

***Biggest Loser Testimony:
1st Place Winner
Sonja Rode (Winter 2018/19)***

I was born with hip dysplasia in both hips. The doctors in Germany, where I was born, thought I would never be able to walk; that I would be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of my life. They performed several surgeries over the course of three years. Finally, at the age of three, after several long stays in the hospital, I was able to walk---with a walker, then a harness, and FINALLY on my own! The doctors told my mother that I was a medical miracle but that I should never be overweight or I would be plagued with hip problems for the rest of my life. Obviously, since I am writing this Biggest Loser testimonial, I did not take their advice, and I became overweight (in fact, obese according to the BMI charts).

I never had weight issues growing up. My mother always made home-cooked meals, and we hardly went out to eat, except for Ponderosa. If we went to Ponderosa (with its expansive buffet), we had to starve ourselves most of the day, so that we could eat everything available. Of course, life caught up with me. I worked seated most of the day. I stress ate. I got pregnant---with twins! I gained weight. Despite having four long scars on my hips to remind me to avoid obesity, I still couldn't avoid progressively adding on the extra pounds.

I became a Princeton Club member after a friend's recommendation, and, upon researching the PC, I discovered that it was the only club in southeastern Wisconsin with a current pool. After my pregnancy with twins, besides achy hips, I had developed plantar fasciitis making it painful to work out, so jogging in the pool against the current was a great workout for me. Soon after joining, I discovered the Biggest Loser contest, which provided additional motivation to work out regularly, and I proved to be pretty successful with this competition, losing more than 30 pounds. BUT...then the contest ended, and so did my healthy habits----after all, I had already lost "the weight," right? I gradually went back to my unhealthy ways. I had quit going to the Club, and, two years later, I was right back to the weight I was when I joined.

After a hiatus from the PC, I was driving home one day with my kids, and we passed the Club. My kids noticed they now had an outdoor pool, and asked me if we could go back. They were now reaching double digits in age and were becoming more aware of the benefits of eating well and working out, so I signed us back up. After rejoining, I tried the Biggest Loser a couple more times, but failed to meet my goals.

This last summer, I was able to travel back to Germany in order to visit my family whom I hadn't seen in 15 years. (NOTE: 15 years ago I was "skinny," and I dreaded having my family see me "fat." ...but even that wasn't enough to motivate me.)

So, what motivated me to change my ways, and, ultimately, win the Biggest Loser? My mother told me that my uncle (from Germany) had called and told her that he felt "sorry for me." He said that I used to be such a pretty girl, and, now, I had gained so much weight. I didn't want anyone to feel sorry for me, and, when this contest came up again, I wanted to show him! I signed up for the Biggest Loser as soon as Zack sent us the contest registration email, and this time I prepared.

I signed up for Saturday morning workouts with Sarah, because I am a morning person and have found success working out with her in the past. Weeks before the contest, I reflected on what had worked previously for me and what hadn't worked, and I attempted this contest AGAIN. For example, in the past, I remember Sarah asking us why we hadn't changed our habits earlier, and (having remembered people talking about having their "last" McDonald's meal right before weigh-in) I had my "cheat meal" the week before. In addition, I

tried to form intentional habits for eating and exercise before the first day of the competition. I would pre-journal my food for the day, so that I knew exactly what I would be consuming.

I made sure I worked out daily, and, if I didn't feel like it, I'd listen to music that would amp me up. I began walking longer distances with my dogs. Then, I would challenge myself to run a bit; from one tree to another tree. Eventually, I extended that to running on every other sidewalk. At about this time, when I started running more than walking (and not only because I had been chased by a coyote on one occasion), Penny Marshall had passed away and the Laverne and Shirley theme song was played quite a bit in the memorial coverage. That song totally resonated with me and what I was trying to accomplish. Certain lyrics seemed spot on. For instance, "Nothing's going to hold us back now/Straight ahead and on the track now/We're going to make our dreams come true!" or "Never heard the word impossible" or "**This time there's no stopping** us/We're going to do it." If I didn't feel like working out, I would crank that song up as often as I needed to in order to get myself moving. I made it my theme song. I'm pretty sure my family knows the song lyrics by heart.

