

Wagering may ease weight loss

Diet betting sites on a roll since 2004.

While it can start out being about cash, the incentive can change.

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’s got three young kids – and he was dealing with significant weight gain.

Looking around his office in Irving, Texas, the 37-year-old Ylanan 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 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-foot-7 began the competition at 245 pounds and ended it at 196.

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, such as line graphs to track progress, regular 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. Many make money betting optional to tackle weight loss and other health goals.

Regular weigh-ins are usually required, either through the honor system or a third-party source like a doctor or a health club. Privacy settings keep sensitive details hidden if desired, but Facebook-esque walls provide that sought-after share factor popular with players.

Around this time last year, Marietta attorney Debbie Haughton was facing down her 40th birthday. She joined a 12-week, 40-person pool organized by a friend. She put in \$20, weighed in weekly on the honor system and lost about 10 pounds.

Small prizes, including

workout DVDs and pedometers, were awarded along the way. Haughton won a few and went back for another 12-week round after the organizer decided to save up the money to dole out as cash at the end.

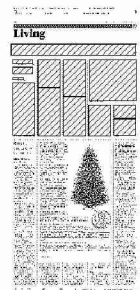
Haughton dropped about 18 pounds and walked away with \$200. She’s at the tail end of a third challenge, this one running 16 weeks, and was about 7 pounds from her goal weight heading into the holidays.

“I knew that a competition would stoke that fire for me, since I tend to be fairly driven,” she said. “I’m very toned and looking and feeling great. I’ve also become a runner for the first time in my life.”

Klark Overmyer of Snellville lost 58 pounds as part of a five-person team backed by his company, Rooms To Go. They lost a collective 252 pounds in three months and – like Ylanan’s Benjamins – evenly split one of the \$10,000 Healthywage jackpots.

“I would like to say that I’m above the money being a big motivator, but who am I kidding,” said Overmyer. “Without the money my vacation to Disney wouldn’t be a possibility. Instead of seeing Mickey my son would be seeing his fat dad on the sofa.”

David Roddenberry, co-founder of Healthywage, offers several other types of weight-loss competitions and had 20,000 users by the end of last year. The site closed 2011 with about 100,000 us-



ers, he said.

Ylanan and the other Benjamins shed 266 pounds collectively, or 49 to 56 pounds each. So what did they buy with their winnings, amounting to about \$2,000 each?

“We ended up buying new clothes,” Ylanan said. “Nothing fit.”



The LSG Sky Chefs Healthy Wage winners are (from left) Neil Ylanan, Andy Davis, Ben Levine, Michael Sutter and Andrew Trabosh.

Karen Hill Associated Press