



## Websites make weight-loss wagering simple

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The 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.

“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 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,

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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.

At Weightlosswars, where the motto is “Lose together or gain alone,” marketing director Pete Maughan expects 10,000 to 15,000 people to register from mid-December through January. The site already has nearly 130,000 users in private team weight-loss competitions among friends, families and co-workers, along with individuals competing in public challenges like Seth Brown.

“We’re kind of like an annual flower,” Maughan said. “I don’t view it as a solution to America’s weight-loss problem, but it’s an important spark and a fun and extremely motivational way to get started on a weight loss journey.”

Klark Overmyer in Snellville, Ga., 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.”

