

Rip Esselstyn:

I want to welcome you to a very special episode of the Plant-Strong Podcast. This week, I am live from the Esselstyn family farm with my parents, Ann and Essy, as we prepare for the kickoff of our ninth annual Plantstock event, which starts tomorrow, August 14th. We affectionately coined the event Plantstock back in 2011 for a number of reasons; one, the farm is located about two hours from the famed 1969 Woodstock event; secondly, my grandfather, believe it or not, was the medical director for Woodstock; and then lastly, we invite all of the plant-based brock stars to take the stage at Plantstock, just like Woodstock invited the perennial rock and roll stars of the time to join its stage.

Rip Esselstyn:

This farm, as you're going to learn, has been in the Esselstyn family since 1675, and in fact, is one of only two family farms in New York that have been owned and operated by the same family for more than 300 years. There's a certain magic in bringing Plantstock back to its roots. The event may be virtual this year, but serendipitously, it also allows us to open our doors to thousands of you to this special place. In the past, we had to cut it off at about 500, 550 people.

Rip Esselstyn:

So today, I am sitting on the front porch with my mom and dad, and we're going to reminisce about the early days on the farm. You're even going to get a detailed play-by-play of my father's 1956 Olympic rowing race. I still get excited hearing about this special moment in his life, even though it's been decades and decades. His Olympic berth started right here on the Esselstyn family farm, where his dad... I should say nearby... where his dad treated patients, including a few very famous ones that you're going to hear about on the broadcast.

Rip Esselstyn:

So sit back, relax, enjoy this visit with my parents, and do join us if you can for our virtual Plantstock immersive weekend that starts tomorrow. We're saving you a seat right next to us on the porch. Plantstock2020.com has all the registration details, and if you can't join us live, know that every ticket includes an all-access video pass to watch later. Thanks.

Rip Esselstyn:

All right. I am here with my dad. This is fantastic, and I want you to know that you, I think, will now be the most prolific person on the Plant-Strong Podcast. I think this will be your fourth episode that we've done together, and the reason why I wanted to pull you aside and do something right now is because, obviously, we're at the farm in upstate New York, and we've got our big Plantstock 2020 event coming up. It will be our ninth annual Plantstock, and I thought this would be an appropriate time for us to reflect on your childhood growing up here on the farm and how it impacted you as a man growing up. We'll kind of let it flow and see what happens.

Rip Esselstyn:

Just for starters, how long has this farm been in the Esselstyn family?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Actually, it was... yeah, my stepmother and you in the 1985 or 1986, went to Albany for the tricentennial, which is a farm that had been in the same family for over 300 years. Some were of the order of 1675, so the farm has got quite a tradition to it.

Rip Esselstyn:

To put it mildly. I mean, that's 300... if my math is correct, that's 345 years.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Yeah, we're moving on.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah. Yeah. And I think I've also heard that it's one of two farms in the whole state of New York that have been owned and operated by the same family for over 300 years, which, I mean... incredible.

Rip Esselstyn:

Now, I want people to know before we dive into this that we're probably going to have some distractions. We've got six or seven grandchildren running around, and we're doing our best to kind of maintain order.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

And of course, Route 23, although it's many yards from her, often will have some heavy trucks and motorcycles that will give their little echo.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah, yeah, so bear with us. So when exactly did you and your brothers and your sister and your parents move to the farm?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Well, actually, my dad, although he spent a fair amount of time at the farm here growing up, as well, his parents, who lived at the farm, also... his father was a lawyer working in New York City. Grew up in New York City and he went to Yale, and then he went to medical school; two years at Yale and then the last two years at Columbia.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Then, he began his practice of surgery in New York City. We lived in Riverdale, which is a suburb of New York City, until I was seven years old. It had always been my father's dream to come back and practice medicine up here, using the farm as a home base. And so, it was in 1941, in September, that we moved from New York City to the farm.

Rip Esselstyn:

So 1941... you were born in '33, so that makes you about eight years old.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Well, I was seven. I was eight three months after we moved up here.

Rip Esselstyn:

Okay, all right. So can you remember back, coming from the city to the farm... that's a pretty big adjustment, I would imagine.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Yeah, it just seemed to flow, though. I mean, there was just nothing that was really difficult about it. We were in sort of a little local school, Claverack School. It was easy to make friends, and I stayed at Claverack School until the eighth grade. Then, the track began to get a little hotter. My parents sent me to Deerfield Academy, and I was there for all four years.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

I thought Deerfield was terrific. I really enjoyed the friendships there. I loved the athletics there, and fortunately, the academics there enabled me to go to Yale.

Rip Esselstyn:

Speaking of Yale, so there's a history of Esselstyns going to Yale. Obviously, I never went to Yale, but there's a history of it. Who was the first Esselstyn in our family line to go to Yale?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Probably my grandfather, yeah. What was interesting was he was from a farming family here, the Esselstyns, living in Hollowville, which is a little town at the other end of the farm. I think it was in 1878 that Grandfather took the horse and buggy from Hollowville to the town of Hudson, which is right on the Hudson River; then, he got on the Hudson River Day Line, and he went up to Albany, where he had entered the state geometry contest.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Grandfather won the state geometry contest, and the prize was a scholarship to Yale University, so it was the first time that anybody in the family had gone to Yale, that I'm aware of. Grandfather went to Yale, and then my father went to Yale, and my uncle went to Yale, and then I went to Yale.

Rip Esselstyn:

And one of your sons, Ted, went to Yale.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

That's right.

Rip Esselstyn:

So your grandfather... what did his father do? Was his father a farmer?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Yep.

