Beyond the Ring: Vegan Fighter

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Omowale Adewale, an amateur MMA fighter and boxer, spends his time outside the ring as director of Grassroots Artists MovEment (G.A.ME), an organization in the Bronx dedicated to provide resources to low-income residents like healthcare, access to healthy foods via means of gardening and youth incarceration prevention programs.

He has been the director of G.A.ME since 2001 and routinely visits classrooms where he provide lectures on how to eat healthy foods—even incorporating vegan foods and implement after school physical programs like boxing where he occasionally serves as a trainer.

The 37-year-old fighter, a New York City native, also is a personal trainer to clients ranging from people as young as eight to those in their sixties. Depending on the time of year, Adewale will train some of his clients outside or at Gleason’s boxing gym where he provides tips on how to fight and tips on how to eat clean through veganism.

As for him, his personal training skills translate into his own physical training as he prepares for the Extreme Cage Fighting 8 title match, his final MMA match at the Melrose Ballroom in Queens on Dec. 5.

It’s not just his final MMA match for the year; it’s possibly his final match in his illustrious career, which includes being a Golden Gloves quarterfinalist in the novice division in 2012, an unanimous victory decided in three rounds in NYFE 5: When Hell Freezes Over welterweight division fight against MMA amateur fighter Jude Paulemon in 2013 and a technical knockout victory against MMA amateur fighter James Hilton in Cage Wars 27 in 2014.
“If I win tomorrow, I’ll be an MMA champion and that’ll be a great note to leave the sport on,” he says.

Adewale’s typical routine for preparing for a fight includes getting a lot of rest the day before a fight and keeping his weight around the same through cardio and consuming the right nutrients. Whether or not he wins this fight, he doesn’t have time to waste as he needs to prepare for a kickboxing fight at the MMA Expo the following week.

“This is unusual for fighting, period,” he says. “You could see that in boxing but for MMA, it’s unusual. To say I’m the first to do it, that would be untrue. Every fight I’ve had in MMA has been pretty much tough and I’ve needed time to recover.”

Four days later at a vegan restaurant in Manhattan called V-Spot, Adewale is being praised not for his victory at Melrose (he lost in a unanimous decision to Derek “The Shark” Garlington), but rather for the release of his first book “An Introduction to Veganism & Agricultural Globalism.”

The book, which took him nearly two years to research and write, provides a guide for foods beginning and practicing vegans should eat in addition to recipes and an explanation as to how Genetically Modified Organism food crops are being sold in third-world countries that lack the resources to grow sustainable crops.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 100 million hectare GM crops are being planted in 22 countries. Adewale says in his presentation that between 1998 and 2014, the United States made $27.5 billion more in GM soybeans alone and that 50% of Americans don’t believe that GMO foods even exist or are misinformed about what they actually are.

Although Adewale originally had the concept to write a book on being a vegan back in 2011—he was still a vegetarian who at that point had stopped drinking milk but occasionally ate eggs—his motivation for writing “An Introduction to Veganism &
Agricultural Globalism” came partially from his 2014 “Go Veg” campaign, where he challenged 100 people to go vegan for an entire year in addition to informing people how to do it.

“I wanted to cement something, to put something in because people were still asking questions, do you do this on a regular basis,” he says. “Some people would just send me long writings about what they were doing and some people sent me so many things about how I inspired them, how I helped them become vegan and how it changed their life and so I was really impacted by that and I said, ‘listen, I need to put something in it where I can refer people. I need to be able to.’”

At the book signing, he holds a discussion on veganism that includes Tiana King, a registered nurse at Cornell and a holistic health instructor who doubles as a yoga instructor. Both speakers happen to practice veganism. The back of the restaurant is packed with his friends-amateur athletes and not, family and vegan enthusiasts.

To the casual observer, it’s easy to conclude that Adewale is in impressive shape as both a fighter and boxer with bulging muscles that are being highlighted from his long sleeved shirt and a slim figure thanks to the amount of protein he gets from a mixture of animal products and some fruits and vegetables when that is far from the case.

As veganism continues to gain popularity in the United States, with supermarkets carrying more whole wheat, gluten-free and organic products as well as eateries specifically targeting hardcore vegan practitioners and people looking for alternatives to a high-fat diet, an increased amount of athletes in the boxing and MMA world are incorporating aspects of veganism to their training.

For Adewale, being a vegan in a world where the stereotype is that athletes in this particular environment consume meat as a major source of protein in order to fight has some advantages such as improved flexibility. But otherwise, it’s about reducing portions when training for a match.
“If you were speaking with someone who ate meat, they go into training, they already know they have to reduce meat,” he says. “Anything you were eating before you bring that down. You make everything lean you might go to eggs or whatever the case may be and take out the yolk so you would be doing egg whites and so on and so forth. When I’m eating, I don’t think as much about it because it’s going to burn off, it’s going to burn off a lot faster and it’s also not going to accumulate so much.”

