



Losing is winning: Weighing what they've won -- Competition has been fun, but the Pierce County Biggest Winner participants say they're all winners

NIKI SULLIVAN; The Tacoma News Tribune, June 12, 2007

They knew they'd lose weight, but Megan Richardson and Stephanie Johnson, along with the dozen other Pierce County Biggest Winner contestants, never knew the 14-week program could change their lives. At the start of the program, Johnson, an office manager, couldn't walk far or stand for very long without getting tired. On Saturday, she walked the 12-kilometer Sound to Narrows. Richardson, a teacher, had been sporadically active, but her eating was out of control. It wasn't a question of if she'd have ice cream at the school staff meetings: It was whether she'd have seconds. Now, she's nixed her cravings for fast food and sweets, opting for healthier meals she makes at home.

The two were among 14 contestants in the competition, a partnership between MultiCare Health System, YMCA of Tacoma-Pierce County and the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department. The contestants signed up in February. They were given memberships to the YMCA and met weekly with their team members and a personal trainer for weigh-ins and workouts. For Johnson and Richardson's efforts, they've each lost more than 25 pounds.

It may sound easy to lose weight when you have a professional support system, but the contestants still had to put in the hard work – and will have to continue it to maintain their health and reach their goal weights. To help, the contestants will get six-month memberships to the YMCA. They also plan to meet with their teams and, possibly, their trainers and nutritionist.

'I DON'T WANT TO SIT DOWN'

There were weeks when Stephanie Johnson counted calories and exercised hard, but the scale didn't budge come weigh-in time. As an emotional eater, she had to learn to overcome her urges to turn to food when she was happy, tired, upset or just bored. "It's been a struggle," she said, "but it's finally getting there. My clothes are fitting a lot different, I feel a lot different." Her family has seen a change, too. Before, she'd be home with the kids and think about going for a walk or playing, but never had the energy to do it. "Now when I'm at home on weekends, I don't want to sit down," she said. She has energy to play with her younger son and take walks with her oldest. She's far from her goal – she hopes to lose another 200 pounds through exercise and healthy eating – but she says she can't imagine going back to her old lifestyle. "If I went back to eating the way I did, it would just tear me up," she said.

'THAT'S KILLER'

Megan Richardson met her husband at the Y. But, after they got married, she said they both just kind of let their weight get out of control. "I was pretty much sitting on the couch, and always kind of beating myself up about it, too," she said. On top of her inactivity, she felt like a slave to her fast food and sweets addiction. It's been easier for her to avoid junk food – after all, her whole school is watching what she eats for lunch or whether she grabs the ice cream at the staff meeting. Just that small change made a big difference, and she started dropping weight.

But working out has been a challenge, especially since her new eating habits had such an effect on her weight and she had less to lose than her teammates. “I haven’t been as stringent as all the other people. I feel like a jerk,” she said. But she’s been inspired by watching her teammates. “Even taking a walk was a workout for them. Now they’re running and kickboxing,” she said. Since she’s always been active, Richardson didn’t consider walking an “actual workout” at the start of the competition, but not anymore: She walks around the Chambers Bay Golf Course trail pushing her sister’s stroller. “That’s killer,” she said. “I heard one person say (working out is) like a doctor’s appointment. You wouldn’t stand your doctor up,” she said.

Despite not always making the workouts, her weight is now below 200 pounds and she’s halfway to her goal of about 150 pounds. Her husband has kicked the fast-food habit, too, and lost 30 pounds because of it. “It’s been something that’s been really good for us in terms of our future,” she said. The two plan to have children someday. She knew she’d lose weight and have more energy after the competition, but she didn’t expect that it’d affect her sleep: She recently had a dream that she ran from her house to Pierce College without getting winded. “When I woke up this morning, I thought, ‘If I thought I could really run to Pierce College, I must be getting in shape.’”

Stephanie Johnson

Age: 33

Occupation: Office manager

Starting weight: 350

Ending weight: 321

Saving grace: Her team. She met with them outside of their weekly weigh-ins for workouts, which she plans to continue.

Biggest challenge: Caffeinated drinks and candy from her desk.

Now: She no longer drinks sugary coffee and has ditched the desk candy dish.

Megan Richardson

Age: 31

Occupation: Second-grade teacher

Starting weight: 208

Ending weight: 182

Saving grace: Her team. She was one of the smaller members of the competition, but group members were encouraging and inspiring.

Biggest challenge: Motivation. She liked the accountability of being in the program.

Now: She’s accountable to her fellow teachers and students, so she’s confident she’ll succeed.

Who won

Aaron Stewart from University Place was announced the winner of the Pierce County Biggest Winner contest on Saturday. He lost 58 pounds. He won a one-year membership to the YMCA and other prizes. The runner-up was April Waddington from Puyallup. She lost 48 pounds.