Rip Esselstyn:

Right. So he's the one that kind of broke the cycle a little bit?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

That's for sure, went from Hollowville to New York City. That was breaking the cycle, without question.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Rip Esselstyn:

Okay, so you went to Yale, and when you were younger growing up, can you remember what were some of the main chores that you had on the farm?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Well, yes, on the farm, before I went to Deerfield, most of my weekends were working on the farm. It would depend on the season of the year as to what the duties were, because remember, what the farm had then were Angus beef cattle and a dairy herd, and all of the activities on the farm really have essentially to do with nourishing the cattle... when you plowed the fields, when you disced the fields, when you harrowed the fields, when you planted the fields, you grow grain and you grow hay... for what? To feed the cattle.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

So, all of activities that I was involved in, running the machinery that would be responsible for growing those crops... it got a little bit less interesting in the wintertime because most of the winter was spent shoveling out stalls and spreading manure out on the fields.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Farming was really highly instructive in many of the practical aspects of the land, because the maintenance and the care of the living beings, namely the cattle, and at the same time, nursing along and taking care of machinery. One thing you learn about machinery early on; it always breaks. You have to somehow be creative to be able to repair the machinery and nurse it along so, hopefully, you decrease the amount of breakage.

Rip Esselstyn:

I'm sure that that had an impact on you as far as just being a problem solver, and always trying to figure out a better way to kind of-

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Oh, I bet you there's been some spinoff of that, without question.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah, yeah.

Ann Esselstyn:

I just have to break in right here.

Rip Esselstyn:

Well, then make sure people can hear you.

Ann Esselstyn:

I just have to break in.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Well, then don't-

Ann Esselstyn:

Just have to break on and say that Essy can handle a tractor as well as he can do a parathyroid. You should see the detailed things he can do with a tractor. I just had to add that.

Rip Esselstyn:

Is that what made you fall in love with Essy, the way he can drive a tractor and do a parathyroid?

Ann Esselstyn:

His attention to detail. Well, do you want to know what I-

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah. I want to know what made you really fall in love with Essy.

Ann Esselstyn:

Oh. Well, there he was in Cleveland, a medical student, fresh off the 1956 Olympics with a gold medal, and handsome and tall, and I used to drive around his apartment in my car just hoping he might come out. I never saw him come out, but I was hoping he would.

Rip Esselstyn:

Really?

Ann Esselstyn:

I did.

Rip Esselstyn:

How did you first meet? Wasn't there something-

Ann Esselstyn:

Our fathers. My father had also gone to Yale and knew Essy's father, but he knew him because when Essy's father was in medical school, he was, on the side, coaching freshman football, and my father was playing freshman football, so that's when they met. We found, in our archives, a picture at a banquet, a college banquet, with my father and Essy's father both in the same photograph. What year was that?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

That was probably about 1926 or 1927.

Ann Esselstyn:

No, older. Well, anyway, it was a crazy picture.

Rip Esselstyn:

Well, that's an adorable story.

Ann Esselstyn:

That's the end of me.

Rip Esselstyn:

No, it's not. Well, so, as she just said, you went to Yale, and obviously you did some rowing while you were there. What inspired you to do rowing? Why crew?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

My freshman year, I went out for freshman football, and that really was not very exciting. I wasn't particularly gifted when I thought I was doing football, and my roommate, on the other hand, never having rowed before, decided to go out for crew, and he did very well and he made the freshman crew. They beat Harvard, and every time they would come back from a race, he would be absolutely filling with me all these exciting things had happened with rowing.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

In the summer between the freshman and sophomore year, I decided that I would try to go out for rowing as a sophomore. Now, I knew that I was behind everybody because they had rowed in a previous year, but I was able to make an arrangement with Bob Kiphuth, who was a great swimming coach at Yale who ran a conditioning class three weeks before Yale began in the fall of 1953. So, my brother and two fellows from Hotchkiss and myself, we lived in the Payne Whitney gymnasium under Bob Kiphuth's tutelage for three straight weeks, just doing nothing but working out, so that-

Ann Esselstyn:

One of the other people with you was Bucky Bush.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Yeah, Bucky Bush, who was the youngest brother of George Herbert Walker Bush.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

It was pretty exciting for me to start rowing knowing that one thing I didn't have to worry about was conditioning, so all my focus really had to be on technique. That's the way it went all fall, and then we came off the water, and in the wintertime, we had bodybuilding for those who were going out for crew. Then, we went out on the water, usually in the end of February, when the ice would come out of the Housatonic River, that's when we would start rowing.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

At that point, I made it to the junior varsity for our first two races, and I'm happy to say that on the first two races, the 1954, the junior varsity won, but our varsity had lost. So, as happens in those very fateful

moments in rowing, when you're out on the water and the coach says to the coxswains, "Alex and Jay, bring your boats together," and then everybody held their breath. Lo and behold, on the water, you were changed your seats; that is, there were actually five of us from the JV who were put into the varsity, and those five varsity then came into the JV.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

We won our next race, and then we came in second in the Eastern sprints, and then we beat Harvard. So it was a pretty big setting, first year.

Rip Esselstyn:

Wait, so you went from the JV to the varsity your sophomore year?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Right.

Rip Esselstyn:

And how many other sophomores kind of got flipped into the varsity boat?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Well, the others who had earned their way, Tommy Charlton was in that boat, and so...

Rip Esselstyn:

Couple others?

