* in 2005; and wrote a bestselling book, *Vegan Bodybuilding & Fitness*, in 2010 to share my experiences as a vegan bodybuilder with others.

## Dispelling the Protein Myth

In 2011, I was recruited by [Forks Over Knives](#) to help market the film. At that time, my diet was comprised of a variety of whole and processed foods, supplements, and a fondness for consuming as much protein as I could. That quickly changed as I spent time with the film's creator and executive producer, [Brian Wendel](#), and stars of the film including Dr. Esselstyn and Dr.

Campbell, who would later become my friends and colleagues.

As a champion bodybuilder, I lived by the notion that protein was king. My goal was to consume as much protein as possible. I once consumed 18 tofu hotdogs in a single day, something that seems absurd to me now, but was part of my lifestyle at one time. There is a collective fear among Americans and people around the world that if we're not eating animal products, then we won't get enough protein. I was learning that the opposite might be true, but I still adamantly defended the idea of downing as much plant protein as I could to sustain my competitive bodybuilding career.

After my inspirational and educational experience of working with Forks Over Knives, I enrolled in the Dr. T. Colin Campbell Plant-Based Nutrition Course through Cornell University. Dr. Campbell's course challenged what I thought I knew about protein, supplementation, processed and whole foods, and a number of other health topics. Through education, I made a 180-degree turn on various viewpoints, and, ultimately, changed my life. At this point, I had no choice but to put what I had learned into action and give it a try.

## Saying Goodbye to Tofu and Protein Shakes

In 2012, I said goodbye to processed foods and supplements for good and allowed real food to fuel my athletic endeavors. In previous years, I had been obsessed with gnawing on a package of tofu or guzzling down a protein drink immediately after a workout. With my new approach, I threw fear out the window and stopped worrying about protein. Dr. Campbell's research reveals that we only need to consume 5-10 percent of our daily caloric intake from protein, not 30-60 percent, which is a common goal for athletes and bodybuilders.

On my new whole-food, plant-based, [Forks Over Knives lifestyle](#), I set a course record in the "Run Like the Wind" 3-hour timed race in 2012 that still stands in 2015. I never looked back, and I am currently stronger than I have ever been in my life, performing lifts that few people my size are able to manage.

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Now at age 35, I am in the best shape of my life, which led me to write a book about my experiences over the past few years. Endorsed by the producer of *Forks Over Knives*, Dr. Campbell, Dr. Esselstyn, and two dozen other world-renowned experts, I released *Shred It!* in November of 2014. The book is full of case studies; transformation stories; 75 whole-food, plant-based recipes and meal plans; dozens of workouts including photo demonstrations, and featured stories from more than 35 plant-based athletes.

I didn't know when I accepted the opportunity to join the Forks Over Knives team that it would be one of the most influential decisions I would make in my life. As I embark on my 20<sup>th</sup> year as a plant-based athlete, I am so grateful to those who stood up to shed light on what will someday be considered the norm.