In addition, I completed all of the Biggest Loser challenges, which were really purposeful and timely. The Marathon Challenge and Group Exercise Class Challenge really helped to break plateaus. I went to a class that was only 30 minutes called Grit, thinking it might be easy(er), until I saw that General Manager, Renee Warzon was also taking the class...to challenge herself! As soon as I saw her, I knew I was in trouble! That class is anything but easy! The nutrition challenges always offered something new, even if at first I came in thinking I've gone to them enough times to know what to do. I'm especially thankful for Kelly giving me some good advice on the side! At about week 6, I was starting to feel tired, but then a woman at a nutrition challenge said, "I joined this weight loss contest, and I intend to win." I had already been at the top for a few weeks, and that lady gave me the fire to keep going---challenge accepted; I WILL WIN! I would chalk that up as another reason to go to the nutrition challenge, finding fuel for your fire. (No pun intended.) :)

One of the most important aspects of the contest is the comradery that you will find within your team. I was lucky to have an extremely great group of women in my Saturday with Sarah group (aka S.A.S.S) who inspired and pushed each other when working out or on Facebook. Jessica, Becky, Michelle, Amy, Lynn, Jennifer, Sue, Kristen and Tanya made Saturday mornings genuinely enjoyable. From telling stories or jokes to sharing what worked for us or belting out songs, it was always fun. Whenever we needed a nudge or a kick in the butt, we knew we could count on each other. Sarah put together awesome workouts that never got boring. She wouldn't get upset about weekly weight loss or food journal failures, simply reminding us to get back on track, and always offering words of encouragement. Sarah, you are awesome!

In terms of motivation, I put myself in the shoes of my students who are struggling readers at the high school level. They hate to read, but they need the practice. They need to hit the 20th percentile for reading in order to exit out of the intervention. I saw their 20th percentile goal as mine now, and I told them that I would achieve at least a 20% weight loss in this competition. Each week, they'd ask me to pull up the contest to see my weight loss percentage, and I allowed them to see me struggle. One of the programs we use in class highlights words within a passage, moving at a consistent pace in order to help them become more fluent readers. I told them that this exercise was their treadmill, and I had already been on mine that morning. :) After all, reading to the mind is like exercise for the body.

Last, but of course not least, my family and co-workers were extremely supportive of my efforts; they helped me stay the course. My family celebrated with me each week and offered healthy cheat meals after every Saturday workout. When I had a concussion (and may have cracked my tailbone) during Christmas time, they forced me to slow down a bit so that I wouldn't do any further damage to myself. My co-workers rooted me on by checking in with me regularly. I made this contest very public for added accountability.

The difference between this Biggest Loser and the four or five past Biggest Loser contests is that this time I was super focused because of how I had prepared myself: by remembering things that worked and didn't work and by surrounding myself with people who were extremely supportive of me. This time, I also have a plan for my post-contest lifestyle. I have signed up with Sarah again for the continuation class and made my own sign-in sheet to keep the pounds in check. I am determined to continue the healthy habits I have formed, while also incorporating a few suggestions my teammates found successful.

I would recommend the Biggest Loser contest and the Princeton Club to anyone who wants their dreams of weight loss to come true because of the:

- knowledgeable and committed trainers (Devan, thank you for explaining the why behind the exercises; Amy, thank you for your words of confidence and encouragement; Sarah, thank you for everything!)
- friendly staff members
- energetic and creative instructors
- competent, inspiring and always smiling Program Director, Zack Ferguson, and General Manager, Renee Warzon

You too can achieve your goal of attaining a more healthy lifestyle! ...in pursuit #ForABetterTomorrow!