Ann Esselstyn:

Dave?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

No, Dave was not in that one, but it was exciting to be amongst a lot of the upperclassmen and seniors as a sophomore, because that's... a lot of the leadership was, and that gave a lot of depth to the boat. It was pretty exciting for us to win those races, and especially to beat Harvard.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

The one that was particularly exciting when we knew we were on the way in our sophomore year was when... this was 1954, and we rowed in the Eastern sprints. We were rowing against the group that won that, which was the Navy crew. They were called the Navy Admirals. They had won the [inaudible 00:18:37] race in Helsinki in 1952, and they came back... this was 1954... they were shooting for, again, 1956; they wanted to repeat as the Olympic champions. It was kind of cute; when the stroke of the Navy crew after the Eastern sprints race had never heard of Yale... came up to our stroke, Steve Reynolds, and said, "Who are you guys?" Steve just put a smile on his face and said, "We're the JV."

Rip Esselstyn:

Nice. Okay, and so, then what happens your junior and senior year? Are you on the boat now for good?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Well, yes. I got into the boat my sophomore year. I was there my junior year. I did not row in the sprints in my junior year. I had a bad couple of two weeks there when Jim was making some changes, but other than that, I was in every other race through our junior year, and again, we beat Harvard.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Now, it came to our senior year, and lo and behold, 1956 was the Olympic year, and the idea was to see if we couldn't somehow make it to the Olympic trials. Our greatest competition, we thought, was Cornell, because we beat Cornell in the first race of the year. The second race, down at the sprints, they beat us by maybe three or four feet.

Ann Esselstyn:

Is three or four feet a lot?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Not a lot. Not a lot. When it came to the next race-

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

It was going to be at the Olympic trials, which were going to be held in Syracuse at Lake Onondaga, and I can remember that whole episode as if it was yesterday. When we left our training spot at Gales Ferry in Connecticut, we had to drive from there to Syracuse, and the most direct way, believe it or not, went right by the farm. It was kind of cute because I know my stepmother was very apprehensive about, what could she possibly treat these diamonds, these potential Olympic trial contestants and not do anything but enhance their rowing, because we were going to stop at our house for lunch?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Believe it or not, my grandmother was in 83 years of age and she was still alive, and when she heard that the Yale Crew was going to be coming by for lunch, and that they were potential at the Olympic trials, they were strong potential... Grandmother, even though she was legally blind, went out and found nine four-leaf clovers, which she carefully put in these lovely little envelopes with a nice little message to the crew, and they each have that to this day. I think I gave mine-

Rip Esselstyn:

No, you gave yours to Jill and me, I think, on our wedding. Yeah, yeah, for good luck.

Ann Esselstyn:

Where is that?

Rip Esselstyn:

It's hanging in the kitchen.

Ann Esselstyn:

Oh.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

So after we had lunch, we drove up to Syracuse, and here we were with all the other crews from the United States who had aspirations for representing the United States at the Olympics in Australia that fall. We were out practicing with our coach, Jim Rathschmidt, up at the trials when apparently, unbeknownst to any of us, the other coaches had gotten together and decided that Yale had an early heat that was far too easy, and so, behind everybody else's back, they changed the heat; so when we came in from our practice row, a reporter raced up to our coach and said, "Coach Rathschmidt, are you aware that the coaches, while you were out there rowing, have changed your heat?"

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Jim looked at him and smiled and said, "Well, I really don't think that makes much difference. You see, I came up here to beat everybody, and I don't really care much in what order we do that."

Rip Esselstyn:

Love that confidence.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

We got through the heats and we got to the final of the Olympic trials, and in the final was the University of Washington and Cornell on our right, and immediately on our left, the Navy Admirals, the crew who had won in 1952 in Helsinki who were coming back because they wanted to represent the United States a second time.

Rip Esselstyn:

I mean, that's quite a lineup. You've got University of Washington; they have quite a history, right?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Right.

Ann Esselstyn:

The Boys in the Boat.

Rip Esselstyn:

The Boys in the Boat and that amazing comeback they had, and then these guys that won the Olympics the previous Olympics. Okay, so are you guys nervous at all?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

We're ready. Sure, we were nervous. I remember our wonderful stroke, Bob Morey, after we had the start... at the start, the third stroke, his oar completely missed water and he lost it in his hands, and that made Rusty, who was right in front of me, caught a crab... where your oar dives deep and it finally comes out when the boat goes far enough.

Rip Esselstyn:

So was that nerves? Was that all nerves?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

What happened was, it was, in retrospect, probably the best thing that happened, because there was a shudder through the boat, and we didn't stop, but we certainly slowed. Immediately... and I've never felt the boat have as solid a setup... that is because when your setup isn't solid, then the big men cannot get all their power on without worrying about the balance of the boat, and for some reason, that boat, right after that, became like a rock. Everybody was just driving off, because they thought, "My God, we really blew it there."

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

But suddenly, the boat surged and, in not too many strokes, I began to be able to hear it once again. I could hear on the right, I could hear the shrieking of the Cornell coxswain, urging his team on when he saw Yale coming up on him. Our coxswain, Becklean, did a wonderful job. I mean, he had this technique of asking for a power 10. A power 10 is when you really hit all your power; you can't hold it the whole race, but you can try to do what we call gain a man; in other words, although we're not looking out at the boat, he's looking out at the boat, and if you're right next to somebody, you can so tell whether they're a man or two ahead of you, or you're a man or two ahead of them.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

He would say, after our power 10, he said, "You got me a man," and in reality, we had gotten him two.

Rip Esselstyn:

For people that don't know, there's eight men in the boat.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Right.

Ann Esselstyn:

Plus the cox.

Rip Esselstyn:

Plus the coxswain, but does he count as a man when you're talking about-

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Absolutely he counts.

