

Will 'The Game Changers' Change Your Game?



By Joe Schwarcz — December 14, 2019

The feats of the athletes in a Netflix documentary cannot be considered to be proof of the benefits of a vegan diet for athletic performance. For every vegan “star,” one can find numerous top-level athletes who gorge on meat.



Photo Courtesy: McGill University [1]

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The documentary “[The Game Changers](#)” [2] has been picking up steam on Netflix. This is basically a two-hour promo for a vegan lifestyle focusing on a few athletes who attribute their high-level performance to a vegan diet. Before going further, let me say that I favour a diet that has lots of fruits, vegetables and nuts, but I think that some meat, mostly poultry and fish can be accommodated. I have no argument with the notion that a mostly plant-based diet offers health benefits but what we have in this film is a host of anecdotes bolstered with some cherry-picked data. Of course one can find vegan athletes who perform well because there is nothing about a vegan diet that would preclude this. It is certainly possible with proper attention to food intake to meet the body’s protein needs. Meat is not necessary despite advertisers badgering away about the complete proteins in meat.

However, the feats of the athletes in “The Game Changers” cannot be considered to be proof of the benefits of a vegan diet for athletic performance. For every vegan “star,” one can find

numerous top-level athletes who gorge on meat. Zach Bitter, for example, the 24-hour and 100-mile world record-holder, is a heavy-duty meat man. Usain Bolt, the fastest human ever, breakfasted on eggs, lunched on pasta and corned beef and had Jamaican dumplings and roasted chicken on a typical day. Attributing the Tennessee Titans making the playoffs to 16 of the players adopting a vegan diet is a big stretch. Maybe those players did feel better on their new diet because their previous one featuring pizza and fried chicken as the main food groups was atrocious.

The producers of this film, including James Cameron, are dedicated vegans and strive to make a point, mostly through confirmation bias. They “know” that a vegan diet is the way to go and then look for evidence to support their view. That evidence is quite flimsy. Comparing the plasma of three athletes after eating meat and vegetable meals and then concluding that meat is unhealthy because the plasma is more cloudy is meaningless. First, the sample size is way too small, and the notion that the cloudiness has something to do with impaired endothelial function has no basis in science. There is also an experiment in which three men, again a statistically meaningless sample size, were fitted with a device to monitor erections during the night. The conclusion was that after eating meat they had fewer and softer erections. We have no idea about the medical history of the subjects or differences in lifestyle.

Some of the data dredging done is nonsensical. Suggesting that iceberg lettuce has more antioxidants than salmon or eggs is ridiculous. Salmon and eggs are not consumed for their antioxidant potential, although they do have some of these compounds. Eggs contain lutein and zeaxanthin while salmon has astaxanthin. And while fruits and vegetables do have lots of antioxidants, lettuce is a poor example. While it is true that on a dry weight basis lettuce may have more antioxidants, since lettuce is mostly water one would have to consume piles of it to match the antioxidant content of a serving of eggs or salmon. Other points such as cow’s milk increasing estrogen levels and reducing testosterone are not even supported by the references provided, nor is the statement that “vegetarians who add one serving of chicken or fish to their diets a week triple their risk of colon cancer.” There is also a misleading statement about a peanut butter sandwich having the same amount of protein as a three ounce steak. That would have to be a pretty hefty sandwich containing about 40 grams of peanut butter. The total calorie count would be roughly double that of the steak and the sandwich would have some 25% more fat.

There is talk about how Big Food and Big Pharma influence research, but no comment that some of the research cited on behalf of veganism is funded by the organic or avocado industries. Basically, when it comes to making a good case for increasing plant product intake, the film disappoints by overstating the benefits. Yes, athletes can perform well on a vegan diet, but not *because* of it. There is good science to be had for promoting a plant-based diet, but this film strays too much into pseudoscience for my appetite. Admittedly, it does make some solid points about the environmental unfriendliness of animal agriculture. Also, if it does convince you to move towards a more plant-based diet, then it will have done some good. But I don't think going vegan will improve your physical performance when it comes to arm-wrestling with carnivores. Remember also that "plant-based" does not necessarily equal "healthy." After all, French fries, ketchup, candied apples, onion rings, frosted flakes, and sugar-sweetened soft drinks are all plant-based!

The original McGill University OSS post can be [found here](#) [3].

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