



LOSING AND WINNING

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In One Year She Lost 75 Pounds and Six Dress Sizes—and Rediscovered the Pretty Girl She Used to Be. Here's How She Did It.

BY HEATHER PERRAM

IN THE FALL OF 2001 MY DOCTOR, BETH UNGAR, scared the size-16 pants off me. My excess weight, she told me, was damaging my health. Moreover, she said, I was too young and attractive to be carrying around all those extra pounds.

Her words were sobering, though they only confirmed the truth I already knew but couldn't bring myself to face. In the past six years I'd added 50 pounds to the extra 20 I'd been carrying around since college. I'd been avoiding this checkup for a long time. I couldn't even remember the last time I had weighed myself. I was shocked to learn that I tipped the scales at 210 pounds—far too much for my five-foot-six frame.

I knew I was getting bigger and bigger. I just wasn't convinced yet that I was enormous. A year or so earlier I'd begun noticing other heavy women and wondering how I compared. "Am I as big as she is?" I'd ask when I saw one waddling toward me. It got to the point that my close friends would spot a big woman heading our way and say "No" before I could ask.

I tried a weightlifting program under the supervision of a personal trainer—but ignored the fact that it wasn't making me fitter or slimmer. I couldn't climb a flight of stairs without huffing and puffing.

Although I love fashion—and finally was earning enough to indulge in it a little—I dreaded buying clothes. I began to channel my style obsession into shoes and handbags. I'd moved beyond control-top pantyhose and into foundation garments just to squeeze into my everyday clothes. Even so, there were days when I couldn't look

The author regained her looks the old-fashioned way: with diet and exercise—but with professional help on both.

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down and see my Manolo Blahniks.

My life as a fat person passed before my eyes in Dr. Ungar's office that day. By ignoring my weight, I had abandoned my body. I'd turned into a brain with feet.

I'd become comfortable with my matronly appearance, using it as an excuse to hide from relationships and explain why I hadn't remarried after a divorce ten years earlier. I missed the pretty girl I used to be—but not enough to do anything about it.

The news about my health was scary. And galvanizing. I'd never been hospitalized or even broken a bone in my 42 years. Ungar said my total cholesterol was 252 (it should have been under 200), my LDL/HDL—or "bad" cholesterol/"good" cholesterol—ratio was six (it should have been under four), and my heart and lungs were working too hard. She gave me a prescription for a cholesterol-lowering drug and the name of a nutritionist and told me to get more exercise. Immediately.

I CALLED THE NUTRITIONIST, JANET ZALMAN, AS SOON AS I left the doctor's office. She told me to start keeping a food diary, which she would review at our first meeting. I was tempted to start changing my habits right away—in much the same way that I tidy up the house before the housekeeper comes—but decided that would be counterproductive. Besides, I really wanted to spend the next two weeks enjoying Singapore rice noodles, fettuccine with cream sauce, and all my other guilty pleasures.

When I sat down with Zalman just before Thanksgiving, she was firm: I had to cut down on carbohydrates and fats (particularly pasta, butter, and cheese) and add more protein and raw vegetables to my diet. I was surprised to find that some of the things I thought were good for me weren't, like flavored lowfat yogurt and fruit juices (both full of sugar). We talked about my lifestyle and food preferences, and she wrote up a food plan for me to follow.

A pasta lover, I felt panicky at the thought of cutting down on starch, so Zalman added half a cup of rice or pasta to my daily regimen if I really wanted it. I said that I didn't have a sweet tooth, so we didn't have to waste time negotiating over desserts. We agreed that I would continue to keep the food diary and review it with her at weekly meetings, when I would be weighed.

The next six weeks were hard work. I lived for my starch fix at the end of the day. On weekends I made and froze half-cup containers of rice, and pasta with tomato sauce, so I could always be sure of coming home to them for dinner. For reassurance during difficult times, I would open the freezer and count the containers, giving each one a little pat.

During the drive home from work at night, I started craving potato chips, something I rarely ate before I began the diet. I clearly was missing starch, fat, and salt, and my mind had added them up for me. I began making a deal with myself: If, after dinner, I still wanted potato chips, I could get in the car and drive to the store to buy them. Usually by the time dinner was over, I didn't feel like going to the store.

Over time the cravings went away, and so did most of the crankiness. I never got through my whole stash of rice and pasta—after a couple of months, I didn't want them anymore.

WITH ZALMAN'S HELP, I BECAME MUCH MORE MINDFUL ABOUT food and planning meals. It helped that I like to cook—I enjoyed coming up with new recipes. At first, eating in restaurants was a

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challenge—I was afraid I would inhale certain foods if they were on the table—but in time I felt more in control and able to order without feeling self-conscious. My friends were a big help, making sure there was healthy food for me at parties and cheering me on for the slightest improvement in my looks.

Every week Zalman and I went over the diary. She asked questions about the choices I'd made. My weight was either down or the same at each session, and I began to feel a real sense of accomplishment. By the end of the year I had lost about 15 pounds. The worst of the bad moods and food cravings was over, and I was beginning to get compliments on my appearance. I made it through the holidays without a stuffing-and-

mashed-potato binge.

