How A World-Class Athlete Thrives On A Plant-Based Diet Transcript

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Introduction to Rip Esselstyn

Well hello everybody. It is another unbelievably exciting episode of Reversing Heart Disease. Naturally, summit. And you probably can already see we not only have a hunky, hunky interview coming up, we have a world famous figure in the, both athletic and nutrition, whole food plant based world, Rip Esselstyn.

That's probably a few people say Esselstyn, but I think it's Esselstyn. Right? You got it. You got it 100% correct. I applaud you. Look at his rip your real.

Some people do. That. Your real first name I didn't I never asked well no fear. So for starters it's a nickname. And what happened? My parents love to ski, and my dad was at the Cleveland Clinic.

I think he was doing his internship 1963. And you know, he grew up on a farm in New York. They love skiing in Vermont, a place called Stowe. Stowe, Vermont.

And so the farm was like eight hours from Cleveland. And it was and then it was another maybe three hours to Stowe, Vermont. So, you know, I was pregnant.

I mean, I was my mom was pregnant. I was in her tummy. And I decided to come out almost six weeks premature and where this farm is located, Joel is right next to the little hamlet where Washington Irving wrote The Legend of Sleepy Hollow and Rip Van Winkle.

And in the background of the farm, you have the Catskill Mountains, where rip went and slept for 20 years, and then came back and nobody recognized him.

But my grandfather, my dad's father started a clinic there called the Rip Van Winkle Clinic. You got the Rip Van Winkle Bridge, the Rip Van Winkle Diner, and so.

They didn't give me a name until day two, and they gave me the name rip. But in the birth certificate, it's Richard Van Esselstyn. But I've never been called Richard. Ever.

Isn't that interesting? Wow. Elegant little backstory. And, we love the geography references. And that farm has been in your family for, what, 400 years?

Not quite about three since 1675. So almost almost 350. And that range. Amazing. And yeah, we had a moment pre conversation I haven't formally introduced you.

Family Backstory and the Origin of the Name Rip

Of course if anybody by any chance doesn't know the engine to hero his first book, his experience transitioning from athlete to firefighter and then nutritional firefighter consultant.

Now you know, for many years working closely with John Mackey at Whole Foods on a food lined engine to food line. And now we'll talk about his new, very, very important venture, the plan strong food line, but Rip Esselstyn, Austin, Texas we were just chatting for a second before we went on and I just curious.

I do go pump gas and run into Peter Attia in Austin or just like bump into Joe Rogan that, you know, at the 7-Eleven. You probably don't hang at 7-Eleven a lot or at such.

No, no, I haven't I haven't bumped into Joe Rogan. I haven't bumped into Peter. Although I know that Lance Armstrong, who's a good friend of mine, just had Peter on his podcast.

I have not run into Elon Musk, but I have run into, Elon's brother, younger, younger brother, at a at a John Mackey event a couple months ago. Yeah. And I'm sure you run into John Mackey a whole lot of cars just in case somebody doesn't recognize that name.

You know, one of the four hippie founders of Whole Foods and certainly the face of Whole Foods till about five years ago. And now the face of love life, his new health and fitness and food adventure, which I wish John Mackey well and he's such a capable guy.

But let's come back to you. I'm allowed to ask, off the wall questions like, what's your real name? When you were growing up, again, I had the absolute pleasure of interviewing your father.

You know, which, is not the first time, but a treat. Just a couple days ago. And he was so amazing. Of course, having passed his 90th birthday not long ago and, saying your little energy bunny mother was running around in the background preparing dinner as soon as they were done.

But was there a time that the Esselstyn family, when you were growing up as a child, your dad now is about 40 years into heart disease reversal research.

But was there time, you guys, the diet was completely different than what it is now. What you're so famous for is a family. Oh yeah. I mean, we were we were the we epitomize what the standard American diet was.

Burgers, spare ribs, filet mignon and, you know, Ritz crackers with cheddar cheese, you know, for snacks all day long. The one the two things that my parents never allowed in the house growing up, they never allowed soda pop of, of any kind.

And they never allowed white bread. But other than that, anything went, I mean. Your dad started research. It would have been about, you know, senior high school, college age, you know, mid 80s.

You were probably, you know, finishing high school and in college mid 80s. Yep. So he started he started that first cohort cohort of 22 patients at the Cleveland Clinic in 1984.

And, and I was about two years into my I was my sophomore year at the University of Texas at Austin. And of course, you were on the swim team and quite a competent, competitive swimmer.

