

Losing to Win

The Biggest Loser's Pete Thomas and his wife, Pam, reveal the tips behind their 255-pound weight loss (and his \$100,000 prize). The key to their success? Working together.

February 16, 2006 By Tomika Anderson

If you had asked Pete Thomas last year whether he and his wife would ever have kids, he probably would have said no, but not because they didn't want to. Struggling to walk under the weight of his massive 401-pound frame while battling the impending onslaught of diabetes and high blood pressure, Pete just couldn't imagine living long enough to raise them. "I used to cry because Pete was so overweight," says his wife, Pam. "He'd say, 'It's OK, Pam. We're gonna figure out something.' Then he'd come home with diet books. We'd try Atkins, Weight Watchers, Weigh Down—anything we could think of. Nothing worked."

A fresh start

And then came *The Biggest Loser*. One of TV's highest-rated reality shows, *The Biggest Loser* shows everyday overweight people competing against each other in various physical and diet-related challenges. Split into two teams, participants vote one another off *Survivor*-style after weigh-ins every week. The person who loses the most weight after 12 weeks wins \$250,000. Chosen from more than a quarter-million people to be a contestant on the second season of the show, the 37-year-old Michigan native endured grueling workouts and a diet overhaul at the infamous *Loser* ranch last March and dropped 83 pounds before he was eliminated. Pete then shocked the nation when he appeared on the show's November finale literally half the man he used to be, having shed an additional 102 pounds—more than anybody else on the show—during the six months he'd been gone. He was rewarded \$100,000 for his efforts.

Pam, who weighed in at 265 pounds before *Loser*, made good on her promise not to "stay fat while her husband came back skinny." She lost 30 pounds while Pete was on the ranch and another 40 after he came home.

It was the miracle that Pete had been waiting for: He and Pam would get to have children after all.

The roots of obesity

Pete's health had been in jeopardy from his early years. "My mother suffered from mental illness, so I didn't grow up in a stable household," he explains. "One time, she left me and my sister alone, and we went door to door to get food, and that's how we entered into foster care."

With no parents around to ensure that he ate balanced, nutritious meals, Pete learned to fend for himself. “We would attend this Catholic church—not to attend service, but to get the two-for-one Burger King coupons. I practically lived off fast food as a kid.”

Pam tells a similarly heartbreaking tale. Teased for being the heaviest in her family, Pam, 38, who is also Pete’s real estate partner, spent many years crippled by low self-esteem. Desperate, she began yo-yo dieting, starting at age 5. “My mom would follow me around the house, monitoring everything I ate,” she says. “One day, I went to a birthday party, and she told me I couldn’t have any cake.”

Using laxatives to help control her weight during her college years, Pam says she often punished herself for eating junk food by working out three to four hours at a time. “There was just never a healthy balance to the foods that I ate,” she admits. “I was miserable.”

While Pete was at the *Loser* ranch, Pam had a flashback to her unhealthy college days. “I wanted to lose the weight so bad while he was gone that I would starve myself,” she says of the first 30 pounds she lost. “I’d eat grilled chicken and lettuce with no dressing, grits with no butter or salt—basically only taking in 700 to 800 calories a day (for weight loss, the recommended daily amount for a 170-pound woman is around 1,700), so I’d always be grouchy. My friends would always ask what was wrong with me, and I’d be like, ‘I’m hungry!’”

How they took it off

Determined to put her strict salad-eating days behind her, Pam and Pete now eat everything they ate before Pete went on the show—just the low-fat, low-calorie versions. “It’s not about depriving yourself—it’s just about making wiser choices,” Pete advises. “I used to eat huge portions of eggs, sausage, hamburgers, fries, pasta and chocolate. It added up to more than 4,500 calories a day! Now, instead of eating eggs for breakfast, we’ll have Egg Beaters. We’ll swap the sausage patties for 95% fat-free ham. Instead of orange juice, it’ll be a glass of Crystal Light, and we’ll have whole grain toast. I don’t even miss the old stuff!” he says.

To maintain their new physiques, Pete and Pam run at least three times a week. They’ve just completed their first minimarathon and are training for their first full marathon this spring. Pete’s even got his eyes on an ultramarathon, which is between 50 and 100 miles.

Pete also does a great deal of weight training. He varies his routine each day, a technique he says is key to his ability to tone muscles and lose weight. On Mondays and Thursdays, he focuses on back, chest and arms, saving legs for Tuesdays and Fridays. His abs get no rest, however—Pete works them seven days a week. The weighted situps and ball crunches have caught Pam’s attention: She says he’s got “four-pack” abs now.

The payoff

The couple has tons more energy to do basic things, like go clothes shopping or ride their bikes in the neighborhood. And best of all, they’re in the best condition of their lives.

“When I went to the ranch, my blood pressure was borderline 150 over 90,” says Pete. (The normal rate is below 120 over 80.) “My body fat was above 51%! During the show, I got it down to five. (Between 10 to 20% is considered normal for a man; 5% is considered outstanding.) I also had borderline sleep apnea.”

“Pete used to snore so bad I would have to race him to bed just so that I could fall asleep!” laughs Pam. “Now I can’t sleep because it’s too quiet!”

On the show, Pete was blown away by fellow contestants’ medical miracles. Among the other Losers, one guy’s asthma cleared up. Another had such bad sleep apnea that he had to wear a mask at night to make sure he breathed properly. The mask is now gone—along with more than 153 pounds.