I continued with the weightlifting program. I didn't see much in the way of results but kept going because the location was convenient and I didn't want to quit without a plan. I started asking around, and a friend recommended Susan Kostorowski, a personal trainer and physical therapist.

I began 2002 working out with Kostorowski three days a week in Georgetown at the Water Street Gym, which she owns with her husband, Steve. I was clumsy and breathless during most of our early sessions. My pushups were wobbly. I nearly kneed myself in the eye doing bicycles. I regularly tripped over the jump rope and fell when my legs gave out doing lunges. I dubbed myself "Princess Grace."

Clothes were starting to be an issue. I'd begun spending part of every Saturday morning doing a private fashion show—going through my closet to see what was too big, what fit now, and what might fit in the next few weeks. I happily started a giveaway pile in my spare bedroom. In April I had to buy some new clothes—my pants actually fell off while I was walking across the campus of my alma mater. I was down from a size 16 to size 10.

Zalman advised me not to buy too much or invest in anything expensive. She promised that if I kept on track I would need a new wardrobe by the time fall came. I also passed another milestone: I was able to stop taking the cholesterol-lowering drug.

ONE DAY A MAN FLIRTED WITH ME IN THE SODA AISLE at the McLean Safeway. It took me a few minutes to catch on, but I was thrilled—no one had flirted with me in ages. Another day I was so busy admiring my reflection in a store window on Connecticut Avenue that I walked into a street sign. Vanity had arrived.

It was like going through puberty all over again—the good part, where your body is changing and boys start to notice you and you spend hours looking in the mirror. I was sitting in a meeting in my office when I noticed a new muscle on my forearm. As soon as everyone left, I shut the door to "take a conference call" and spent the next five minutes studying my arm.

I had thought that Zalman and Kostorowski, whom I had come to regard as my fairy godsisters, would be most important to me during the tough times—the first few months of getting my eating under control and learning to exercise. It turned out that they were just as important in the good times, when I was celebrating my new self.

The truth is that your friends and family may love you and be happy for you, but they don't want you to pull up your shirt so they can see your abs. Your nutritionist and personal trainer, on the other hand, take at least a professional interest—and they're used to seeing people lose their minds after finding their bodies.

I told Zalman I felt like I could really rejoice with her because she understood how I'd earned it. She was also able to help me understand why some of the people in my life weren't as pleased for me and how to accept their feelings without giving up any of my own joy.

Over the summer, I gave away almost all my clothes. I loved the simplicity of having just a few things in my closet. I was now running three miles on my workout days, from Key Bridge to Memorial Bridge along the river.

I was born in Washington and have lived here most of my life, but it had been a long time since I felt connected to, and inspired by, the city's landmarks. The sight of the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial in the morning mist seemed especially sweet given the terrorist attacks of just a few months before.

As I adjusted to my new appearance, I got over my giddy self-absorption—much to the relief, I'm sure, of everyone around me. It was wonderful to wear a bikini at the beach in August and to go to my high-school reunion in a sexy dress, but as I got closer to my goal, I simply felt more and more like myself.

IN OCTOBER 2002, I MADE MY WEIGHT GOAL OF 135 POUNDS. I FELT proud of myself but also surprised at how simple it had been. People have said they admire me for sticking with it, but the truth is that it was easier than I ever thought it could be.

I had made up my mind that day in Dr. Ungar's office that I wanted to be well. There were days when I was hungry and sore and in a bad mood, but there were so many more days that I was exhilarated by the difference in my body and the positive changes in my life.

Working with a nutritionist and a personal trainer made a big difference, and not just for the obvious reasons. Being able to ask for, and accept, their help—even though I was paying for it—was a big step for me. I always thought I had to do everything, and know everything, all by myself.

The other big step was learning to be patient. I had to lose the weight the way I'd gained it—one ounce at a time. I wonder, and worry a little bit, about people who use extraordinary means to lose weight quickly. I think it was important for my mind to have time catch up with my body.

As I neared the home stretch, Janet Zalman modified my food plan to add some calories. I still see her a couple of times a month and plan to continue doing so.

I'm also still happily working out with Susan Kostorowski three days a week. I run three miles as a warm-up, which takes about half an hour, then follow her direction through a 45-minute session. I never know what she has up her sleeve, which keeps it fun for me, but I usually do some cardio—steps, jumping jacks, StairMaster—use free weights and machines, work on balance and strength, and end with abdominal exercises and a serious stretch. I still trip over the jump rope, but I think my pushups are a thing of beauty.

When I saw Beth Ungar for my annual checkup last October, I was 75 pounds lighter, my cholesterol was 191, and my LDL/HDL ratio was 2.8.

The most amazing thing is how losing 75 pounds transformed everything else. Life is much the same, but I am different—by making my health a priority, I was able to bring more energy and resolve, more strength and flexibility, to every situation. The size-four wardrobe is pretty impressive, too. I even have a new nickname: Feather.

At 210 pounds and size 16, she realized she was using her weight to hide from relationships.