Rip Esselstyn:

Okay. Okay, okay, all right.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

We had did a couple of power 10s, and then it was quite apparent to us, even without looking out, that we had not only drawn even with Cornell, but we were really pressing them pretty hard, and that we were going by them. When you have that surge, when you not only pull up on the crew and you're even with them, and then you go by them, that is just a surge to go even higher and stronger. We won by three-quarters of a length, so there was absolutely no doubt about who had won the Olympic trial.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

All the oarsmen there, they were very gracious. They were gentlemen, but it's...

Rip Esselstyn:

So, you were talking about how after the crab and the misstep at the start, how fantastic and solid the boat felt. Can you count on your hands how many times the boat has felt that good?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Once.

Rip Esselstyn:

That was that time?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

That was that.

Rip Esselstyn:

And so, was it also... would you say it was easy speed, or is there such a thing as easy in crew... or, relatively speaking?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

I would just say that there's such a feeling that you're getting the job done when it's that solid, that that is such satisfaction in itself. I bet you could argue that makes it... what makes it easier is when you know that you're going by somebody.

Rip Esselstyn:

Isn't it frustrating how elusive that feeling can be? I mean, you guys were amazing, but you felt that feeling that one time. Did everybody else in the boat, you think... did you guys talk about? Did they feel it as well?

Ann Esselstyn:

Oh, my God. Oh, Rip.

Rip Esselstyn:

What?

Ann Esselstyn:

Every year at the farm, we have a meeting, a reunion of the crew. I am the only non-crew here, and the conversation is only about that kind of thing: the feeling, the two men, the power 10; again, how it was, what happened. It's repeated every year, and they're all so excited. I mean, I even kind of enjoy it.

Rip Esselstyn:

But I'll go back to the question: did they feel that same thing that you felt?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

In a different way. Yeah.

Ann Esselstyn:

Oh, no, they all did; at least, from the memories that they have every year.

Rip Esselstyn:

Okay, so you won the trials. What's next?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Well, then my life got to be a little exciting because we had some bad weather at the trials, so that the trials had been pushed back for a day or two. I was supposed to have matriculated at that time, since I had graduated from Yale, but here I was trying to go into medical school, and I hadn't yet satisfied the organic chemistry requirement.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Well, a month or two before the Olympic trials, I knew that we were probably going to have the summer off; it's not like it is these days. But I had therefore found out that I could go to summer school in organic chemistry at Cornell and satisfy the requirement for medical school, but because the Olympic trials got pushed late, I was two days late starting my organic chemistry at Cornell.

Rip Esselstyn:

Pretty exciting course, I'm sure.

Ann Esselstyn:

Just say you passed.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

That was six weeks. Yes, I did pass, and after that six weeks, it was now probably about near the end of August, and we had to start getting ready for the Olympics. I mean, when you think about where we stand today, nobody ever would have taken two months off once they had qualified for the Olympics. They would be training right up until, but that was the way it was in that era.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

I was just about thinking that after I finished rowing... remember, this was Australia, so the Olympics were in the end of November... I didn't really feel that that was a way to go to medical school, so I thought I would just keep on rowing, and then after the Olympics, maybe I would take a trip around the world, come back, and then start medical school the following year, but my draft board said otherwise. They said, "If you're not in medical school, you will be drafted." Yes, you could row the Olympics, but you would then immediately go into the Army as a private.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

So, I then went to Yale Medical School and said, "Look, I've got this situation where I'm rowing in the Olympics, but I also have to be in medical school," and they said, "Well, we never really got a chance to answer your application. Why don't you think about coming to Yale? It would work out perfectly."

Ann Esselstyn:

Times have changed.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

So I started in September of 1956 at medical school in the morning, but every afternoon, of course, the guys would come by and pick me up and we'd go out and practice rowing. It was sort of a peculiar initiation to medical school, to only be there half time, and then by the first of November of 1956, I just left medical school with the team because we went to Australia. That was where we were then sent, not in Melbourne or Sydney; we were sent to Ballarat. Ballarat was where they had the Olympic events at Lake Wendouree.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Lake Wendouree was shallow and filled with reeds, but they had this... I'll never forget this reed-cutting boat that would cut these reeds, which allowed a passageway through these reeds in this lake for the crews to compete. We were living in an old Army barracks with all the other people who had water sports: the canoeists, all the other oarsmen. It was where we trained for about three weeks before our events began.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Now, when the events began, this was around November 18th or 19th, and we had not had a single race since the trials, so that was almost six months.

Rip Esselstyn:

You hadn't had one race for six months?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

The trials were back in June of '56. So, the coach was also quite happy with our conditioning, but in the first race, we came in third in this first heat, but fortunately in rowing, they don't cast you out if you've lost in the first race, because in case you broke equipment or an oar or something, you've come all that way... you get to go into what they call the repechage, which in French means to fish again.

Rip Esselstyn:

Can I stop you for a second?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Yeah.

Rip Esselstyn:

So, you got third. Was there anything that happened? Did you guys just feel rusty because you hadn't raced in six months?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Oh, we were totally flat.

Rip Esselstyn:

Just flat.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Just flat, yeah.

Rip Esselstyn:

Did you know it from as soon as the gun went off? Were you guys like, "Oh, this is not good?"

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

It was pretty apparent.

Rip Esselstyn:

So for people... what's the distance of the race?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

2,000 meters.

Rip Esselstyn:

2,000 meters, and roughly, how long does that usually take?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

A little over six and a half minutes.

