Biggest Winner

After beating out hundreds of wannabes on American Idol, R&B singer Ruben Studdard took on the next big challenge of his life: his weight.

August 29, 2007 By Tomika Anderson

American Idol winner Ruben Christopher Studdard is the latest in a long line of male R&B heavyweights. Known as the "Velvet Teddy Bear," the Birmingham, Alabama, native's 6-foot-3, 375-pound frame draws comparisons to the late Barry White, Gerald Levert and Luther Vandross.

But unlike this Idol's idols, the 29-year-old was taught a lesson early on that living large can cause irreparable damage to your health. For inspiration, he needed to look no further than his 33-year-old brother, Kevin, who was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes last year.

"That scared the hell out of me because he's young," admits the single Studdard, who has always prided himself on his "big and sexy" image. "It was definitely a wake-up call. Plus, diabetes [is often] hereditary," he says, referring to the multiple people in his family who suffer from it, along with other weight-related illnesses like high blood pressure. "I didn't want that to be an issue for me."

Breaking Bad Habits

Thanks to the folks at the Duke University Diet and Fitness Center, Studdard says, obesity-related diseases won't plague him.

In August 2006, he enrolled in a four-week weight loss program on the Chapel Hill, North Carolina, campus, where nutritional specialists immediately got to
work on overhauling his diet.

"At first I thought it was going to be the worst fat camp in the world," Studdard jokes. "But what I learned there changed my life. They taught me portion control. They taught that I did not have to sacrifice taste for lower calories. And they showed me how drinking a lot of juice and soda was keeping me fat.

"Man, when I got there I weighed 455 pounds," Studdard says of his all-time-high weight. "It was time for me to get my ass in shape. So I listened to them and put my heart into it—eating five small meals a day and [doing] at least an hour of cardio every day. By the time I left there I had lost 40 pounds. And I've kept it up," he says proudly. "I've lost more than 80 pounds

altogether—going from a size 58 in pants to a size 48!”

The key to Studdard’s success was breaking the cycle of years of bad eating habits.

“I’m from Alabama, so I love soul food,” he says sheepishly. “The whole nine—macaroni and cheese, fried chicken, collard greens with ham hocks, you name it. Plus, I used to play football,” says the former Alabama A&M scholarship winner. “I was used to eating big meals to fuel up for practices. Only I wasn’t playing anymore so I wasn’t burning it off as quickly.” He also finds that going vegetarian, which he did after leaving the Duke program, has helped to keep the pounds at bay.

And while Studdard says he hasn’t fluctuated more than a few pounds since he started losing weight, doing two-hour circuit-training sessions on an elliptical trainer and other machines four times a week helps keep his weight in check.

In It to Win It

The handsome singer has been so successful at losing weight that his home state of Alabama came knocking, tapping him to be a spokesperson for a statewide initiative aimed at helping Alabamians shave off the pounds.

“The program is called Scale Back Alabama,” says Studdard. “Alabama is [per capita] the second most obese state in the country. I try to motivate, and make appearances at different events to show people that we don’t have to be.”

But for Studdard, who has been in the studio recording his fourth album, the journey couldn’t be more personal. After years of heavy sweating during shows and having to ask for seat belt extenders on planes, the singer just wants to live the healthiest life he can. To do it, he plans on taking off as many more pounds as he can safely shed over the next two years.

“I told myself that by the time I’m 30 I want to be in the best shape of my life,” Studdard proclaims. “Whatever that is and whatever my genetics allow, that’s what I want to be.”

A VEGETARIAN DIET-IN 4 SIMPLE STEPS!

Going vegetarian but don’t know where to begin? Starting gradually is the key. “People tend to move too far from their current behavior too quickly,” says New York-based nutritionist Constance Brown-Riggs. Check out these healthy steps for leaving the meat behind:

1. Think of vegetarian dishes you already enjoy. “Most of us eat meatless dishes on a regular basis-like black-eyes peas and rice,” says Brown-Riggs.

2. Adapt recipes to make them meatless, says the Physician’s Committee for Responsible Medicine. With extra spices, soups can hole their own without meat.

3. The Committee also suggests trying out new options. Says Brown-Riggs: “Variety in your meal

plan ensures you're getting adequate nourishment."

4. Kids can go veggie, but be sure that they get adequate amounts of protein and vitamins and minerals, such as B-12 and calcium.

-Nicole Joseph

VEGGIE VOCAB

Lacto-ovo? Flexitarian? There may be a fit for you. Vegetarians come in all shapes and sizes-and types. A nutritionist (or a source such as www.mypyramid.gov/tips_resources/vegetarian_diets.html) can help you design a diet that delivers the nutrients without the beef. Four common varieties of vegetarian:

Semi-vegetarians ("flexitarians") eat mainly fruits and vegetables, and only on occasion fish, poultry, eggs, red meat or pork. Tip: Fleshy mushrooms keep you from missing red meat in soup, stews and sauces.

Lacto-ovo vegetarians don't eat meat or fish; the do eat eggs and dairy products. Tip: Avoid overloading on fatty cheeses to replace meat.

Ovo-vegetarians don't eat meat, fish or dairy products, but do eat eggs. Tip: Replace dairy with choices such as soy or rice milk.

Vegans nothing from animal sources. Tip: Get sufficient protein by combining foods (think rice and beans); get vitamin B-12 (usually found in animal products) from nutritional yeast and soy.

GETTIN' HEALTHY WITH IT

One Alabamian bucks the stats
Until a year ago, 41-year-old Valerie Jones' life was a study in contradictions. While the Birmingham, Alabama, nurse and mother of two got paid every day to tend to other people's bodies, she weighed in at an unhealthy 215 pounds, making her the person most in need of TLC. Then, she rediscovered Weight Watchers.

"It was easy to manage," she recalls of returning to the popular weight loss program after a couple of years away. "I said to myself, 'I can do this again,' and that's when everything changed."

We'll say! Jones has achieved Lifetime Membership status with Weight Watchers. She kicked her once-passive interest in Spinning classes into high gear and is now a certified instructor. And her 8-year-old son and 14-year-old daughter eat healthy right along with her—forsaking junk food for low-calorie snacks. Jones even joined her state's Scale Back Alabama initiative and Dr. Ian Smith's 50 Million Pound challenge and is continuing to lose weight. "I am determined to achieve permanent weight loss once and for all," she says.

-Tomika Anderson

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