

BETTING TO LOSE

Thousands of people have joined websites that let users wager on their weight loss

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ASSOCIATED PRESS

IN DEPTH C3

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

So Ylanan, 37, rallied four of his fellow foodies at LSG Sky Chefs for a weight-loss

competition online.

During the past 20 years, there has been a dramatic increase in obesity in the United States, and more than one-third of adults and almost 17 percent of children were obese in 2009-2010, echoing results since 2003, the Centers for

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Disease Control and Prevention said Tuesday.

Ylanan and his co-workers named their Irving, Texas, 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."

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 increases 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.

Healthywage offers several other types of weight-loss competitions. The numbers of users rose from 20,000 in 2010 to about 100,000 last year, said David Roddenberry, a co-founder.

Money is optional

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 lets users set their own stakes, including an "anti-charity" donation to a hated cause.

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 the sought-after sharing popular with players.

Seth Brown, 28, in Morgan Hill, got a jump in August on his New Year's resolution to lose 62 pounds.

He had fallen into a routine of burritos, fast food and video games when he lost his job. He put up \$30 to compete against 14 strangers in a public individual challenge at Weightlosswars.com, where Dell, Google and Groupon have sponsored employees. The top three contenders were to win about \$260 each.

"I first set out to find a website that acted as sort of a social network for fat people," Brown said. "I thrive in competitive situations, and I loved the idea of competing with a group of people who are in the same boat I am."

A success story

Other people like their wagers the old-fashioned way, organized on their own among people they know for token sums, prizes or simple encouragement.

A little over a year ago, Marietta, Ga., attorney Debbie Haughton was facing 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. "I knew that a competition would stoke that fire for me, since I tend to be fairly driven," she said.

'Social pressure'

Not all sites that provide tracking and social tools to reach health goals use money as a motivator.

Alex Rainert is head of product for the location-based check-in service Foursquare. He tried to organize a get-healthier office contest himself using a simple spreadsheet and small money antes. He found he couldn't keep up with record-keeping, and the money didn't seem to rally his colleagues.

So he turned to Healthmonth.com, which doesn't use money bets. Winners receive virtual fruit to give in solidarity to others over a month's time. At the beginning, participants fill out detailed questionnaires that are later used by

the site to craft daily emails offering help with self-selected goals like limiting alcohol or soda and eating more greens or whole grains.

About 40 of Foursquare's 100 employees participated and met their personal challenges last year. "I've used countless food and fitness trackers to try to change," Rainert, 35, said. "I think this worked for us because of the social pressure."

Healthmonth, with about 50,000 users, sees two or three times more traffic in January than any other month.

'An important spark'

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.

"I don't view it as a solution to America's weight-loss problem," Maughan said, "but it's an important spark and a fun and extremely motivational way to get started on a weight-loss journey."

Some diet-betting sites

Healthmonth.com
Healthywage.com
Stickk.com
Weightlosswars.com

Men vs. women

A survey by Mintel, the market research firm, indicated that among dieters, men are more likely than women to be dieting to address a health concern like:

High blood pressure: 40 percent men, 33 percent women

Diabetes: 31 percent men, 24 percent women

Heart disease: 29 percent men, 23 percent women

Source: NYT News Service

Intractable weight gain

- The American rate of obesity is defined as having a body mass index of 30 or greater (about 203 pounds for a 5-foot-9 adult)
- Americans spend about \$147 billion a year on obesity-related health costs.
- The U.S. Health and Human Services department has awarded more than \$119 million to states and territories for programs — including increasing physical activity and improved nutrition — to reduce obesity since 2009.
- Obesity rates in adults rose slightly to 35.7 percent from 30.5 percent between 1999 and 2010, compared with rates that nearly doubled in the two previous decades, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Tuesday.
- In 2009-10, more than 78 million U.S. adults, or a third of the overall population, and about 12.5 million children ages 2-19, or 17 percent of all children, were obese.
- In 1962, the obesity rate was 13.4 percent of the population.

Sources: Bloomberg News, Associated Press



Neil Ylanan, (from left) Andy Davis, Ben Levine, Michael Sutter and Andrew Trabosh at LSG Sky Chefs in Irving, Texas, lost weight to win wagers on a diet-betting site in October. ASSOCIATED PRESS