I mean, you were were you still eating steaks at UT Austin? Right. I was doing oh, yeah, I was Joe, I was on the Athletic dining room table with all the scholarship athletes.

So I was there with the football players, the basketball players, the the golfers, the swim team. And it was chicken fried steak. It was steak. It was burgers.

It was soft serve ice cream, all you could eat. It was and if there were veggies, they were drowned in, you know, butter, some sort of lard. It was, it was looking for.

Somebody who said, look, it's easy for rip.

Growing Up on the Standard American Diet

He grew up in the house. Where was a kid? He was eating tofu. But it's kind of refreshing. There. What age did you have the epiphany? And, you know, really start to make serious transition your own personal diet.

Well, so I would come home for spring break, for Christmas break for a couple months in the summer. And so my junior and senior year at the University of Texas, whenever I would come home, I got exposed to what my father was doing.

And as your as my dad may or may not have told you, he was like he told my mom, okay, if I'm going to ask my

these heart disease patients to do this, then, and you and I have to do this as well.

So my mom, you know, she was such a a warrior when it came to, you know, rolling up her sleeves and creating all these wonderful whole food plant based recipes.

But so when I came home, I got exposed to it and I wasn't at all negative. I was like, this is so cool. I love what you're doing. I, you know, I got exposed to sweet potatoes for the first time in my life.

Joel at home, my junior year in college, I got exposed to mangoes for the first time in my life, my junior year at college. It's crazy. What a narrow, myopic view we had as a household on what to eat.

And I look now and I think about what my, my, my kids have been exposed to all the different green leafy vegetables, all the incredible, you know, whole grains, all the different legumes.

It's it is Bountiful and they love it, but. No. So, Yeah. So I started in earnest, though I like 100%. When I graduated from the University of Texas, I was able to have a little apartment with a buddy of mine, and, we had a little kitchen, and that's when it started.

So for me, it started in 1986. Okay. So it's been a long journey for you, but it's so interesting to know that you've seen the other side and. You know, and tasted the other side.

You're not sneaking in the back door of capital Grille and having a rib eye, because you remember what it tasted like when you were, you know, 19 years old.

You're trained your taste buds and and your brain to savor what we both enjoy so much healthful cooking. So exactly. We are going to be talking to a couple athletes in this summit.

But you are an athlete. What's in a typical week? How many days a week do you work out? Well, it used to be a lot. I mean, it used to be probably 20 to 25 hours a week. Wow.

Back in the day when I was doing the track. So once I graduated from University of Texas at Austin, I immediately, embarked on a ten year career as a professional triathlete.

So that's really what I was doing. So yeah, I would say on average it was 20 to 25 hours a week. But now it's more like, you know, I, I swim with a master swim program six mornings a week, and I play pickleball, typically an hour to two hours, four days a week.

And then I'll go for, a mountain bike ride once a week. And then I'm also doing I'm also doing some I do, you know, pull ups, I do push ups, I do air squats.

And I'm going to start lifting weights again here very, very soon because it's incredible job.

Transition to Whole Food Plant-Based Eating

But you know, I'm, I'm 61 now and I've noticed that, you know, I want to do everything I can to starve off the sarcopenia, you know, that that sets in and keep keep that elevated resting metabolic rate, and, and just feel really good in my skin.

So that leads me to the question. And that's like was a perfect answer because I knew, you know, that's more than most people are doing that are listening to this, you know, interview.

You know, there's a raging debate. There's always a raging debate, you know, plant based versus keto, the diet. Yeah. But certainly the you have to to quote Mark Hyman, MD, if you want to build muscle, you have to eat muscle.

A direct quote from his most recent book. And Mark Hyman is a friend. But when I read that in his book, I nearly

swallowed my tongue. You have muscle, build muscle, and I don't believe the science shows that.

And I don't know if you've ever actually determined how many calories a day on a good workout day you're burning. But it's more than most of us. And so it leads to the question.

You must have come to the conclusion you can get enough calories and the right kind of, nutrients to sustain, you know, a high level athletic performance.

I mean, we got better at doing it, and we can occasionally hear about his diet and certainly not plant based and he's not the only one. It's just we already brought his name up as a fellow. Austin.

Yeah. Yeah, but you're doing it. You know what? It will. What more do you respond to this muscle centric approach to medicine that almost always is a animal food, you know, sustain muscle centric.

I mean, you're a rip rip. What do you do? Well, I think it's a big mistake. I mean, and I think it's kind of appealing to the lowest common denominator.

