

Fitness Contest Gave Heather the Tools to Topple Her Sedentary Ways

by Jack Williams

Eight months ago, Heather Thelen's idea of a heavy workout was lifting 320 pounds - every ounce of it her own - onto an elliptical trainer. Thirty seconds later, breathless and exhausted, she could barely remain upright. Nothing, though, could be as draining as falling off one structured diet program after another, from Jenny Craig to Optifast. "I would lose, then hit a plateau, get discouraged, quit and gain everything back and more," she said. Thelen, 33, was such a depressed and guilt-ridden glutton that she went straight to Plan Z: stomach-stapling surgery. But her health insurance company turned her down. Left to her own devices, the mother of two entered a Get Fit San Diego makeover contest in October. Accepted as one of 10 contestants, she was assigned a nutritionist and a personal trainer. The downsizing was downright serious; the down-sliding gone for good. She didn't win the contest, which was decided by online voting, but she was one proud loser. "I lost over 50 pounds in 12 weeks," she said. Today, at 242 pounds, Thelen is on course to reach an ultimate goal of 170 pounds on her 5-foot-7 frame. She still hits those plateaus - weeks when two workouts a day and small portions of food throughout the day aren't reflected on the scales. Now, though, she knows they're a temporary glitch in body chemistry. "Right after that I might lose three pounds in 48 hours," she said. The menu makeover, designed by a Lifewellness Institute nutritionist, left no room for fast-foods and processed foods. "I have eaten my weight in preservatives and hydrogenated fats," she said. "I was completely unconscious of what I was putting in my mouth." The exercise regimen, introduced in manageable increments, included a litany of foreign objects - elliptical trainer, treadmill, rowing machine, stationary bike, dumbbells, resistance machines, even punching bags. Working one-on-one with trainer Jason Ventetulo of Fitness Together near San Diego, Thelen overcame her fears. "I continued the regimen because I finally felt good," she said. "I could see a way out and I was scared to go backward." The joy of six: Thelen follows a meal plan of six servings a day, fitting them around morning and evening workouts and 11-hour workdays at her family's Hawthorne Country Store. Her largest meal is a midday lunch at a restaurant. She'll have grilled chicken, a grilled chicken sandwich or fish, preferably salmon, along with a salad. "My nutritionist said, 'If you're gonna overeat, overeat on broccoli,'" Thelen said. Her once-a-week treat: a chocolate-covered strawberry. Double duty: A self-described morning person, Thelen begins her workouts at 5:10 a.m. No longer afraid of disapproving stares, she joins fellow early birds at a 24 Hour Fitness near her home. A typical warm-up is 15 minutes on an elliptical trainer at a 10-to-15 resistance level. Then she'll hit the weights, sometimes doing 20 repetitions, sometimes 10, depending on the load. "It's push one day, pull the next, working on core strength one day and legs or arms the next," she said. At least three times a week, she'll return to the gym after finishing work at about 6:30 p.m. "A friend or my husband, Terry, usually joins me," she said. "It's cardio, just something to get my heart rate up for 30 to 40 minutes." Rested development: "I'm addicted," Thelen said. "I force myself to take either Saturday or Sunday off from working out, and I feel weird all day long. A couple of times, I tried watching movies all day, but I felt sore when I did that. So I'll clean house or something. I do work harder and better the day after I'm rested." © Copley News Service Bend Oregon, Central Oregon, Bend Weekly

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