Rip Esselstyn:

So it's six and a half minutes of basically all-out just going crazy.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

So when we lost that first race, we went into the repechage with the other crews that had lost, and if you came in first or second in the repechage, you could then get back into the regular flow, because all the other crews that had won were having a day off, whereas we were rowing in the repechage in the very next day. Since we won the repechage, we were in the semi-final.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Now, in the semi-final, we were against Australia, who was one of the crews that had just thrashed us the first day. We were a pretty young crew. So in the semi-final, from a mental standpoint, we had to do well against Australia or beat them in the semi-final to be able to convince ourselves that we could really get this job done. I should share with you, though, that the atmosphere in the evening of that first day when we lost that race so badly... our coach, we got together, we went for just a walk in this field away from the Army barracks, and Jim Rathschmidt stopped for a minute and he said, "Well, men, I owe you

all." He always called us men. "One thing I'm sure of, that I have got the finest crew that's here, and I came to Australia to bring back gold."

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

That was Jim. That was the way it was, flat-out. So, the semi-finals started and we, obviously, were jumped by Australia because they always seemed to want to get us at the start, but we really ground on them and we ground on them, and we ground on them, and we just really put the pedal to the metal, and we won by about maybe a deck length, which is not much, maybe eight or 10 feet.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

It was a very interesting article that appeared in this Australian press within hour, saying, "Australia is guaranteed a victory tomorrow. The silly Yanks overdid themselves," because what happened... a number of us went so flat-out, including yours truly, we were vomiting over the sides of the boat after we won because of the effort put out. Despite the comments of the Australian press, we didn't feel that we were going to lose the race because we went flat-out; we were actually just the reverse. We thought, "Well, hell, if we can beat them once, and being as young as we were at age 24, with a good night's rest and a full meal or two, we should be fully restored."

Rip Esselstyn:

I want to understand. That was the semi-finals; and so, there were two heats in the semi-finals, and was it the top two in each heat went on to the finals?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Yeah, the final was composed of Sweden, Canada, the United States and Australia. When we were sitting there at the start, I'll never forget another mistake that Australians made before we even started the race.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

We were sitting at the starting line, and at that moment, we were passing the shake. Now, passing the shake is an old racing tradition for Yale, where the coxswain reaches the stroke's hand, shakes hand; stroke turns around, shakes the hand of number seven, Rusty; Rusty turns around and shakes my hand; I turn around and shake Charlie; Charlie turns around and shakes Don's hand. While we were doing this-

Rip Esselstyn:

You didn't have the bump back then?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

No. Shake. It was hand.

Rip Esselstyn:

Was it like this?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Yeah.

Rip Esselstyn:

Was it like this, or was it like this?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Like that.

Rip Esselstyn:

Okay.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

At that moment, when Charlie was shaking Don's hand, Garth Manton... nice guy, number five for the Australian crew... leans over and yells, "I say, Charlie, haven't you met Don yet?" Here he was, mocking our tradition, and that gave everybody's adrenal gland a little bit of a squeeze, so that when the race started where Australia usually jumps us at the start... and that was their plan, jump us at the start, hold the lead that they got, and then finish us off at the sprint... well, they may have jumped, but we jumped with them.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

For the first part of the race, it was flat-out even. Sweden began to fall apart, but Canada, United States, and Australia were neck and neck. As a matter of fact, there's a thrilling audio-

Rip Esselstyn:

And some video.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Version of the entire race.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Showing how tight it really was.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Once again, our coxswain came to the fore, because he didn't ask for a power 10. He asked for a power 20. We had never heard of a power 20.

Rip Esselstyn:

What does a power 10 or a power 20 mean, for people that don't know?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

It means that for those 10 strokes, or in that case, 20 strokes, you really absolutely give it everything.

Rip Esselstyn:

Okay.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

You can't hold it for the whole race, but you give it enough.

Rip Esselstyn:

Is there such a thing as a power five?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

No. Well, I'm sure there could be.

Rip Esselstyn:

But usually it's a power 10.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Yeah. So, Becklean calls for a power 20.

Rip Esselstyn:

How far into the race?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

This is probably a little after maybe 500 meters.

Rip Esselstyn:

Okay, power 20.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Then after we finish the power 20, he yells, "You got me a man." Well, that was not the truth. Bill was hiding from us, we gave him two and a half men, almost three. So when he said, "Give me a man," it was exciting to think we've got something.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

But then, lo and behold, after about another 500 meters, he said, "I want another power 20, this one for Jim." For Jim, the coach.

Rip Esselstyn:

The coach. The coach, yeah.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Everybody was so devoted to Jim, so he thought he would really get an extra squeeze out of all of us, which he did. This time he said, "You gave me a man and a half." We gave him three men.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Then, as we got a little bit closer, I think with almost 300, 400 meters to go, he screamed as loud as he possibly could, "You're going to win it. You are going to win it." We still had racing to go, but with those

words, I mean, everybody just took whatever strength they had left and poured it on, and we were able to win by three-quarters of a length. Canada was second, Australia was third, and Sweden was fourth.

Ann Esselstyn:

And then tell them what happened to the people in the boat.

Rip Esselstyn:

Oh yeah, so what happened to Charlie? Didn't somebody have to be taken off to the hospital?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Oh, that was John Cook. John Cook was exhausted to the point where he couldn't stand up to get-

Ann Esselstyn:

And Life Magazine caught a picture of Essy. Describe that picture. Well, he's just flat-out... oh no, you're crying. It was in exhaustion.

Rip Esselstyn:

I think it was all the feelings that basically came together in one, all the hard work, the joy from winning the gold medal, all that.

