Is Rich Roll the Ultimate Athlete?
Scott Tinley Talks to Jimmy Riccitello.
Running From Canada to Mexico.
How RICH ROLL Went from Middle-Aged Couch Surfer to Extreme Athlete Role Model

What does it take to drive a conventional person to extremes? Why would a non-exercising man with a busy, happy, challenging life of financial, professional, and personal achievement and success suddenly and radically change his diet, his exercise habits, his lifestyle and his whole philosophy on life? What would compel a schlumpy, daily double-cheeseburger couch surfer 50 pounds overweight who hadn’t worked out in a decade to transform himself almost overnight into a radical advocate of veganism and become a chiseled, no-body-fat extreme athlete satisfied not with mere Ironman triathlons, but with the crazy stuff normal triathletes don’t come near, like triple and even quintuple Ironmans?

Words | Roy M. Wallack
Photos | John Segesta
It takes “an epiphanic moment of clarity,” says Richard Roll, 44—the aforementioned pudgy non-athlete turned two-time Ultraman finisher who was named one of the “25 Fittest Guys in the World” by a men’s magazine and “Sexiest Vegetarian Celebrity” by an animal-rights organization—“Then it takes several years to figure out who you are.”

One night in early 2006, after a typical evening that included a late return from work and several hours of eating fast food while watching TV on the couch, Roll clicked the remote and started heading up to his bedroom. On the cusps of his 40s, life was good for the former collegiate swimmer. After a stellar academic career at Stanford undergrad and Cornell law school, he’d built a thriving entertainment law practice in Beverly Hills. He had a luxurious custom-built home in the Santa Monica Mountains, a beautiful loving wife and four perfect kids. Rising off the couch, his successful trajectory in life as assured as the morning sunrise, he rose up toward the stairway—and nearly collapsed.

The 6-foot-taller chest pains. His body buckled over; it felt weak, frail. He almost passed out before he staggered to the top. When he finally got there, he caught his breath and had his epiphany.

“For a long time, I’ve been feeling terrible—and just ignored it,” he admitted. “Face it, I had the typical middle-aged guy’s story—every year putting on a few extra ‘normal’ pounds until I was up to 210, 220 pounds over my college weight. I haven’t exercised in years. Heart disease runs in the family and I probably am at risk.” His grandfather, a former American record holder in the 150-yard backstroke at the University of Michigan, died of a heart attack at 54, before Roll was born.

Shaken, Roll approached his wife, Julie Platt, for help. She was an avid yoga practitioner and homeopathic healer who several years before had successfully rid herself of a golf-ball sized tumor on her neck with a protocol of exotic, foul-smelling spices prescribed by an Ayurvedic healer. Now, Julie was primarily a vegetarian. But she’d never pushed her lifestyle on her husband.

“Now that I was ready, she had big ideas,” says Roll. Julie started him off with a ‘detox’ cleanse: no solid food at all, just a veggie and green tea broth for a week. It immediately worked.

“I felt so great!” says Roll. “In fact, the feeling was so good that we decided to go totally veggie. And soon after, I began slowly exercising.”

After six months, however, the experiment seemed to have run its course. Roll began to feel “as lousy as before.” It made him wonder if it had anything to do with his regular consumption of large cheese pizzas, which left him with the same post-meal “food coma” as meats and processed foods did. Roll’s research caused him question whether the cheese he always loved may be inflammation-producing for him. So he asked his wife what turned out to be the crucial, life-changing question: “What if I get rid of the dairy?”

Going Vegan, Going Long

Veganism is vegetarianism taken to a stricter level. Dairy, as an animal-based product, is out. In fact, in 1944 Donald Watson, the co-founder of the British Vegan Society coined the term “vegan” to mean “non-dairy vegetarian.” So vegan eat a “plant-based whole food diet.”

