

the guardian

WORD OF MOUTH
BLOG

Olympic vegetarians: the elite athletes who shun meat

Lizzie Armitstead isn't the first athlete to achieve Olympic success on a non-meat diet. We raise a glass of [vegetarian champagne](#) to some of the best



Lizzie Armitstead with her silver medal. Photograph: Mike Egerton/PA

Lizzie Armitstead was just 10 years old when she told her parents she wanted to become a vegetarian. Yesterday, she won [Great Britain's first medal of the Olympic Games](#), taking silver in the gruelling 87-mile road cycling race, no less.

I was brought up as vegetarian from birth and have been a long distance runner for most of my adult life. One of the most common misconceptions I've come across is that vegetarians are pallid, gentle creatures who would recoil in a tough sporting arena. Despite the fact I was breaking school records on the track, people still questioned my diet's ability to make me strong.

I spent six months last year living and training with some of Kenya's greatest long-distance runners, for my book, [Running With the Kenyans](#). The athletes (from the Rift Valley) were not strictly vegetarian, but ate very little meat, which is usually reserved for special occasions such as weddings or funerals. Although there were occasional non-vegetarian meals served in the athlete training camps, we lived mostly on a diet of rice, beans, ugali (a dough made of maize flour and water) and green vegetables. The list of gold medals the Kenyan athletes have won on the track is almost endless. (On a personal note, I returned home to run a marathon in under three hours.)

However, most nutritionists are still unconvinced of the benefits of a vegetarian diet for elite sportspeople. While it can mean a diet low in saturated fat, which is good, it requires athletes to be more vigilant about their intake of protein, iron and vitamin B12. "It is hard work," says Linia Patel, a sports nutritionist at the British Dietetic Society. "It can be done, of course, but I take my hat off to those who do it."

Yet as Armitstead has shown yet again, vegetarians continue to rise to the very top of their sports. She follows a long line of Olympians who have managed to excel without

"eating corpses", as she herself puts it. In honour of her medal, here are a few other great vegetarian Olympians:

Paavo Nurmi



Paavo Nurmi. Photograph: Keystone-France/Gamma-

Keystone via Getty

One of the greatest distance runners in history, the 'Flying Finn' won nine gold medals in long-distance running events during the 1924 and 1928 Olympics, including the 1,500m and 5,000m on the same afternoon in Paris in 1924.

Murray Rose

Known as the 'Seaweed Streak' because of his vegan diet, Australian swimmer Rose won four Olympic gold medals in the 1956 and 1960 Olympics. He was a vegan from from childhood.

Edwin Moses



Gold medalist Edwin Moses. Photograph: Bob

Thomas/Getty Images

Twice the Olympic 400m hurdles gold medallist, Moses went on one of the most incredible winning streaks in the history of sport when he won 122 successive races between 1977 and 1987, breaking four world records along the way.

Bode Miller

One of the greatest American alpine skiers of all time, Miller has won five Olympic medals, including gold in Vancouver in 2010. He was raised as a vegetarian on an organic farm in New Hampshire.

Carl Lewis



Carl Lewis crosses the line in 1991. Photograph: Getty

Images

Carl Lewis wasn't a vegetarian when he won four gold medals in Los Angeles in 1984, but turning vegan later in his career only seemed to help. In 1991 he won the 100m at the world championships at the age of 30 in a world record. It was, he has said, his greatest race.

Emil Voigt

The last British man to win a long-distance gold medal at the Olympics, in 1908 in London, Voigt was a former Guardian writer as well as a dedicated vegetarian.

Christopher Campbell

The wrestling arena is no exception when it comes to vegetarian winners. Campbell missed his chance at Olympic gold in 1980 through the US boycott of the Games - he won the world title in 1981 - but he managed to come back in 1992 to win bronze in Barcelona at the ripe old age of 37.

Martina Navratilova



Martina Navratilova in action in 2004. Photograph:

Gabriel Bouys/AFP/Getty

Although she lost in the quarter finals in her only Olympic appearance in Athens in 2004, Navratilova is one of the greatest tennis players in history, winning 18 Grand Slams, including an incredible nine Wimbledon titles. She is a strong advocate of vegetarianism.

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Damn...and I really warned to her.

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Batmanned

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I'd be more worried about certain athletes scoffing fast food in the Olympic village.

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RobertsRadio

30 July 2012 4:39PM

I agree. My two children have been vegetarian for over 15 years their idea not mine but one which I welcomed very much. I became a vegetarian at the same time because, consciously, it was the right thing to do.

My son is over 6ft tall and is a very intelligent, ambitious and hard working lawyer, my daughter is 5ft 8ins and is also a very intelligent, ambitious and hard working psychologist. They are both very slim and very, very healthy.

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