Now Pete has vowed to warn others about the dangers of obesity. “It’s amazing how many medical conditions are directly related to weight,” he admits. “In the black community, we struggle with obesity—diabetes and all—and it’s killing us. Your health is something you can get a handle on if you’re just given the right information.”

By “right information” Pete means, among other things, the science of calorie counting. “You only need a certain number of calories every day to survive,” he explains. “If you go over that amount, even by 100 calories a day, you will have gained ten extra pounds a year.”

Dealing with stress

Obviously, counting calories won’t keep you from falling off the wagon if you haven’t dealt with the emotional triggers that cause you to overeat.

Nutritionist Goulda Downer says that many people use food as a sedative to reduce stress. “When you get stressed, you have food ‘jags,’ where you eat one kind of food in large amounts—like ice cream—because it’s soothing.”

Pete agrees that stress can be the starting point for overindulging: “You’ve had a bad day at work, or you’re not happy in a relationship, and the first thing you’re gonna want to do is reach for the Pringles. At least I do! But if you know you’ll be tempted to eat something crazy, just don’t keep it in the house.”

And the Thomases can’t emphasize enough the importance of having a strong support system. “I couldn’t do any of this without Pete,” says Pam. “When I’m having a bad food day, he’s right there with an encouraging word. We hold each other accountable for what we eat every day. We go to the gym together. We even make each other go to bed early so we’re not tempted to have that midnight snack! It’s all about teamwork.”

Over the past few months, even their families and friends have gotten in on the act. “When we go to family barbecues, we’ll either eat something before we go or take leaner cuts of meat for

ourselves, and they'll cook it up for us," says Pete.

"Or if I'm over at my best friend's house," Pam says, "my friend will count out a single serving of french fries for me and not let me have any more than that! People see what we're trying to do, so they follow our lead."

Pam plans to follow Pete's weight loss lead all the way down to her ideal size. She's still got 30 pounds to go, but she's not worried about getting and staying there. "I'm trying to get pregnant, and people always say to me, 'Aren't you scared of gaining weight'? Nah, I've got the hang of this weight loss thing now. I've got the power. Bring those babies on!"

The Biggest Loser: Home Edition

Around the country, weight-loss hopefuls are using the show's formula of group support and cash to lose weight

Do you want to be the biggest loser? Well, now you can lose the weight and win a cash prize without ever setting foot on the ranch! Just ask 27-year-old Biggest Loser fan and New York City TV exec Alicia Allen. She and her family launched a home version of the challenge in January after being inspired by Pete's miraculous weight loss. Each of seven members contributed \$200 to the winning pot. After 12 weeks, the member with the biggest weight loss is \$1,400 richer—and pounds lighter. In her first week of competition, Allen got a leg up, shedding 3.5 pounds. She plans to drop 80 more. "We're all determined to keep our New Year's resolutions this year—to be fit and lean in 2007!"

Pete & Pam's Weight Loss Do's & Don't

Do deal with the psychological issues that keep you overweight. "You can't lose the weight and keep it off if you don't understand why you're overeating in the first place," says Pete. "You've got to really analyze—what have I been doing to get myself in this shape? What bad eating habits have I picked up over the years? Generally, for most people the root of the problem is inner struggles that have nothing to do with food."

Don't keep "trigger" foods in the house. "A 'trigger' food is a food that once you eat one piece, you're gonna gobble up the entire bag," says Pam. "Miniature Snickers are my 'trigger' food; chocolate chip Häagen-Dazs ice cream is Pete's. Now, we resist the temptation to overdo it by making sure we don't keep them around."

Do your research. "There's a science to losing weight," Pete explains. "We have what's called a BMR, the basal metabolic rate. It's the number of calories that your body needs to survive." To figure out how many calories you need, visit www.mypyramid.gov to get an estimate based on your age, sex and activity level or call the USDA at 800.687.2258. "Then figure out how many calories are in what you're eating. As a man, my body only needs 2,500 calories a day. If you go over your BMR by even 100 calories a day, you gain ten pounds a year. That's how most people

gain weight—slowly.”

Don't overdo it with the condiments. “Two tablespoons of regular mayonnaise contains 100 calories,” Pete explains. “Ketchup is loaded with calories, and barbecue sauce contains lots of sugar and calories, too. If you've got to have it, try the low-fat versions and always put them on the side. Low-fat mayo, for instance, has only 50 calories per tablespoon. It may seem like it's not all that important, but trust me: The little things add up.”

Do enlist the support of loved ones, coworkers or even a weight loss buddy. “You've got to have someone who can help you through this process,” says Pete. “For me, it was the folks on the show. When I got home, it was my wife. I couldn't have done it without them. They were always there to offer encouragement”

Don't give up. “Be optimistic!” Pam says. “Attitude is everything. If you believe you can do it, then you will. Pete and I tried everything before *The Biggest Loser*—Atkins, Weight Watchers, Weigh Down. You name it! But if we'd given up, we would have never gotten to where we are today.”

Do exercise every single day. “Find an activity that you like to do and stick with it,” Pete advises. “When I came home from the ranch, the first thing I did was join a runners club. But for you it may be swimming, walking or aerobics. The important thing is just to be active every day.” And don't slack on the weight training. “Cardio burns calories while you're at the gym, but building muscle burns it off once you leave it,” says Pete.