Aside from the ethical and environmental sustainability issues that come with the production of meat and dairy, these foods are said to be very acid-forming, says Roll, creating a ripe environment for disease and inflammation. Veganism is limited to anything that grows from the ground that can be picked and eaten, generally with minimal processing—such as nuts, fruits, and vegetables, which are alkaline-forming rather than acidic. Vegans emphasize but don’t limit themselves to raw, uncooked, completely unprocessed foods.

In 2007, Roll and his wife became vegans. They eat plenty of partially-processed items such as olive oil, orange and coconut juice, and gluten-free brown rice pasta, but try to avoid heavily-refined fare like snack crackers, white bread, and potato chips. Admittedly, the latter are his weakness.

“Hey, I do the best I can,” he says.

Small sins notwithstanding, the vegan diet quickly did the trick for Roll. His “food coma” ended. His head and sinuses cleared up. And an unusual side effect arose: Roll became an athlete.

“I felt an incredible difference in 7 to 10 days,” says Roll. “I had a tremendous surge in energy levels—and an overwhelming need to do something with it.”

That meant sports. Roll, a swimmer through his childhood and a walk-on 200 butterfly specialist at Stanford for three years in the ’80s, still saw himself as an athlete, even after 15 years of chip-dipping and channel-surfing. In fact, that’s why he’d had a lap-lane pool designed into the backyard during the building of his Calabasas mountaintop home in 2003. Now, he started using it.

Roll also started running and cycling. Starting right outside his door, he had several hundred miles of trails in the Santa Monica Mountains. He began
After he finished the story, Roll couldn’t get Ultraman out of his mind. Yes, it was a big expense and a hassle, but it was worth it. The support crew and vehicle, plus housing and flights to Hawaii. I wasn’t interested in Kama moves (for Ironman) but personal growth!” he says.

“Ultraman seemed like a perfect match. Something I could get into it out of my brain. It was ridiculous. I just wanted Ironman. I didn’t know if my body could handle this. But I had to do this.”

The next week, he called Jane Baca, the Ultraman race director, and pleaded, “I will not let you down if you let me in,” he said. She did not say no.

Roll was electrified. He had seven months to get in ultra-shape. The challenge of his life—balancing training for a crazy event with running a business, husband and keeping his family of six happy—was on.

“My whole life came into focus,” he said. “I had a purpose. It forced me to make choices. What is mission critical? I random socializing, late night TV, surfing the internet serving my higher goal? I got rid of non-essential time.”

On recommendation of friends, Roll hired coach Chris Hauth, a pro triathlete and former German Olympic swimmer. With his goal just to finish, Roll began a standard periodized schedule that built volume up to 25 training miles a week while keeping intensity low to avoid injuries. He maintained his vegan diet throughout, consulting with Brendan Brazier, author of the vegan diet book Thrive and supplementing with plant-based proteins.

The plan worked. Coming in 7th out of the water, Roll finished 11th in his first Ultraman 2005, the event he had been preparing for three years, which is an invitation-only. The next one was scheduled for November, 2008.

In Ultraman 2009, Roll came out of the water in the lead and won the first day, which included part of the bike, in 10 minutes. But he crashed on day 2 with 135 miles to go, tore up his knee and shoulder, and wrecked his pelvis. With a borrowed pelvis and racing shoes, he beat back the pain, got through the bike and the run, and took 6th overall.

That triumph led to Roll’s next Ultra-adventure in 2010: The Epic 5, a nightmare of an event with a $5,000 entry fee that features five consecutive Ironman on five different Hawaiian Islands—a total of 12 miles of swimming, 560 miles cycling, and 131 miles running. Epic 5 was the brainchild of Jason Lester, a fellow Ultraman who Roll had become close with in the two races.

“I want to do things that have never been done, and Rich gets it,” says the 57-year-old Lester, a disabled athlete with a non-functional arm who has used his completion of 28 Ironman-distance races and two Ultraman Canada as vehicles to push the message of his Never Stop Foundation: that you are in control of your own destiny.