I mean, you and I both now let me backtrack for a sex. So, you know, the whole the whole thing, the whole idea that you have to eat muscle to build muscle to me is, you know, I think Patrick, the boobie in In the Game Changers, had the best quote, and I don't know if it made it into it.

But, you know, when he said, you know, thinking that you need to eat muscle to build muscle is about as ignorant as thinking that you need to eat brain in order to, you know, build smarts.

And, you know, I get it on the surface, but you and I both know that all the building blocks of all the essential amino acids, they start in plants. It's like the mother source for all 20 of the essential amino acids and the nine, I mean, the amino acids, and then the nine essential amino acids.

And it comes when you get it from plants. You get that without without all the excessive baggage, the saturated fat, the dietary cholesterol, you know, all the substances that promote trimethylamine oxide, the heme iron.

So I just think it's a, you know, my friend Doctor Doug Lyle just refers to animal products as just a dirty fuel. They're a dirty fuel. Yeah, they're a fuel, but they're just a dirty fuel that are going to clog up.

Clog up your engine. So I prefer to go for the clean Goldilocks, form of protein, which to me is it comes from plants. Now, I probably consume about 3000 calories a day easily.

I eat, I eat a huge breakfast. I eat a medium sized lunch and a good sized dinner. And then when I snack, I'm always snacking on fruit. Joel, I probably have no exaggeration.

12 pieces of fruit a day. No problem. I added it up because so many people ask me. And a typical day I'll take in between 95 to 115g of protein. I will take in right around 75 to 85g of fiber.

Training, Athletics, and Plant-Based Performance

And then I would say that, probably 75% of my calories are coming from complex carbs or simple carbs with the fruit, a good 15% coming from protein. And then the remainder is coming from fat.

1570 protein, which is, you know, very modest and reasonable and in line with national guidelines. But yeah, you're slamming down obviously chicken breast, but, you know, you're not guzzling tofu.

Well, yeah, not for a second. I mean I mean, let me, let me let me throw it back on you. I mean, what I mean, so one of the things that that I think is kind of getting out of control right now, in my opinion, is the amount of protein that people think they need to be consuming.

It's like we can't get this protein kind of myth to, to to leave. And I know that Peter Attia is a fan of huge amounts of protein. Sounds like Mark is, you know, you and I both are friends with, Michael Greger and if you've read, you know, How Not to age, you know, he's pretty.

He's pretty adamant that less protein is better than more protein. Right. And I do understand that a certain. Yeah, I, I, you know, my read of the science favors, you know, a lower protein diet until about age 70 or 65.

Doctor Valter Longo's right. The best research and you can do it with plants I agree. But the confusing thing to the people listening to this interview is they can click this off and we're done.

Go over to Instagram and see people with MD and Dr. after their name, talk about three times the level of protein as necessary to avoid sarcopenia. And, you know, during your career as a triathlete, were you largely plant based or totally plant based?

Oh, for the entire my the entire career? Yeah. So so I, I graduated from UT and in December of 86 and then in 87, I started a ten year career as a professional triathlete.

And I went whole food plant based literally like January 1st of 1980, 87. So, you know, I have not. Suspicion if you had been a UTI, swimmer, plant based, you know, you could have improved your performance.

I know your performance was excellent or, you know, you know. Yeah. You know what? I would, I would, I would say that when you're, when you're 18, 19, 20, 21, you can pretty much get away with anything, right?

And. Yeah, what I have recovered a little bit faster. Sure. But it's, you know, it's crazy. I, I look at these kids and, you know, they, they put on muscle and, you know, just by sneezing and, it's it's crazy how how hard we trained, how hard we partied, how fast we went and what, how resilient the human body is, especially in those golden years.

But, I mean, look what I'm doing now. I mean, you know, I got the world record for 55 to 59 year olds in the 200 meter backstroke. Right before Covid hit, literally at the top of my game in pickleball, I would say, although I haven't, I've played some of the top 60 plus year olds in the country, and I'm probably one of the top five, in the United States in singles, in, in pickleball, which is an insane sport, especially singles.

So, I attribute where I am now at 61, really to the totality of my lifestyle, whole food, plant based training consistently. And then, and then, you know, I don't smoke.

I haven't I really haven't been a drinker of alcohol for almost 25, 30 years. Yeah. So doing all that, doing all the thing, trying to do all the things.

Right. All right. Well, you know, I love to listen to a, a world class athlete talk about, you know, eating beans and peas and big bowl this area with plant based milks and fruit food, fruit, fruit and you know, you look great.