Two-time WBO Welterweight Championship boxer Timothy Bradley is notable for going on vegan diets to prepare for fights. Bradley has mentioned in several interviews that being a vegan helps him have more energy in addition to being able to lose weight and feeling overall lighter and less bulky. Similarly, amateur boxer and Olympic Rio De Janeiro hopeful Cam F. Awesome has been a vegan since 2012 and has contributed his success from consuming plant-based foods.

UFC fighter Alex Caceres and retired UFC lightweight Mac Danzig are also notable for going on strict vegan diets. Caceres is a raw vegan meaning that he mainly consumes uncooked foods while Danzig is one of the first fighters in MMA to be open about going full-fledged vegan and receiving backlash from his carnivore-oriented peers.

Adewale mentions that for professional fighters like Bradley, he’ll have an easier time going on a vegan diet to better prepare for his matches.

“This is not going to be a problem for anyone if you know exactly what foods to eat,” he says. “He has enough resources to find this information, to pay for the right people to get this.”

Tiana King, a registered nurse at Cornell and a vegan, explains at Adewale’s book signing why it benefits athletes to go pursue the vegan lifestyle.
“More and more athletes are actually turning towards vegan because of the short repair process and the amount of energy that athletes have,” she says. “There’s so many big bodybuilders out there and athletes that have muscle and I think it’s because we’ve been lied to.”

Adewale made the transition from vegetarianism to veganism in April 2013 after appearing on a radio show where he was asked why he wasn’t a vegan.

“It was a really good question and I really hadn’t thought about it,” he says. “Well, I had thought about it but I really thought in terms of when I would. It wasn’t something I had my mind. But it made a lot of sense because I didn’t need eggs. I didn’t need dairy.”

Adewale became a vegetarian at the age of 15 due to health reasons and a desire to be fit. Soon after, he got into Jeet Kune Do, a form of martial arts inspired by actor and martial artist Bruce Lee, bodybuilding and boxing, eventually becoming the Super Middleweight Champion in 2012. Because he was a vegetarian for so long, the transition to veganism was a smoother ride compared to those who had meat incorporated into their diets right before going vegan.

“I felt like if I can still get adequate amounts of nutrients, I can still be strong,” he says. “When I did become vegan, I felt even healthier because what it did was address my hypertension. You want to be even healthier no matter how you came into being vegan. You want to be healthier. You look at what’s organic.”

In terms of helping him prepare for a boxing or MMA match and even training others athlete or not, the benefits for him have been tenfold, especially for ethical reasons regarding animals.

“Being a trainer made me being more keen and being more focused and help my clients at the same time,” he says. “But it was a drive that I didn’t need to harm animals to actually get my nutrients.”
A January 2015 study from New Hope Natural Media shows that 8% of consumers are vegan because of ethical reasons or “social responsibility.”

Nevertheless, veganism doesn’t come without its challenges. Adewale mentions that one of his biggest struggles in being a vegan as well as other current and former vegans he knows is not being full enough due to heavily relying on foods with additives and refined foods.

“I’ve experienced it myself,” he says on being hungry. “I taught myself how to not feel like I’m hungry all the time.

Championship boxer Bradley has admitted to incorporating meat back into his diet in a December 2014 interview with BoxingScene.com after a loss to Manny Pacquiao because although he had a lot of energy, his lack of strong muscle mass and not having the right amount of protein and nutrients caused him to tear his calf and deal with other injuries.

However, nurse King says that anyone, not exclusively athletes can find the sufficient amount of protein they need for their bodies in many ways.

“Animal protein does not equal amino acids,” she says. “Protein is all living things-fruits, vegetables nuts and seeds and so your body wants amino acids and you can get that from all living plants.”

Adewale acknowledges that there are negative connotations in being a vegan fighter due to the lack of “recovering from a sport”. However, he thinks that a diet vegan shouldn’t change how one trains and recovers.

“Anything you’re competing [in] you’re thinking about recovery,” he says. “Recovery for people would be basically when you finish working out, you need food to supplement those lost cells, those beaten up cells so you can kind of redevelop yourself, you’re stronger than before.”
Whether veganism is becoming a trend, Adewale dismisses that statement and says that veganism has been in a sense, underground for a while.

“If this is trend, this is the longest trend that I’ve ever heard of because people have been doing it for decade,” he says. “People grow out of it and sometimes they’re vegan for a while and then they’re not. Sometimes, people are married and all of a sudden, they’re not. We don’t look at marriage as a trend. People start things and then all of a sudden, they’re not doing it.”

The study from New Hope Natural Media also shows that approximately six percent of the U.S. population is vegan. Furthermore, the study showed that 36% of Americans are more likely to lean toward alternatives to milk and meat while 35% believed that veganism are strongly associated to healthy foods rather than the 23% who associated veganism with the ethical treatment of animals.

Adewale believes that transitioning into a vegan, whether you’re a fighter or not can be feasible if you’re doing it for the right reasons and if you have access to plant-based foods and resources.

“When people are helped and they’re supported, like socially, people are going to stay vegan,” he says. “If they have vegan friends and they have vegan resources and they’re educated, a lot of these things [have] impact.”