Ann Esselstyn:

But it was one of Life's two-page pictures. It was great.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

It just goes to show you how hard up Life was.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah. So did you really think going into that that you guys would win the gold? I mean, looking back, was there any doubt in your mind?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

That's what we were going for. We weren't preparing to try to get a silver medal or a bronze. No.

Rip Esselstyn:

So, those guys-

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

I remember Tommy Charlton, within minutes after we had got back to the boathouse, having received the medals, and there were reporters there. Tommy, who was never short for words, said, "We are the toughest crew ever put together and we beat the finest."

Rip Esselstyn:

I think it is so awesome the way my father can recall every little nuanced detail of that Olympic race, and as I'm sure you can imagine, I am so proud of him, and love hearing about the drive, the energy, and the mindset that it took that Yale crew team to achieve the ultimate success. There's no question it inspired my career as a swimmer and a professional triathlete, and while there may not be an Olympic for our pets, they still deserve the best possible food so that they, too, can live life to their fullest potential.

Rip Esselstyn:

Wild Earth dog food is that gold medal fuel source, with only whole food, plant-based ingredients, and optimal digestion support. Try it today. Visit the episode page at plantstrongpodcast.com to claim up to 50 percent off your order.

Rip Esselstyn:

How do you think winning the gold medal helped shape you as a person going forward in everything you did?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Well, I think it did. What it did do, I should tell you... obviously, I had missed an awful lot of medical school. I mean, I was over there in November and December. Finally, in January and February, there was a lot of wining and dining for us back in the States, so it wasn't until February that I began to get to thinking about medical school seriously again, and although the nice folks at Yale suggested that I could make it up easily during the summer, I just didn't feel that I wanted to have a first year of medical school be quite as thin, and I followed through with my original plan, which was to go to Case Western Reserve University.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

As a matter of fact, that in and of itself was kind of an interesting story that I've perhaps overlooked, but in January of 1956, before we ever even thought about rowing in the Olympic trials... I had no idea how good our crew would be... I can recall when I was interviewing for medical school in Cleveland, and I was speaking to the associate-

Ann Esselstyn:

That was the medical school you wanted to go to so much, because it had very unique programs back then.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Right.

Ann Esselstyn:

Lucky me!

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

What was interesting in talking with this associate dean... he said, "Well, if we were to offer you a place to matriculate in September of this year, 1956, can you think of any reason why you would not accept this offer?" I looked at him and I said, "No, I'm quite flattered. Quite frankly, I'd be delighted to be here,

but in the spirit of full disclosure, I just have to share with you the fact that I do not intend to give up rowing my senior year." It means a lot with the associations and so forth.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

I should mention, I said, "Also, if we were lucky enough to have a crew that is good, very good and very fast, we're going to enter the Olympic trials, and if we happen to be very good and very fast and faster than anybody else at the Olympic trials, it would mean that we would have to go to the Olympics, and this year they are in the fall in Australia, which means that I could not be in Cleveland if we won the crew."

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

So we both sort of smiled, and he said, "Well, that's kind of an interesting story." He said, "Well, why don't we do this? Why don't we worry about that if it ever happens?"

Rip Esselstyn:

So were you able to go back to him and say, "It happened."

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Of course. As soon as they won the Olympic trial that same day, I called Dean Jack Caughey and I said, "Dr. Caughey, our crew entered the Olympic trials and we won. I cannot come to medical school at Cleveland this fall," and he said, "No problem. All we can do, if you're up to it, we'll just delay it for one year." I said, "That sounds good to me."

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah, so after winning the gold medal, you came back to the farm for a little bit, I'm sure. What was the reception like here in Claverack?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Well, it was fun. Actually, the local sports team got very excited about the fact that they had an Olympic gold medal in the community, and they wanted to have some sort of recognition night, and they asked if I would see if some of the other crew would come. Sure enough, it was held at the local Elks club, and we had five of the crew came, drove up from the [inaudible 00:53:34] to the farm to be a part of that evening, which was great.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah. So you spent, obviously, your whole career at the Cleveland Clinic. I was obviously raised in Cleveland. At any point did you consider moving up to the farm and leaving Cleveland, or was that-

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Well, with no question, the farm is terrific, and every-

Ann Esselstyn:

Cleveland is terrific, too.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Every year of my life when we were in Cleveland, we would come back here for some time during vacation with my parents and so forth. But the Olympics does something that... for some people, I think the Olympics is sort of the... they feel that's the ultimate in perhaps what they're going to ever achieve in life. But on the other hand, I think there are others for whom the efforts of achieving Olympic status teach you some pretty exciting lessons about tenacity of purpose and perseverance and how important those qualities can be in what you might try to achieve, or later on in life, as well.

Rip Esselstyn:

I think that that tenacity of purpose has served you well, especially as you've sought to show everybody, and very successfully, that we all have it within our capacity to not only prevent, but also reverse heart disease.

Ann Esselstyn:

Also Rip, as he's hit the wall of people who think he's crazy, that this is impossible, and he just perseveres with the same old thing, and Dr. Sprouts, but so what?

Rip Esselstyn:

Well, you've got to have a thick skin, and obviously you do, and you feel pretty good about yourself on a lot of levels.

Rip Esselstyn:

Right here, we're on the porch of the homestead. You didn't grow up in the homestead. You grew up near this house, but when you were growing up, who lived in this house?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Grandmother was widowed when Grandfather died in 1938, and she lived here until 1958 when she died. It was largely Grandmother that was-

Ann Esselstyn:

But she only came here in the summer.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Right.

Ann Esselstyn:

It was not winterized, right?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

No, that's right.

