



'EXERCISE IS GOOD, BUT IT ISN'T A WEIGHT- LOSS TOOL'

Fitness guru
MAX LOWERY
is the hottest thing
on Instagram. But his
methods - start by ditching
the protein shakes and don't
even think about eating
breakfast - are a little
controversial, as
Victoria Woodhall
finds out >

PHOTOGRAPHS
STEVE SCHOFIELD

With his coat-hanger cheekbones and perfectly proportioned jaw, Max Lowery is a textbook example of the golden ratios of attractiveness. And then there are his abs – as seen on Instagram – which have more rippling contours than an Ordnance Survey map. The 27-year-old former competitive sprinter, ex-model and author of *The 2 Meal Day* regularly appears on lists of top personal trainers. Victoria's Secret models queue up to train with him, men want to look like him... And not only that. When we meet at the upmarket gym in Kensington where he occasionally teaches, he tells me that the most common internet search under his name is, 'Is Max Lowery gay?'

'I don't mind: I'm pretty comfortable with it,' he says. 'I have a girlfriend: we've been together for four years, but it's something I'm quite private about on Instagram.'

Instagram is Max's shop window to 33,000 followers, where you can find 'before and after' real-life weight-loss transformations from his 60-day online plan, as well as workouts, recipes and videos. It's the same model that propelled Joe Wicks from jobbing suburban personal trainer to multimillionaire fitness phenomenon in the space of just a few years. 'I take huge inspiration from Joe,' says Max. 'The fact that he has done well has opened the door for others like me.'

Although he has never met Joe, Max applauds the way he times carbs around exercise and doesn't count calories. 'But in many ways, he falls short,' he says. 'He is very much one-size-fits-all and I think there could be more education around understanding your body better.' Max is not afraid to take on the titans in the wellness debate. He is happy to pronounce protein shakes unnecessary for 90 per cent of people and to question whether, for some, the current vogue for fat-busting high-intensity interval training (HIIT) could be doing more harm than good. The breakfast lobby and cereal companies come in for a bashing, too. Skipping breakfast, says Max, is possibly the best thing you can do for your health.

Not that he's actively out to pick a fight with anyone, but as one of the few trainers to combine fitness with fasting, he frequently finds himself under attack from within his own community. In



Clockwise from top: Max's baked kale and eggs; at sports day with his grandfather aged 12, and before a channel swim for Harrow in 2003



“WE SEEM TO HAVE A FEAR OF EMPTY STOMACHS IN THE WESTERN WORLD”

the fitness world, where energy drinks and protein bars are part of the culture, going without food for around 16 hours a day – as *The 2 Meal Day* suggests – is seen as fringe, to put it politely.

'I get messaged on Instagram by other fitness professionals who are very negative about the concept and say it's not good for you, because they don't understand it. The generic advice is to eat little and often and count calories. All I can say is read what I'm saying – I'm careful to reference scientific sources – rather than hearing the word "fasting" and jumping to conclusions.'

Intermittent fasting (IF) – whether it's a time-honoured religious practice, doing a weekend detox or following the 5:2 – isn't new, but it's poorly understood. 'We seem to have a fear of empty stomachs in the western world,' reflects Max. 'Just because your stomach is empty doesn't mean that you are hungry. Real hunger is something that occurs every 16 to 24 hours, not every four hours. My regime effectively mimics the way we ate for thousands of years when food was scarce and we ate sporadically, rather than

grazing all day. In fact, having an empty stomach, or being in the "fasted state", brings about some amazing changes in your body.'

Weight loss is, of course, the most obvious benefit, but fasting may also lead to a stronger immune system, heightened mental alertness, reduced hunger, a slowing of the ageing process and a reduced risk of Alzheimer's disease, heart disease and type 2 diabetes. Silicon Valley CEOs have taken to IF in a big way, claiming it makes them sharper and more focused (it's not dieting, by the way, it's 'biohacking').

