

# What Being a Vegan Runner Means to Me

By Matt Frazier

Vegan marathoner; Author, 'No Meat Athlete'



It takes only one word, really: this lifestyle, to me, is a *practice*.

I use the word in the way it's commonly employed in the context of meditation, yoga, philosophy, or even religion -- where "practice" means an activity done for its own sake, something that is not at first pleasurable (and in fact is often quite difficult) but that is unquestionably worthwhile for the foundation of character that it builds. Worthwhile, ultimately, because it purifies the soul.

Many runners run for the joy of running. Many vegans, since coming to this diet, have discovered a love for food and cooking they didn't know existed. But neither of these describes me.

For me, both running and veganism involve personal sacrifices -- sacrifices that are worth it, but sacrifices nonetheless.

I don't run in order to feel good in the moment. Sure, I recognize that if I'm having a bad day, a run might help me put things in context, and feel better all around. But that's not why I run -- in simplest terms, I run because running is the least painful way for me to stay in shape. There's some fun associated with it, but it must be qualified: "fun," with quotes.

There's more to it, of course. Over time, I've come to love the process of training for a certain time goal, or a distance that at one time seemed impossible. But in the moment when I'm spending a Saturday morning running 24 miles -- not in a race, just in training -- while the rest of the world enjoys their coffee and a crossword puzzle, I can't honestly say I'm having fun. Not even fun-in-quotes.

My experience with veganism is very similar. Before I made the decision to stop eating meat, I loved cooking and looked forward every night to an adventure in the kitchen. I loved the act of going to the store, choosing the freshest ingredients to make the most authentic, luxurious version possible of whatever food I had chosen -- usually an Italian dish, ever since a trip to Italy awoke the chef (and wine lover) in me.

But after I made the decision to eliminate meat and eventually any other animal products, cooking ceased to be my passion. I still enjoy making a good meal, but gourmet vegan cooking has never excited me the way more traditional cuisine did. I've accepted that for my palate, plants just don't taste as good as animal products did, and more than five years after I last took a bite of meat, I still recognize this. Now that I'm vegan, the love of cooking I once had is all but gone.

If this is surprising coming from a guy who makes a living writing a blog about the intersection of veganism and running, that's because it's supposed to be. But if the story ended here, I wouldn't be writing this essay.

Here's the rest of it: If in the moment neither running nor being vegan is as pleasurable as the alternative, then whatever drives me to run and abstain from all animal products, day in and day out, must be pretty darn compelling. And it is.

Let's return to that word: practice. It implies a sacrifice, not in return for something external, but in exchange for something far more valuable -- inner strength.



When I train for seven years to qualify for the Boston Marathon, taking 100 minutes off my marathon time in the process, what does that teach me about my own capacity for change? And about the power of small, repeated actions, each with no

noticeable benefit, until the tiny improvements over the course of years culminate in a result that was unthinkable before?

When I run 100 miles in just over a day, pushing on through the depths of pain and self-doubt, what do I learn about perseverance? About what we're really capable of, when we stretch ourselves to the limit, which is far more than we could have imagined?

As for veganism: for years, there was an obvious inconsistency in my relationship with my food. When I looked into the eyes of my dogs, when I truly felt love for these animals. So how could I routinely begin my *pasta al arrabiata* by frying a half pound of flesh from an animal no less intelligent or sentient than my pooches? It didn't compute, so I didn't allow myself to think about it. I buried the thought deep in my psyche -- out of sight, out of mind, but always there, an open loop.

When I finally made the decision to go vegan, that loop finally closed. During my first shopping trip as a vegan, I stood in the aisles of the grocery store diligently scanning ingredient lists, and was struck by the realization that this inconvenience felt incredibly, unmistakably right. At last.

With each meal and each day that passes -- as any desire to eat animals ever again fades, and I begin to take a bizarre pleasure in the mild inconveniences that result from the choice to eat this way (having to prepare hummus wraps before a long car trip if we want to eat anything of substance, for example) -- a feeling of completeness grows inside me. My values and behavior are aligned rather than at odds. And that, for me, far outweighs whatever momentary pleasure I give up when I choose to eat lentils and rice instead of rosemary-rubbed steak and mashed potatoes.



There are many people in this world who don't know that human beings can run 26.2 miles -- let alone 100 miles or more -- without stopping. Likewise, there are many who don't understand that it's possible to eat a healthy, substantial diet that includes no animal products whatsoever.

On its own, either of these practices would be enough to create an identity -- *I'm a runner*, or *I'm a vegan*. Being both puts you squarely in the realm of "freak" in many people's eyes.