Rip Esselstyn:

Ah. And so, didn't you say that it was every Sunday at 1:00, you'd come here for dinner or lunch?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Absolutely, all summer long, all spring when Grandmother was here, or early fall. We always had Sunday lunch here with Grandmother.

Ann Esselstyn:

And Grandmother would say, if you didn't accept seconds... what did she say?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Even though she was somewhat partially blind, she had an incredibly acute vision. When my father, who was establishing the first group practice almost in rural America in 1946... when he would interview candidates, I can remember one in particular psychiatrist who was being interviewed by my father for a position at the Rip Van Winkle clinic, and Dad always loves it when they came for an interview on a Sunday because he could take them to Sunday lunch with Grandmother.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

I can remember this fellow. He was sitting just to my grandmother's right, and she, of course, gave him enormous heapings of potatoes and roast beef and vegetables, and had insisted he have seconds, and then you could just see, absolutely, he was totally full of food; in comes the dessert, which is this mammoth, big peach shortcake, the best looking thing you can imagine.

Ann Esselstyn:

Oh, I feel like peaches now!

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

It was my grandmother who always insisted on cutting the peach shortcake herself and making the serving. When she saw that this was a friend of my father's, she really wanted to make sure he felt that he was welcome, so she gave him this enormous piece of peach shortcake, and he didn't dare offend, so he tackled this thing and got it down. Then, as the dessert was sort of ending, Grandmother looked around, said, "Now, who would like some more peach shortcake?" Dr. Lafferty looked up and said, "Oh, ma'am, I've had plenty," and she said, "You've had plenty? This is delicious." He said, "Ma'am, it was so wonderful. Maybe I'll just have a half a piece." She then took her knife and cut him this enormous piece, and as she was passing it to him, said, "My husband used to say, 'What kind of a man is half a man?'"

Rip Esselstyn:

Oh no! Now, so we have this backdrop of... it's almost like a football field that's behind us here. In the last seven of the last nine years, we've had our annual Plantstock event here. Do you have any particular memories of these Plantstocks?

Ann Esselstyn:

I mean, they were wonderful. I mean, I personally prepare for them by growing zinnias, and I have tons of zinnias, and we also have other flowers. I would make these great arrangements for all the tables, but I also put them inside the port-a-potties. We have... I don't know how many port-a-potties, Rip, eight?

Rip Esselstyn:

Oh no, no, no, no.

Ann Esselstyn:

10?

Rip Esselstyn:

At least 10, maybe 12.

Ann Esselstyn:

Okay, so I will never forget when one man came out of the port-a-potty, and he said, "You know, I have never been in a port-a-potty with flowers. I felt like this was the perfect Plantstock."

Rip Esselstyn:

Well, it's crazy how much planning went into those live events, from the generator, the jumbo screen TV.

Ann Esselstyn:

The caterer.

Rip Esselstyn:

The caterer that basically brought a 18-wheeler in here and made all the meals out of there.

Ann Esselstyn:

And then he spent the night. Yeah.

Rip Esselstyn:

The crazy, huge circus tent that we would put up, all the little side tents that we put up, the ice machine that we would have to bring here. The dumpster-

Ann Esselstyn:

The dumpster.

Rip Esselstyn:

The dumpster.

Ann Esselstyn:

The signs we put all around so people weren't going into the barns and places they shouldn't go.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Parking 250-

Ann Esselstyn:

Oh my God!

Rip Esselstyn:

Parking! The parking, yeah, parking.

Ann Esselstyn:

We still have in the basement these big poles with flags that would show you where you would park.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah, yeah, but it was magical. It truly was.

Ann Esselstyn:

Oh, it was magical. When people left, we had flares so that it was very, very nice.

Rip Esselstyn:

But really, we kind of outgrew this venue, right? I mean, the capacity here was about 500, and it's one of the reasons why we went to Asheville, North Carolina. But it's another great reason why we're so excited to-

Ann Esselstyn:

Be here virtually.

Rip Esselstyn:

Due to COVID-19, but to bring everybody back to the farm for our virtual live-streaming Plantstock 2020, so people get to visit the farm that has been such a precious place for all of us.

Rip Esselstyn:

Can you tell me... so your dad... so he started the Rip Van Winkle clinic here. Who were some of his most famous patients? Do you remember?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Well, although the patient that I recall most vividly from that standpoint would have been while I was still in New York City and when I was seven years old... I was introduced to... well, actually, I was in the first or second grade, and my teacher came to me at Fieldston Ethical Culture School, which I was attending in Riverdale, and she said, "Your father would like to... he's out at the end of the pathway"... which, down to the sidewalk, and it was right in the middle of the school morning. She said, "Your father would like to see you down there."

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

And so, I put on my jacket and went down there, and there was my dad with a guy that was just about as tall as my father, and a very, very good-looking fellow. My dad said, "I'd like you to meet my good friend, Mr. Lou Gehrig." For the last year and a half of his life, while Lou Gehrig was dying of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, Dad really being about the same age, having an athletic background, and he was sort of given a responsibility or was asked, and he would see Lou Gehrig practically every day of his life until he died.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Up here at the farm, for many years after that, the widow of Lou Gehrig, Eleanor Gehrig, was really often, for 10 days to two weeks at a time, she would be a guest at the house because of the friendship that had developed between my father and Eleanor Gehrig as she was watching her famous husband literally, sadly, waste away and die.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah. So your dad passed away in 1972. I think I remember I was about nine years old. To me, it's a crying shame that he passed away at 72... if I'm not mistaken. Was it 1972?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Right.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah. And when I think about, as we were talking about earlier, winning the gold medal was quite an achievement, but it was a stepping stone to a lot of other greater achievements? How proud do you think your father would be with the achievements that you've had since the gold medal?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

I think we'd have a lot of fun talking about it.