You're performing great. And people can, take that to heart that there's a lot of conversation on the other side of the aisle that needs to be questioned for its, authenticity.

But you've also had such an interesting career in that, you know, you're an entrepreneur and you're a businessman, and you had a long run with the engine to line up foods and whole foods.

But now you're the plant strong.com, man. And that is the website people should look at after this plant strong.com. And you've developed quite a, you know, wide and lovely line of foods that are now free of oils and, no excessive sodium, no refined sugar come from whole grains.

So, where are you running that out of Austin? Yeah, the headquarters are in Austin. We have about eight different co manufacturers that manufacture our different product, all over the United States and also in Toronto, Canada.

And, you know, this is my I mean, I'm going into my fourth, fourth, actually fifth year now with the food line. And it is Joel. It is it is probably the most challenging thing I've ever done in my life.

Step is stepping into this consumer product. Good arena against these billion dollar brands. We really are.

Protein Debate and Muscle Building

This is like David versus Goliath, and we are trying to carve a path, establish a niche where we can create incredibly delicious food that is nutritious and convenient and doesn't have all the copious amounts of salt, sugar and fat.

We're not using all the usual suspects, and that is something that I don't think has been done yet. You know, and and as we enter our fifth year, we've, we've got almost 12 different categories of products and we have almost 50 different offerings.

So what I mean by that is like we've got shelf stable milks. We got four of them. We've got ten different heat, eight chilies in stews. You just pop in the microwave and you've got like a chunky chipotle chili.

You put on a bit of green leaves or on a baked potato, or you can just eat it plain. We've got cereals, we've got granolas, we've got pizza crust kits, we've got teas, we've got pancakes and waffle mixes.

We have cornbread and muffin mixes. We have skillet burger mixes. So we literally the goal was to create this wide swath of, of basically like a plan, strong grocery store where you could go and get all the things that you want when you don't feel like cooking this particular night, or it's a quick breakfast, like every Saturday and Sunday, I whip up these pancakes and waffles and we just add water to it, to the mix, the dry mix, whip it up, and then you've got pancakes, you know, literally in less than a minute and a half.

But I'm super proud of the other of my team. The passion that we have, the the inroads that we're making, you know, we're in almost 4500 different retail grocery stores with, our chilis and stews and our shelf stable milks, Whole Foods, Kroger, Wegmans.

We're going to be launching and, probably 1500 target stores in the middle of June. I'm sorry, middle of 2025 with our milks. So, you know, we're we're we're doing everything we can to get it done.

Yeah. It's exciting. And again, I encourage people to go to plant strong.com. You can see all 50 of these selections. I'm not sure if every everyone I'll ask you I know that many many are labeled gluten free.

And some people that's another attraction. Is every product gluten free? Now? Every product is not gluten free, but I would say probably 25% of our products.

Are gluten free. Click on a button and isolate the gluten free ones if you want to. Of course. Yeah. And Yeah, we know we I understand that that's important for people that, you know, either have celiac or have some sort of a reaction when they eat, gluten.

So we wanted to be very sensitive of and have some of those offerings. So, yeah, I mean, we've got yeah, all of our skillet burgers. We have a pancake and waffle mix.

We have a gluten free cornbread and muffin mix. Our all of our milks, our, are gluten free. A couple of a couple of our chilis and stews. Yeah. So there's something for everybody.

And, you know, I just clicked on your organic pizza kit. A five pack, very reasonably priced. And I love the crust. Organic whole wheat flour, organic sour dough, organic vinegar, organic dehydrate and maple sirup.

Organic tomatoes in the US organic vinegar. You know, it's it's a high quality line. You know some of us know that name out there is a good friend of mine, the food babe.

Bonnie. Harry just was, testifying in Senate. She would look at this and say, I'll feed my kids this. This is real food. This is clean food.

Plant Strong Food Line and Product Overview

This is. I'm not seeing any, you know, yellow dye number 40. And, the rest. So congratulations. Because, you know, I we're interviewing such good people on this.

And I interviewed doctor Neil Bernard, and he's so great about teaching how you take your current diet and you just modify it to one that now becomes consistent with his, you know, crazy success in helping people lose weight and lower their blood sugar and reverse the disease.

But it still gets to the point. Some people just don't know where the kitchen is in their house, and they don't know how to open a bottle of marinara and put some, pasta and, in a, in a.