As a former athlete, Max, too, is all about performance, with the emphasis on how eating and exercise make you feel, rather than how they make you look. 'I fast to optimise my health, understand my body better and because it makes me feel amazing all the time.' And he also knows, better than most, what it's like to feel the opposite: to wake up every day, wretched and rudderless, with no one to blame but himself.

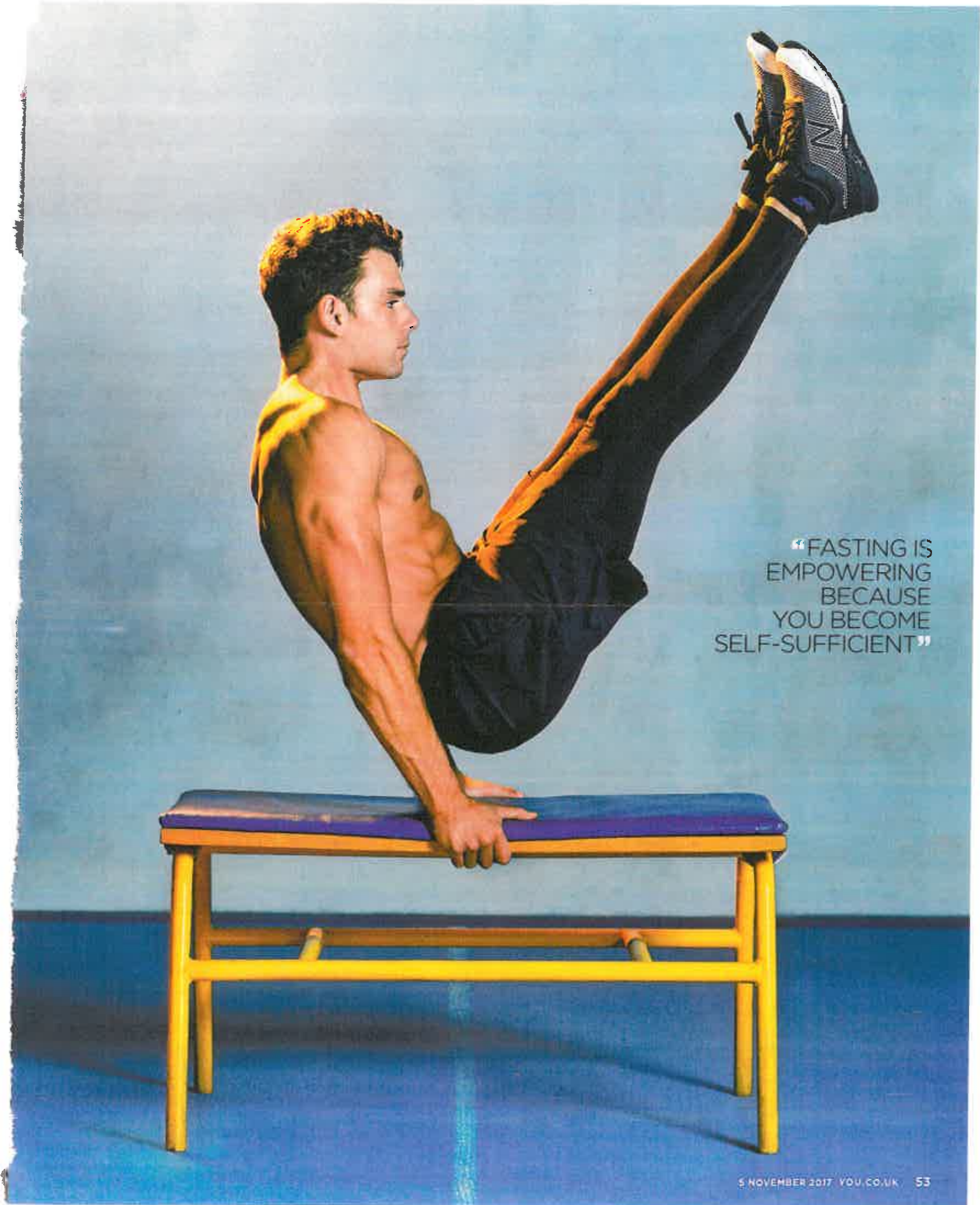
A sports scholar while at Harrow School,