Rip Esselstyn:

I know you would. I know you would.

Ann Esselstyn:

And happy.

Rip Esselstyn:

But especially thinking about-

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Well, Dad knew about persistence because he, himself, was... not only was he a heck of a good guard and tackle at Yale's undefeated football team, but he was really quite renowned for the... although he was about 224, 225 pounds, he was enormously strong. As a matter of fact, he went to... traditionally, they would go to the county fair every September, and at the county fair, there's always somebody who is a strongman who says he'll take on anybody in the crowd and so forth, and so my dad raised his hand and went up, and started wrestling with this guy who... and Dad didn't know that the choke hold wasn't barred; so the guy quickly threw a choke hold on Dad, and he succumbed.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

But then two weeks later, he found out exactly where this same carnival was going, and sure enough, he drove his car up there and found where this place was, and raised his hand again and volunteered to wrestle the guy. He got a hold of him in both arms and just absolutely bent him right down to the ground and won it within about 15 seconds.

Rip Esselstyn:

Tell me, if I remember this story correctly, the first time that he put the choke hold on him and your dad volunteered, did he have a bunch of friends that were in the crowd?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Yeah, yeah.

Rip Esselstyn:

And the second time he went all by himself, right?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Right, yep.

Rip Esselstyn:

I mean, that takes a lot of just chutzpah and courage, right? But he obviously felt wronged.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Oh, he was pretty confident.

Rip Esselstyn:

Oh my goodness.

Ann Esselstyn:

I love the picture of your father on a rock, a big rock over-

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Oh, where he's standing.

Ann Esselstyn:

And he's standing on his hands, where if he fell, I don't know what would have happened to him. But there he is, and he's wearing one of those black bathing suit-type things, with a... do you know what I mean?

Rip Esselstyn:

Oh yeah, yeah, one of the old-school kind of bathing suits.

Ann Esselstyn:

Old school. Anyway.

Rip Esselstyn:

For sure.

Rip Esselstyn:

Well, do you guys have anything else that you want to add? Anything that's exciting that's going on right now in your work, or anything you want to share?

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Well, I think that Ann and I are just so proud and delighted that we've seen such an affection for the farm from all of you children and our grandchildren, and we're just so delighted and confident in the fact that when we pass it along, it's going to be absolutely shared with such confidence, and we're just proud and delighted of the values that you all are able to show.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah.

Ann Esselstyn:

And I'm astounded at what you, Rip, have achieved with the Engine 2. Oh my gosh, I am so excited that the Engine 2 products are coming back; at least, I want certain things to be sure to come back, Rip. Anyway, you and your team have been amazing.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

Well, we haven't talked too much about medicine in this interview, but I have to say one thing, and that is that I think the reason that Mommy and I are so delighted and proud that you've gone into this capacity of having these amazing immersions, and having the public be aware... because you've often heard me say that, really, that we are truly on the edge of what could be a seismic revolution in health, and the revolution in health that is before us is never going to happen with the invention of another pill, another drug, another stint, another bypass, another procedure, another operation.

Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn:

But where the seismic revolution will come about is when we have the will and the grit and the determination to share with the public what is the lifestyle, and most specifically, what is the nutritional literacy that is going to empower them, as the locus of control, to absolutely annihilate chronic illness. And Rip, we congratulate you, what you're doing for that.

Rip Esselstyn:

Listen, as I've heard you say many times, and I'll throw it right back at you, I'm just standing on the shoulders of you and Ann, so thank you.

Rip Esselstyn:

All right, well, with that-

Ann Esselstyn:

Well, Rip, one other extraordinary thing... really, truly extraordinary... is that Essy and I have four children. All of those four of you are plant-based, and passionately plant-based. I mean, Jane and you out there... and Rip and Ted and Zeb, too... but all 10 of our grandchildren are so passionately plant-based, also, and that just astounds me, and the older they get, the more it gets to their pushing it out, so it's really astounding.

This transcript was exported on Aug 12, 2020 - view latest version [here](#).

Rip Esselstyn:

Yep, and it's a legacy that you guys have passed down, and hopefully, we'll continue to pass it down.

Rip Esselstyn:

All right, with that, peace. Engine 2. For the Plant-Strong.

Ann Esselstyn:

And maybe a handshake, too.

Rip Esselstyn:

I think we should do a handshake, too, right?

Rip Esselstyn:

Thank you again, Ann and Essy, for everything that you've done for your kids and your grandkids. You are creating a legacy that's going to last a long, long time. And thank you, all of you, for listening and welcoming my family into yours each and every week.

Rip Esselstyn:

I want to welcome you again to join us for Plantstock 2020 that starts tomorrow. Not only will you hear more about the Esselstyn farm and my family's history, you're also going to be cooking and learning right alongside many of your favorites in the plant-based movement. We can't wait to share this intimate weekend with you, especially in a time where optimal health and community has taken on a whole new level of importance. We're here to support your journey to complete wellness, and while it may not include an Olympic gold medal, we consider each and every one of you Plant-Strong champions.

Rip Esselstyn:

The Plant-Strong podcast team includes Laurie Kortowich, Ami Mackey, Patrick Gavin, Wade Clark, and Carrie Barrett. I want to thank my parents, Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn, Junior, and Ann Crile Esselstyn, for creating a legacy that will be carried on for generations, and being willing to go against the current and trudge upstream to the causation. We are all better for it.