“I was going to do the Epic 5 alone, but I wanted to take the journey with me, and kept at it until he agreed,” says Lester. A Nike-sponsored athlete and author of Running on Faith, “If Rich wasn’t there, I’d have tapped out—and vice versa.” The pair did Epic 5 in six days after being stuck on an island one day due to bike problems.

“I always tell Rich that we’re brothers from another mother. He has the physical and mental DNA for this,” says Lester. “He is a modern-day epic man with a heart for helping other people.”

The Time-Crunched Role Model

“My story can resonate with the average middle-aged guy with kids and a career,” says Roll. “The message is simple: drastic change is possible.”

That message is getting out. Events like Ultraman and Epic 5, combined with Roll’s veganism, ultra-chilled body and cheekiness, active blogging and social networking and Hollywood connections has naturally led to media attention and book deals. He and his wife wrote Jet Seed, a plant-based e-cookbook of vegan recipes, including many of his training and racing foods. In 2009, Mari Fitness named him one of its “25 Fittest Guys in the World”. In 2010, CNN’s Dr. Sanjay Gupta interviewed him. PETA named him one of Sexiest Vegetarians Celebrities in 2011.

An early DNF halfway through 2011 Ultraman in November due to a virus that had Roll coughing up blood did not slow his media blitz. Roll is now working on his memoir, Finding Ultra, due to be published by Crown in July, 2012.

A critical part of the book will be rules for fitting it all into sports, family, business. In addition to getting rid of his non-essential TV and computer time, self-employment helps; Roll got rid of his Beverly Hills office and now works at home, saving two and half hours of commuting time. He doesn’t schedule conference calls in the morning, allowing him to see his kids off to school and workout until noon. Just don’t expect him to be up on the latest jokes coming out of the mouths of Letterman and Leno. Because more often than not, that’s when UltraVeganMan is getting his work done.
ROLL’S RULES FOR BECOMING A VEGAN TRIATHLETE

Get a Goal
It’s difficult to change if you don’t know what you want. A goal lets you create progressive stepping-stones and build accountability and community around the goal. It creates a latticework for change.

Go Public
Identify supportive people in your life who will hold you accountable to your goals. It’ll help keep you on course. Use your best friends, parents, spouse, and kids.

Start Today
Take a first step. Say to yourself, “I’ll eat the bowl of quinoa now, and have the cheeseburger tomorrow!” Remind yourself that the more plant-based foods you eat, the better you’ll feel.

Remember, This Is Not a Diet
A diet is by definition deprivation. Going vegan is a lifestyle, with an infinitely variety of new and exciting dishes to eat and enjoy. Don’t force leafy greens down your throat if you don’t like them. Find vegan foods that you love eating.

Progress, Not Perfection
Don’t be intimidated by not being 100%. An ice cream might be a backward step. But if you’re taking two steps forward and one step back, that’s progress. Don’t beat yourself up for a mistake; that’s your second mistake.

Plan and Prepare
If you worry about eating too much or standing out with your unusual diet at a business lunch, eat and drink your own meal in your car beforehand, then eat a salad at lunch. I hate these Hollywood people who bring a scale to lunch and make a scene of it. At home, avoid the “shame spiral” by having prepared foods in the fridge. When I come home late, I can whip up an avocado-bolt sauce brown rice snack in two minutes, keeping me from pining for a candy bar.

One-month Phase-in
Don’t throw all the bad stuff away today, unless that’s your personality. Allow yourself to get into it gradually. First, get rid of prepared foods, snacks, crackers, cookies, and cola. Then make easy switches: Dump milk and ice cream for almond and coconut milk products. (He avoids soy due to its potential to increase estrogen levels.) Make salads a main course, use lots of spinach and kale, and reduce chicken and meat to side dishes.

Celebrate
The day that the house is free of the bad stuff and you’ve achieved a fully vegan lifestyle, make a ceremony out of it. Burn the last bag of cookies in the fireplace. Ride your tri bike to a cliff and dump the last bag of Cheetos over the edge. Then eat a carrot and ride home. 

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