Those of us who do it tend to believe that the diet helps our running. But there's still the inconvenience -- that of getting enough calories to support this type of training, with foods that in general aren't as calorically dense as meat or dairy products are. And the slight annoyance that at the aid stations of an ultramarathon -- those oases of food and drink that punctuate long, lonely stretches of trail -- the sandwiches, wraps, and cookies there usually aren't for us. Almost nothing is. And at the finish, the pizza with cheese and soup with chicken broth aren't for us either.

This isn't a complaint. I don't expect special treatment. It's part of the practice of being a vegan athlete, one more tiny sacrifice to strengthen me.

When I think of the word practice, it comes with an undercurrent of simplicity. The Zen monk needs no tools to meditate, only a cushion on which to sit. The yogi needs only her mat. There is as little obstruction as possible between the experience of the practice and he or she who practices.

It's for this innate simplicity that I choose running as my sport. There's no two-thousand dollar bike to buy and maintain, no monthly membership fee, no hours at which the roads open and close. The dress is minimal -- shorts and a t-shirt suffice, and in the past few years we've seen even shoes become optional, as runners return to the form of running we were born to do. Sure, you can get as 21st-century as you want, with GPS devices, heart rate monitors, sensors in your shoes, and of course iPods and watches, but none of these is necessary. The longer I run, the less I find myself interested in the gadgetry.

My veganism is no different. I flirted at first with gourmet vegetarian and vegan cooking, in an attempt to transfer my enthusiasm for omnivorous cuisine to my newly compassionate diet. But quickly I found that, for me, it didn't take -- I could only rarely get excited about vegan food the way I once did over long-simmered lamb ragout served over gnocchi with pecorino cheese.

And so, because I was committed for ethical reasons not to eat animals, I went in the opposite direction. For lack of a better term, I turned to what Italian chefs affectionately call peasant food.

Simple, one-pot, one-bowl meals, like rice and lentils, or "a grain, a green, and a bean." Fancier, more processed snacks have been replaced by handfuls of nuts or raw trail mix, or some homemade hummus in a pita with a few spinach leaves.

Fresh, raw fruit, and even plain, crispy vegetables -- it's amazing how your palate starts to change, and how amazing previously-bland foods start to taste once you get away from food that comes in packages.



And in simplifying my approach to food, I discovered a different aspect of cooking than I used to appreciate: the joy of cooking a meal that, instead of highlighting three or four or twelve flashy ingredients, showcases just one profoundly delicious, in-season food in all its glory, against a

simple backdrop of supporting flavors. Butternut squash risotto. Fresh tomato soup. Spinach curry. Or my favorite, *penne* with cauliflower, a dish which prompted **chef Mario Batali** to perfectly say, *"Sometimes a recipe can be so simple it seems, well, almost pathetic. But eating something that's all about one simple, amazing flavor is what good food is all about."*



Luxury can take two forms -- big, extravagant, and over the top, or humble, minimalist, and just perfect that way. I'm learning that for me, the latter is the luxury that life as a vegan runner offers.



Just as there are runners who live to run, there are vegans who love every aspect of being a vegan. They're eager to share the joy they've discovered, and perhaps that's why we've earned the reputation as a group that isn't shy about letting others know we love this lifestyle and wish they'd try it, too.

Falafel with Tahini Mint Sauce

But it has never been my shtick to tell people how they should eat, nor if I'm honest can I say that there haven't been aspects of being a vegan (or being a runner, for that matter) that represent sacrifices, or at least a delay of gratification, when compared to the life that most people choose. And that, of course, is why I chose the word practice, instead of delight or joy or hobby.





Inside Matt's Fridge

I'm different from most other vegan runners in my personal experience with this lifestyle, but recognizing the sometimes-inconvenience and discomfort leaves me no less passionate about the choice. For me, the best way (the only way) to spread this message is to openly admit that it's *not* a walk in the park -- and to choose to do it nonetheless.



Refried Beans Vegan Tostadas





Matt and Erin Frazier and children

Photo by Bren Photography

## About Matt Frazier

No Meat Athlete was founded in 2009 by Matt Frazier, at about the same time he went vegetarian. Six months later, Matt qualified for the Boston Marathon with a time of 3:09:59 at the Wineglass Marathon, over 100 minutes faster than his first marathon time seven years prior.

In June 2010, Matt ran his first 50-mile ultramarathon, and has run several more ultras and marathons each year since.

Matt lives in Asheville, North Carolina with his wife, Erin, and his son and daughter, and is the author of *No Meat Athlete: Run on Plants and Discover Your Fittest, Fastest, Happiest Self*.

No Meat Athlete currently has over 20,000 subscribers and is viewed by over 300,000 unique visitors each month.

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