

The Game Changers: Looking To A Plant-Based Future

Many people are quick to associate certain types of imagery and content when the words 'plant-based documentary' are brought up. Images of cramped battery farms and inhumane slaughterhouses come to mind, with garish scenes intended to pull at one's heart-strings and appeal to the maternal instincts in a viewer. *The Game Changers* takes a different approach. Former UFC champion and combative trainer James Wilks analyses a host of elite athletes, special ops soldiers and fitness moguls through the lens of logic and groundbreaking, real-time research. With a star-studded cast and back-end crew including Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jackie Chan, Lewis Hamilton and Novak Djokovic, Wilks debunks commonplace stereotypes regarding masculinity and the validity of plant-based protein for muscle growth, with science-backed evidence. Perhaps these might be the reasons why they are ranked as the number 1 bestselling movie of all iTunes pre-orders, outranking *Toy Story 4*, *The Lion King* and even Tarantino's much anticipated *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*.

Wilks offers a refreshing perspective on veganism in this eye-opening documentary, approaching the topic from the standpoint of health and wellbeing. Following a recent injury that saw torn ligaments in both of his knees, Wilks sought to find out how he could recover most efficiently and effectively. Upon discovering that gladiators, some of the most vicious and accomplished athletes in history, were vegetarian, Wilks' preconceived ideas surrounding a plant-based diet, masculinity and athletic prowess were instantly put into question. A common assumption is that one cannot obtain adequate protein from plants alone. Wilks proves this to be false, analysing research comparing plant and animal protein. The results were clear, indicating that as long as the proper amounts of amino acids were consumed, the source they came from was irrelevant. Animals, it would appear, are simply the "middle-men", a mere transporter of protein from its original source- plants. Mischa Janiec, natural pro body builder and Patrik Baboumian, world record holding strongman and poster child of the documentary, are proof of this. The captivatingly captured and inspiring footage shows elite athletes thriving on a plant-based diet, as they break both personal and world records reaching the peak of their careers.

The documentary also looked at the adverse impacts of animal products from a chemical level, with all studies concluding that the same biological mechanisms affecting performance in sport, also affected health. Inflammatory compounds found in animal products disrupt the microbiome

of our stomachs, and impair athletic recovery. Aside from chronic inflammation, animal products create oxidative stress and impair endothelial function, accelerating the development of coronary heart disease. Additionally, people who acquire all protein from plants reduce the risk of heart disease by 55%. In fact, the only diet which has actually been shown to reverse heart disease is a plant-based one. A particularly moving scene involving New York firefighters served as a poignant reminder on the general disregard for the impact that diet can have on health. The biggest risk to firefighters was heart disease, and not the calamitous and life-threatening tasks they perform.

With all research, facts and figures pointing towards one indisputable answer, how and why is it that we still fail to acknowledge the harmful impacts of animal products? The answer is simple: marketing. For years the tobacco industry profusely insisted that cigarettes in no way led to cancer, with one brand declaring that "Chesterfield Cigarettes are just as pure as the water you drink". The industry would fund studies that vehemently denied any correlation, while burying their involvement in the fine-print. Ultimately, the evidence grew irrefutable, and cigarette ads were quickly banned or strictly regulated. It wasn't long before evidence against animal foods started stacking up, with members of the dairy and meat industries funding their fair share of research and employing the same tactics that the tobacco industry had used. New, controversial studies and reports would headline each day, resulting in a confused swarm of consumers, unsure of what to believe. Despite the confusion in the media, there is massive global consensus about the fundamentals of a health-promoting diet. And regardless of what kind of research is done, where a study may take place, that diet is predominantly plant-based. Sadly, stereotypes surrounding the masculinity of those following plant-based lifestyles further deter people from the diet, another marketing strategy deployed by the meat industry, with meat advertorials propagating statements like 'Eat like a man', or, 'You'll look like more of a man with a quarter pounder in your hand'. As Arnold Schwarzenegger, a famously virile and masculine former professional bodybuilder, said, "That's marketing. That's not based in reality." In a more humorous study conducted on *The Game Changers*, three athletes were tested to show changes to their bodies following a plant-based diet. But unlike earlier in the documentary, it wasn't the quality of their blood or their endurance that was tested, but their erections. Dr Aaron Spitz, who conducted the study, associated a stereotypical 'masculine' man as someone with strength, endurance, sexual prowess and fertility. Following the consumption of a plant-based the athletes had longer lasting and more intense erections the following night during their sleep. Although a

more light-hearted and entertaining segment, the experiment certainly fulfilled its purpose in proving naysayers wrong.

A final point that Wilks explores is the environmental devastation that the livestock industry brings about. Meat, dairy, egg and fish farming use 83% of world farmland, yet provide only 18% of the world's calories and 37% of the protein. Wilks yet again emphasizes the notion of livestock simply being a 'middle man' in delivering protein and nutrients to humans, with livestock consuming on average six times more protein than they produce. Many people are well aware of the strain on the environment caused by animal farming, yet still resist opting for plant-based alternatives. Aside from the perceived protein inadequacies, people still abhor plant-based alternatives because of their 'unappetizing allure' and 'insufficient selection choices'. While this may have been true some 10 years ago, it is simply no longer the case. The Impossible Foods burger contains heme sourced from plant roots, enabling them to 'bleed' like meat, with a satisfying, appropriately meaty texture. And we are now seeing these types of products launched on a global scale, with the initial lull in the Asian market disrupted by a host of new, plant-based offerings. Hong Kong saw the launch of mung-bean based egg 'JUST Scramble' last year, with companies such as Whole Perfect Foods creating plant-based versions of everything from oyster sauce to abalone. This past April, Right Treat launched the ubiquitous 'OmniPork', with founder David Yeung stating, "We are not trying to imitate pork meat, we are trying to surpass pork meat." Plant-based alternatives have long since passed the days of ticking the mere box of being mildly palatable. Rather, they strive to exceed their animal-based counterparts in every way, from taste and texture to convenience and health.

Navigating the waters of the plant-based diet is no simple feat, further muddied by controversial headlines, stigmas and stereotypes. Many take eating plant-based as an all or nothing approach, disregarding the fact that it is a journey and not an overnight switch. *The Game Changers* encourages viewers to look at the facts and wealth of information available to them, and to incorporate more plant-based, whole foods into their diets with a mentality to do what you can with what you have. And with the wealth of options now available, there should be nothing standing in the way between you and a healthier lifestyle.