

Weight-loss betting sites add extra push of fun competition

By Leanne Italie
 Associated Press

NEW YORK — Neil Ylanan eats for a living and travels constantly as a food expert for a company that supplies in-flight meals to airlines. Toss in those sleepless, sluggish early years of fatherhood — he has three young kids — and he was dealing with significant weight gain.

Looking around his office in Irving, Texas, Ylanan, 37, realized he wasn't alone, so he rallied four of his fellow foodies at LSG Sky Chefs for a weight-loss competition online.

They named their team "All About the Benjamins," in homage to the \$10,000 top prize offered by Healthywage.com, one of at least a dozen diet betting sites to emerge after "The Biggest Loser" went on the air and the nation's obesity epidemic grew worse.

Each of the Benjamins anted up \$60 to lose more — up to a safe weekly maximum — than 30 or so teams. They had three months. Victory was theirs in October.

"At first we really were all about the Benjamins, but the impetus kind of changed. You didn't want to let your teammates down," said Ylanan, who at 5-foot-7 began the competition at 245 pounds and ended it at 196.



Neil Ylanan (left) and his team won \$10,000 on Healthywage.com. KAREN HILL/AP

Research on whether financial incentives lead to weight loss is inconclusive, but that hasn't kept thousands of people off diet betting sites since they began sprouting in 2004. Many sites, such as Weightlosswars.com, experience dramatic hikes in traffic between Thanksgiving and January.

Each site has its own rules and tools, such as line graphs to track progress, regular e-mails with tips and support, and rankings to keep an eye on the competition. Stickk.com allows users to set their own stakes, including an "anti-charity" donation to a hated cause.

Most sites are free or require a small fee. Many make money betting optional to tackle health goals. At Healthmonth.com, for instance, winners receive virtual fruit to give in solidarity to others.