Max was gifted at rugby, athletics and swimming, competing at county and national level. But at 16, he imploded. It started with a back injury, which, looking back, he believes was actually psychological. 'I was doing too much. I was under too much pressure. I wasn't happy.' He fell in with an older crowd and was expelled for smoking weed just as he started his GCSE year. 'As soon as I wasn't getting the mental release through sport, I started looking for

it in other things – drugs and alcohol. I don't do anything in half measures and I went from being someone who excelled at sport to being the one who excelled at getting messed-up at parties.'

His parents – Philip, who founded the Real Food Festivals, and Romaine, a professional home organiser – were at a loss. Not that Max could really explain his downward spiral either to them or to himself. 'Because I was always drinking or smoking it never really hit home how bad the situation had become. I didn't know who I was any more. Before I had been something of a role model; now I was seen as a bad influence.'

Max was expelled from his next school after less than a month and only got through his GCSEs with the help of private tutors. A-levels held no appeal and, in any case, by the age of 17, there were much more exciting offers on the table. He was scouted by a top model agency and went on to work as a promoter in clubs ►



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**Above: Max at work in the kitchen.
Opposite: in a national rugby
competition aged 11**

◀ such as London's Movida and Amika, once favoured by young royals and the Chelsea set. He drew on his Harrow and modelling connections to bring in punters with deep pockets. 'I would get paid for every person who spent a certain amount of money at my table. It was a lot of fun, but the wrong environment. I was drinking a lot because it was free and it led to more excess.' There would be 'party drugs' too, as well as lost hours to alcohol-induced blackouts. 'I would remember being in a club at 2am, then suddenly I'd be on the

street at 4am with hours from the night completely missing.'

Despite having few formal qualifications, in 2009, aged 19, Max landed a job as a stockbroker, where the life of partying continued. Entertaining clients until the small hours was part of the job, only this time he had 5am starts as well. 'I was so hungover and tired and was chained to my desk all day doing really stressful deals - once I lost €50,000. It had to come out of each person's bonus, shared among a team of five. I'm not someone who gets really stressed but after that I couldn't eat for two days.'

With the effects of the financial crash still being felt, the job became increasingly difficult and his heart wasn't in it. 'Slowly things began to remind me who I really was. I remembered that I used to be someone who excelled. I was tired of feeling terrible all the time. At work I removed myself from the group that went out a lot, and I started taking regular exercise and going to bed at a reasonable time.' He signed up for a triathlon, joined a gym and took his personal training qualifications on the side. Then, in 2013, he quit his job to go backpacking around South America.

It was here that he discovered intermittent fasting purely by accident. 'I was trying to live as cheaply as possible, so I'd have a smoothie in the late morning and then eat one substantial meal a day in the early evening. I felt great. When I got home I found I had lost seven kilos. I returned to my normal routine, eating three low-carb meals a day. And while I was only eating 200-300 calories

more per day, I soon put the weight back on.' Max set about researching why that might be. 'By not eating breakfast, I'd been extending my overnight fast to between 16 and 20 hours a day – and that had resulted in health benefits and weight loss.'

Skipping breakfast seemed to give him more energy in the morning rather than less. That fasting buzz, he learned as his research deepened, was produced by the hormone norepinephrine, an evolutionary adaptation to make us sharper in our hunt for food. 'Digestion also takes up a lot of energy, hence the post-meal slump. It made sense to me to save that for later in the day when your most important tasks are completed.' To his surprise he was less hungry and stopped constantly thinking about his next meal. His energy levels stabilised throughout the day and the 11am and 4pm energy crashes vanished. He shared his method online and the 2 Meal Day was born.

To show willing, on the day I'm due to meet him, I skip breakfast. But by noon, I am struggling to focus, knocking things over and nursing a dull headache. He, on the other hand, hasn't eaten for 18 hours and is full of beans. How can that be? 'You're too reliant on food for energy,' he tells me. But, short of plugging myself into the electricity mains, I'm not sure what else I'm supposed to do.

