

Fittest Losers get leaner, healthier and tougher with two weeks to go

It is possible. If there is one message our five Fittest Loser contestants want to share, it's that everyone can lose weight - if they act to make it happen.

All five had struggled with being overweight for years. Many had tried diets, pills or exercise before.

But none had made the wholesale change in eating habits, time commitment, and lifestyle to make losing weight a priority. And none had previously had a personal trainer.

Since being chosen for the Fittest Loser Challenge, sponsored by the Daily Herald, its sister health magazine Live Well, and Push Fitness in Schaumburg, each contestant has worked out three days a week with a trainer, and three days a week on his or her own.

They've kept journals of every bite they eat, limited their calories, and eaten healthy foods low in saturated fats that won't spike their blood sugar.

And they've lost weight steadily - until recently, when some have hit plateaus. With just two weeks left in the competition, we asked what highs and lows they've encountered, and what others who want to lose weight might learn from them.

Lisa Notarnicola, 46, Hoffman Estates police officer

Q: What's been the toughest aspect of the contest for you?

A: Time management, trying to get the workouts in. It's hard because I have a new job (as community relations officer in schools) with a lot on my plate, and I have two kids (11 and 13) and their schedules.

Q: What's the best payoff?

A: I feel better, I look better, I have more patience with my kids. I get in front of a group just feeling confident with myself because of the way I appear. That's been huge.

Q: What's the most surprising thing you've learned?

A: Change your workouts. Keep it fresh. Don't let your body get used to the daily routine. I've been working out all my life and never realized that. It makes it a lot more fun.

Q: How have others helped or hindered your efforts?

A: All the responses I got were positive. My daughter wrote a paper (about health) in one of her classes and said, "It was so easy. I just wrote about everything you are doing." She tells me, "Don't buy any ice cream or pudding. I want to eat healthy like you are." People at work were just floored at how great I look, so that was nice.

Q: What advice would you give others losing weight?

A: Do it for yourself. Once you make the choice, then really learn about your body, working out, and eating right.

Rob Bohanek, 45, principal at Holmes Junior High School in Mount Prospect

Q: What's been the toughest aspect of the contest for you?

A: Plateauing is probably the hardest - the weeks when you're eating right but not seeing the weight loss. That's been the most difficult. It gets a little old when you're eating the same thing.

Q: What's the best payoff?

A: Feeling better, seeing the results, fitting into old clothes that were smaller, and the sense of accomplishment that you're able to do it and sustain it.

Q: What's the most surprising thing you've learned?

A: When they know what I'm doing, how readily people were willing to share their stories and offer encouragement.

Q: How have others helped or hindered your efforts?

A: My wife helps with some of the food preparation and shopping, and having the trainer and knowing the proper foods to eat is huge.

Q: What advice would you give others losing weight?

A: Just that they can do it. A huge part of this is mental. It's believing you can do it, and sticking to it the days you have a crummy workout when you don't feel well. It just takes persevering through the obstacles and taking it a step at a time."

Christine Reiss, 28, single mom, Hanover Park

Q: What's been the toughest aspect of the contest for you?

A: The time that I've spent at the gym training, being away from home and my family and daughter. That's been very difficult for me. I leave home at 6:45 in the morning and don't get home 'til 9 9:30 at night. It's a long day.

Q: What's the best payoff?

A: The results I've seen. Even though the scale hasn't moved as much as I'd like, I've dropped almost two sizes now, so that's awesome.

Q: What's the most surprising thing you've learned?

A: It was shocking to realize how unhealthy and out of shape I was. But it was also surprising to find out I could actually do the things Sharon (Petrynek, her trainer) has me do that at first I thought were impossible - like running two miles, which I couldn't do before. Or sitting against a wall while she stood on my legs and I held her up.

Q: How have others helped or hindered your efforts?

A: I have a blog, so I get a lot of e-mails from people cheering me on, and a few other people have lost weight due to my telling them things I've learned. Everybody's support helps me to keep going.

Q: What advice would you give others losing weight?

A: That it's possible, it's absolutely 100 percent possible. I'm not going to say it's easy, but if you really do try, it's possible without having to take supplements or diet pills or going on some fad diet, because I've tried all those too and it didn't work. Now, I'm doing it the healthy way and it's definitely paying off."

Eric Ronzio, 35, former athlete, Arlington Heights

Q: What's been the toughest aspect of the contest for you?:

A: Keeping up with the diet. Having cookies and cake and treats around for my two kids (age 7 and 5) has been a challenge. My wife's a good baker, unfortunately.

Q: What's the best payoff?

A: Seeing the results over the last 10 weeks. My clothes fit better. I had to drill a new hole in my belt. I feel better. My activity level is way up and that

feels great.

Q: What's the most surprising thing you've learned?

Josh (Steckler, his trainer) said if I have a bad day eating, I can't make up for it in the gym. He said it's 70 percent diet and 30 percent exercise. I've been doing fairly well because I took that advice to heart.

Q: How have others helped or hindered your efforts?

A: The biggest help for me has been the meals my wife makes at home. She's made a conscious effort to steer clear of pastas, mashed potatoes and white rice that were a problem for me, and finding healthy substitutes. Instead of tacos with ground beef and corn tortilla shells, she did ground turkey with lettuce wraps, or poured (spaghetti) sauce over steamed vegetables instead of pasta. So she really went out of her way to find something healthy that I would like.

I was nervous about being in the newspaper, but it's been great. Everyone has encouraging things to say. I took some ribbing, of course, but not too bad.

Q: What advice would you give others losing weight?

A: My advice would be, start now. Don't say I'm going to start next week. It could be something small. Don't drive the extra minute for a close parking spot. Take the far spot and walk. Put down the cookie and eat a salad. Start small but start somewhere. Once you see some results, that will encourage you to keep going.

And having a personal trainer sounds like something only celebrities do, but it's a great way to kick-start your weight loss and healthier lifestyle.

Liesl Ignoffo, 41, business executive, Hoffman Estates

Q: What's been the toughest aspect of the contest for you?

A: The diet. Because I plateaued for so long, we made a drastic change to cut out basically all bad carbs and sugar. It's definitely something I could not live with. I crave fruit, which I'm not allowed to have at this point. I could live on the 1,300-calorie diet, but this is very difficult.

Q: What's the best payoff?

A: I love the compliments. I feel different. I look different. All my clothes are big on me. I went from a size 14 to a size 10. Those are all great motivators to keep me going.

Q: What's the most surprising thing you've learned?

A: How much I'm capable of doing that I never thought I could do, like regular push-ups without my knees on the ground. I'm feeling good and stronger than ever.

My goal is to do my age in push-ups.

Q: How have others helped or hindered your efforts?

A: My husband has been a wonderful support. He's followed my diet except this new one. He gets up when I get up at 5:30 a.m. to work out. He's also lost 30 pounds.

Q: What advice would you give others losing weight?

A: Don't use the word can't. Persevere. Anyone can do this.

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