DID YOU HEAR the one about the Lion who befriended a bulldog?

This was late last year. Rosie had arrived at the Michigan Humane Society with a battered past and a case of heartworm. But her life was about to take a star turn.

Golden Tate—a wide receiver with the NFL’s Detroit Lions—and his girlfriend, Elise, agreed to foster Rosie. They took her on a trip to a pet supply store. They dressed her up in a lion outfit. They lounged with her on the couch, played with her on the floor and helped her start to overcome her fears of men, the outdoors and loud noises.

And they chronicled the experience in a video for the Michigan Humane Society—a video that helps spotlight fostering and shelter animals, a video that ends with Rosie getting adopted.

Fostering remains important to the couple.

“Only problem is we both get emotionally attached to them and then we hate to see them go,” Tate said in April while filming an HSUS video to raise awareness about puppy mills. “But we feel like we could do more good with fostering and with working with the humane society and still take advantage of our passion for dogs, or [all] animals really.”

Tate is one of many athletes making a difference for animals by donating time, drawing attention to issues or becoming yet another shining example of the heights one can reach on a plant-based diet.

There’s Will Witherspoon, an NFL linebacker-turned-sustainable-farmer, and David Carter Jr., a plant-fueled NFL defensive lineman who runs the website the300poundvegan.com. There’s Tia Blanco, an HSUS supporter and a world-class surfer, and Chase Utley, a Philadelphia Phillies standout who speaks up for shelter animals.

In the pages that follow, we’ll take a look at four other special athletes—what drives them to make a difference and what fuels their success as they scale mountains in the Alps, race across the Sahara Desert, execute Brazilian jiu-jitsu moves or find new fights in retirement.

+WATCH Golden Tate’s video for The HSUS at humanesociety.org/goldentate.
Golden Tate plays with Greta, who was adopted shortly after the NFL player tweeted her picture.
ROCK CLIMBING is an unforgiving sport requiring strength, endurance and daring. One mistake could end in a bone-crushing fall. But Steph Davis is addicted to it. She’s one of the world’s top professional rock climbers, having ascended jaw-dropping heights in the Dolomites, Alps and Rockies. She’s one of only two women to free-solo (no ropes, no climbing buddy) Yosemite’s 3,000-foot El Capitan in a single day. And she does it all on a plant-based diet.

Davis, 42, became a vegan about 12 years ago, after a year-long experiment with four different diets, all of which produced lackluster results.

After a cleansing fast, she followed her body’s natural desires. “Everyone said [being vegan] would be terrible for my climbing,” she remembers, “but after a few weeks, I noticed enhanced performance, from running to hiking to climbing.” She has since accomplished her most challenging feats. Yet she’s humbled by nature. “I always look at animals [and] their amazing natural skills,” she says. “The most amazing climb that you just did is the easiest possible thing a spider would ever do.”

When she learned about factory farming a few years later, she knew she had made the right choice. These days, she promotes humane eating through social media, offering recipes and cooking tips.

Davis also supports pet adoption. “There are so many dogs sitting in shelters right now,” she says, “and they would give anything to be in a happy family.” On her blog, she inspires followers with stories of her cat, Mao, whom she adopted after he appeared one day on her doorstep. And Cajun, a heeler/Australian shepherd mix found starving as a pup on a nearby reservation, apparently surviving on cow manure. “Who knows what would have happened to her if she’d remained a stray?”

Having a pet is a lifetime commitment, she notes on her popular blog. “Maybe you’ve read dog bios on adoption sites about dogs who are in the shelter because their family ‘moved and couldn’t take him,’” she writes. “If you get a dog, there is no ‘moving and just can’t take him,’ unless maybe you are moving to the state pen.”

Climbing is a metaphor for life, Davis says. “Do your best always. ... Never waste anything.”
DAVID MEYER

ON ANY GIVEN DAY, Brazilian jiujitsu champion David Meyer runs sprints, lifts weights or bicycles up strenuous hills near his San Francisco Bay area home. He never takes a day off. The workouts are his homework, he says. He also spars on the mat three days a week, refining his grappling techniques, joint locks and choke holds. Sometimes, he works out twice a day. The regimen helped him win five world championships, four gold medals in the American Cup and two golds at the Pan Am Games.

His body is muscular and taut. His mind is sharp. His endurance is unbeatable. At 52, he remains a champion. He won one of his American Cup golds just last year as a middleweight black belt jiujitsu master.

And he doesn’t eat meat, eggs or dairy. He became aware of factory farming in college. “Someone had set up an information table,” he remembers, “and the pictures got me thinking about the inconsistency of my love for animals and then paying into a system that abuses and harms them.” He says he has more endurance and can train harder and longer than before he changed his diet.

When he was 6, Meyer’s parents enrolled him in martial arts classes to help defend himself against bullies. “Animal cruelty,” he says, “is just another form of bullying.” When people ask how he takes down guys half his age and twice his size, he isn’t shy about recommending an animal-free diet.

But mostly, he leads by example.

“I want people to think for themselves about what their values are and whether the lifestyle they are leading reflects those core values,” he says. “In most cases, people just don’t believe that their right to have passing enjoyment supersedes the right of an animal to live its life out without suffering and pain.”

Pet overpopulation and homelessness are also important to Meyer, who in 2000 cofounded Adopt-A-Pet.com to connect people with shelter and rescue animals. Almost 16,000 organizations post their adoptable animals on the website, which gets 4 million searches a month.