He explains that my rumbling stomach is not true hunger, it's my body – a creature of habit – expecting food at a certain time. The light-headedness could be dehydration 'or because your body has become so used to being fuelled by sugars from food, it's struggling to find energy from other sources. It's a common side-effect when people try fasting for the first time, but it only lasts a few days at most,' he reassures me.

If I can survive a few uncomfortable days of adaptation, I'll switch to becoming a 'fat burner' rather than a 'sugar burner' and be

able to use my fat reserves to power me through my day. It's a bit like going off-grid. 'It's empowering because you become self-sufficient. Not only will you have energy all day long, you'll no longer be reaching for caffeine, nicotine or sugar to get you through. Most surprisingly, you'll feel less hungry.'

How liberating to think that I could be free from constantly looking ahead to my next bite and that my body will be burning fat – particularly the harmful visceral fat around the middle which is linked to type 2 diabetes, cancer and heart disease – without even having to exercise.

But if fasting can burn fat, do we even need exercise? 'Exercise is good for so many reasons but it's not a weight-loss tool, which might sound controversial. The past 40 years of advice has been to eat less and do more and it hasn't worked – obesity levels are higher than ever. You can't out-train a bad diet. Exercise is good for your heart, your lungs, your brain, your body: exercise has thousands of benefits for general health and that's why I do it.' In his experience, the sooner people stop exercising for weight loss, the sooner they see results.

While Max has never felt better, he knows that fasting is not for everyone. His Instagram is full of disclaimers: don't do it if

you're pregnant, breastfeeding, have adrenal fatigue, thyroid issues or a history of eating disorders, and those with medical conditions need to seek their doctor's advice. He is fully aware that the 2 Meal Day could act as a cover for eating disorders and indeed some people accuse him of encouraging them. Recently on a Facebook Live chat with his followers, Max received a question from a woman diagnosed with anorexia, concerned about how much she should eat. Max put her straight. 'Sorry, but if you have an eating disorder, the 2 Meal Day may not be for you.'

So far, Max has had 400 sign-ups to his plan from all

over the world. It's not exactly on a Wicksian scale yet, but if this health revolution is a slow burner, then so be it – he's not about to change tack for the sake of Instagram numbers.

Max could easily trade on his high-profile clientele – he mentions a client who is currently one of the biggest supermodels on the planet – but that would be cheating. 'People who train supermodels have the easiest job in the world, although they're held up as the best trainers. You've got to remember that supermodels are genetically gifted, they react very well to training and they are very careful with their diets. The true challenge focus is on real people.'

Cooking from scratch is at the heart of his fad-free recipes, which don't exclude any food groups apart from added sugars. Max has his parents, who brought up him and his two younger siblings on fresh farm produce, to thank for his 'real food' philosophy. His father taught him to cook, and his parents are now hugely proud of him. 'Proud and relieved,' smiles Max.

He still drinks occasionally, but advocates being 'sober confident': having strategies, such as a workout planned the next morning, to make it easier to choose a lime and soda rather than a beer.

The hardest thing on the 2 Meal Day plan, he says, isn't missing alcohol or even food, but dealing with other people's opinions about skipping meals. 'People can get very defensive, talking about how unhealthy fasting is. I accept that for lots of people food is an emotional subject. I try to explain the scientific benefits as non-aggressively as possible – and 90 per cent of people get it. I truly believe that intermittent fasting is the missing link in our overall health and wellbeing.'

Max is supremely personable and confident, a natural presenter and educator whose videos on everything from sleep optimisation to full-body cardio workouts could easily be a showreel – a TV company is sure to sign him soon. Having freed up so much energy simply by shifting his first meal of the day by a few hours, who knows where it will take him next. ■

■ For more information, visit 2mealday.com. Max's book *The 2 Meal Day* is published by Kyle Books, price £14.99. To order a copy for £11.99 (a 20 per cent discount) until 3 December, visit you-bookshop.co.uk*



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