

FOODIES CHANGE THEIR WAYS, WIN



COURTESY KAREN HILL, AP

Diet-contest winners, from left, Neil Ylanan, Andy Davis, Ben Levine, Michael Suter and Andrew Trabosh at LSG's North American headquarters in Irving, Texas.

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.

Each of the men anted up \$60 to lose more – up to a safe weekly maximum – than 30 or so teams from the same

company and around the map. 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 feet, 7 inches began the competition at 245 pounds and ended it at 196.

“I joined a gym. We've all picked up racquetball,” he said. “I haven't played racquetball in 15 years.”

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 of the sites experience dramatic hikes in traffic during the danger stretch between Thanksgiving and January.

“We think of New Year's as our Black Friday,” said Victoria Fener, director of operations for Stickk.com.

Each site has its own rules and tools, like graphs to track progress, emails with tips and support, and rankings to keep an eye on the competition. Stickk allows users to set their own stakes, including an “anti-charity” donation to a hated cause. The George W. Bush Presidential Library and Americans United for Life are top recipients.

Most of the sites are free or require a small fee. Regular weigh-ins are usually required, either through the honor system or a doctor or a health club. Privacy settings keep sensitive details hidden if desired, but Facebook-style “walls” provide that sought-after share factor popular with players.

– The Associated Press