In 2005, Meyer helped rescue pets in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. He kicked in doors and carried out animal after animal. When the animal shelters filled up, he helped set up 3,000 feeding stations throughout the city so abandoned pets had a chance.

He remembers rapping on windows and seeing hopeful faces suddenly appear, such as one emaciated cat who’d survived for two weeks alone in the house. He called the homeowner with the amazing news that his cat was still alive. “The guy had been a New York cop and had found the cat as a kitten in a [trash bin],” Meyer says, “and he broke down crying.”
Extreme’ in elite running circles, having tackled both desert and North Pole marathons. She’s set course and world marathon records. And she’s run a personal best of 2:38:22—a 26-mile sprint, basically.

For Oakes, 47, it’s not about the glory. She does it to raise money for her farm animal sanctuaries and to spread the word that people don’t need animal protein to thrive. She stopped eating meat at 3 years old and dairy at 6. “I started asking my mum questions like, ‘Where do eggs come from? Why does the cow give up her milk? Don’t her babies want it?’” she remembers. “Mum was very frank and said that the milk is taken from the cows and the eggs from the hens, which really bothered me.”

Some of Oakes’ first rescues were hamsters, chinchillas, horses and dogs at risk of being euthanized because their owners didn’t want them anymore.

As her animal family grew, she began to look for land, which led to a serendipitous meeting with her now partner Martin Morgan, who shared Oakes’ passion for animals and was inspired to become an animal advocate. The couple bought property together and founded Tower Hill Stables Animal Sanctuary in Essex, England, in 1995.

They later started a sanctuary in Russia after Oakes witnessed the plight of animals there while competing in a marathon. “I was shocked at the amount of stray street dogs and cats, which were even abundant in places like Red Square,” she says. “When I returned home I set about doing something to help.”

At her home in England, Oakes wakes at 3:30 a.m. to care for their 400 animals, including goats, pigs, sheep, geese and dogs. She trains during breaks and then goes right back to cleaning, feeding and grooming. The sun sets long before she’s done.

For most people, the schedule would be too demanding, but she says animals such as Emily the pig, found rooting around in someone’s garden after escaping from a slaughterhouse, give her strength.

In 2011, Oakes was presented to Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip at Buckingham Palace for her rescue work.

And in 2012, she was nominated for the Daily Mail sixth annual Inspirational Women of the Year competition. “I love each and every animal,” she said in an interview with the English newspaper. “We are like a big happy family—they tug at my heart.”

And they keep her running.

One fan from Kazakhstan brought her family to meet Oakes at a marathon in Russia. The girl’s family had told her that she would be anemic without meat. Oakes’ performance proved them wrong.

“She told me that for her family to see me run and do well in the race meant more than I could ever know.”

In 2012, Fiona Oakes became the first vegan woman to run the Sahara Desert Marathon des Sables—a punishing 156-mile, six-day footrace over sweltering sand dunes up to 800 feet high.

She’s known as the “Queen of the Extreme” in elite running circles, having tackled both desert and North Pole marathons. She’s set course and world marathon records. And she’s run a personal best of 2:38:22—a 26-mile sprint, basically.

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THE FUNNY THING IS Georges Laraque didn’t even want to watch the movie. Rather, a friend had been on him for months to just sit down and see Earthlings—a documentary that examines the various ways people use animals for profit. Finally, in the spring of 2009, he gave in.

“When I watched it, I cried for an hour,” says Laraque, a 6-foot-4 retired hockey enforcer who made a name for himself with his fighting skills over 12 seasons in the NHL. “It changed my life.”

Laraque emptied his refrigerator of anything that contained animal products. He gave away any clothes made with leather. And he began to launch what has since become an inspiring—and effective—second career as an animal advocate.

He’s opened three raw vegan restaurants in Montreal. He’s spoken out against circuses, the use of fur in fashion and the annual Canadian seal hunt. He’s given talks around the world about the benefits of cutting animal products from his diet. He narrated a French edition of Earthlings—a project that took some 75 hours and involved watching, again and again and again, those scenes that so affected him in the first place.

An elephant being “trained” for the circus. (“The way they get beaten up—to get an elephant to sit on a chair. My God.”) A dog getting put in a garbage truck. Live animals heading toward slaughter. “I decided to devote a lot of my time to get that information known to people, because one of the biggest [barriers] to human kindness is ignorance,” he says. “I didn’t know.”

Laraque’s diet switch came just before his final season in the NHL. He had heard the stereotypes—that he’d lose muscle mass, that he’d get sick—so he visited a heart institute in Montreal for tests. Four months later, he returned. He no longer had high blood pressure or asthma. He felt stronger, healthier. He’s now running marathons. “I’m never sick,” he says. “I wake up in the morning full of energy.” Asked if he wishes he’d done this before his rookie year, he says: “Oh my God. I wish I did that when I was born.”

To catch up for all the time he didn’t know about animal welfare issues, Laraque spent a year organizing sessions for which he would share food from his restaurants and show Earthlings.

“It’s just spreading the word, right?” he says. “[My friend] planted a seed in my brain, and after I watched it, I planted it in thousands of people’s heads. … Every single person that talks about it, that educates and converts somebody else, the better it is for animals, the better it is for our planet and the better it is for the future generations.”