Pot skillet up a. Pot. There's the word thank, momentary lapse. I'm four years older. Or you. I'm allowed a little respect. So I love the idea, you know, that, you know, you can really direct a person.

And I do this often. You know, you need to make changes. But maybe for those 2 or 3 weeks, plant strong time might be a good place to get started. You know, so that it's just so easy.

You're going to have your burger tonight. Don't worry about it. But we're going to provide you a way to get a burger that consistent with forks over knives and what the hell.

And reading like your father's and reading books like Doctor Bernard and Doctor. And so, you know, I agree, you're and, you know what I often refer to that that, blue ocean.

There's not a lot of competition, you know. Yeah. No, no, it's a lot of a lot of blue skies. You just got it. You got it. You got to execute, got to execute, and you got to, but, you know, one of the things, one of my big learnings, Joel, because, you know, I, I had a the engine two food line that was at Whole Foods for almost ten years.

And the goal there was really to, to be the most nutritious by a mile. But what we lacked under the engine two moniker was really it wasn't delicious.

It was. It was okay, but you really had to have a sophisticated palate. And it was a really appreciate it. And so you kind of one of my, this one of the steaks that I put in the ground with the new plan, strong line was, listen, in addition to being nutritious, it has to be absolutely drop dead delicious.

And, I would challenge anybody. You tell me if our pancake and waffle mixes aren't the best you've ever tried. Put them up against birch benders. Put them up, put them up against, Kodiak.

Any of them and ours, I believe, are the best. Same with our milk. Same with our skillet burgers. We our cereals, our granolas. I mean, they are drop dead. Incredible.

Yeah, well. And my mouth is literally watering. I'm going to order our go over to my Whole Foods black cumin, vanilla chai tea. Oh. Yeah. I didn't drink glass coffee and drink more tea because of the overwhelming data.

Both are good for you. Compared certainly the Coca-Cola doctor Pepper. But yeah, yeah. And then data about tea and your brain and tea and longevity has been so strong.

And this looks like just a great one. So congratulations, Alice. Thank you, thank you Joe. Joe, just like just to offer something to make this a little bit, easier for your for your audience.

If they're interested, they can put in the, the passcode. Or I should say discount code hall. And it needs to be spelled that way. And so Holly Hall 15, you get 15% percent off their, their order.

That's. Incredibly generous of you. And anything that gets people to do the right thing so you can actually order from the website, you don't have to go to Kroger's or whole thing.

I would actually I would know whatever's convenient. But all of all of our offerings are available at plan strong.com and we're we'll ship it right to your doorstep.

Okay. And for all orders over $80, it's it's free. And then all those under, it's like $7.50. But and that's plan strong. Okay. One word that, Yeah. All of that. And then number 15. Yep.

And then the only, the only offerings that we have that are available at whole Foods and, seven of the Kroger banners and Wegmans are the Chili's and stews.

We have, almost all of those that are available there. And, yeah, but I don't want to get too deep into it, but you have to have a different strategy at grocery retail.

Then you do it, your e-commerce, DTC, business. So we're very surgical with retail and we're very broad on online. Okay. Let's and phenomenal. And, I really would be surprised if a very large number of people don't go over to the website and use that discount.

I'm going to be one of them as soon as we, click off here, because this is just great and we want to support you, but I want to taste this stuff. And I have a wife.

You know, that's a little bit like your mother, and she just always making the most amazing, colorful, delicious food. So I'm very lucky. I come home from a day at the office and my palate is, is just the happiest palate in southeastern Michigan.

But what a lucky man. Well, you know, when you got that, it's nice. And, I don't have the world's best kitchen skills. She does. But when you look at this, it just makes it so easy.

So I think we've covered some great territory.

Closing Thoughts and Discount Offer

These backgrounds, stories of, Rip Van Winkle and, burgers and fries at the Esselstyn home. You know, I think they're great because look where the whole family is now.

And, of course, if anybody doesn't know about Rip's sister Jane, and her amazing, you know, education and cookbooks, the family is literally the healthy dynasty that we need so much in this country.

So thank you so much for sharing. And, you know, just giving us the belief that, you know, your athletic performance, your vitality in the business world is fueled by whole plant foods.

And we can do the same and, you know, predict good health and good performance. Joe, my absolute pleasure. All the best to you and all your listeners, all the audience that's attending the, Reversing Heart Disease Naturally Summit.

And I'm rooting for each and every one of you. You got it. You got it. And you can do it. Plant. Thank you for that amazing, upbeat closure to this. And we'll see each other soon. Thank you.