

14 June 2016

Dear Mr O'Neill,

Like many others across the UK, I was delighted when Northern Ireland qualified for its first-ever European Championship and rooted for the team during its first game this weekend. While the loss to Poland was disappointing, all is not lost - I have a proposition to increase Northern Ireland's chance of future success in the competition: put the team on a vegan, plant-powered diet!

As a former professional footballer who was vegan the last 10 years of my career, I can attest to the fact that a plant-based diet provides athletes with all the protein, complex carbohydrates and other nutrients that they need to be strong and fast – and it helps them avoid the saturated fats, cholesterol and contaminants found in meat, eggs and dairy foods! Plant foods also provide athletes with stamina – an important attribute considering that footballers need to perform continually throughout 90-minute matches. One Danish study indicated that men "peddling on a stationary bicycle until muscle failure lasted an average of 114 minutes on a mixed meat and vegetable diet, 57 minutes on a high-meat diet and a whopping 167 minutes on a strict vegetarian diet". That's quite a difference in physical endurance.

To further prove the point that plant foods contain all the nutrients required for athletes, in June 2015, another vegan ex-professional footballer, Dean Howell, and I cycled 975 miles from Land's End to John O'Groats in just nine days – an average of 108 miles per day. Not bad for an old man of 58!

Eating plant foods has also been shown to improve blood and oxygen flow, helping repair torn muscles and tendons for faster recovery from training and injuries. And a vegan diet can help protect against heart disease, diabetes, strokes and cancer. In addition to keeping players lean, footballers can also lighten their conscience by giving all animal-derived foods the boot: in today's industrialised meat and dairy industries, chickens, pigs, turkeys and cows are crammed into filthy windowless sheds and wires cages, where they live and die in misery.

The glorious game of football needs to embrace the trend of plant-powered eating, as many other sports are already doing. For instance, did you know that tennis players Novak Djokovic and Serena Williams, both ranked number one by the World Tennis Association, thrive on a primarily vegan diet? This is not a coincidence. With vegan meals, Northern Ireland's players have nothing to lose – and everything to gain. My friends at PETA have even offered to provide the team with delicious vegan meals to help the lads make the healthy switch.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Neil Robinson