

Biggest Loser Interview

Originally Posted by **Lyle McDonald's Newsletter**

A few weeks ago, I made a comment about the tv show the Biggest Loser in the newsletter (for those not familiar with the show, it's a reality show dealing with weight loss that has both an Australian and US version).

In response, a former contestant sent me the following comments and told me that, with a few names removed, I could run it in the newsletter. I'm going to run it almost like an interview with his comments (in bold) followed by any comments I have about it.

I think what he sent is interesting as it points out

1. What can be accomplished in a short period when you put your mind to it
2. How unrealistic some of the changes on the show actually are relative to normal people.

In that vein, here's an interesting article about the show.

BL: I know that obese people are not your target audience but for anyone who cares, we worked out 4 hours per day 6 days per week. That started on day 2. Day 1 we worked out 2.5 hours. That is from sedentary to 2. hours.

We did 1 hour cardio in the morning and 1 in the evening by ourselves and the trainer came in every afternoon for two hours to put us through a circuit resistance based routine for an hour and sometimes her own crazy cardio routine for an hour or we did that third cardio hour on our own also. We never worked out intensely for more than 2 hours at a time.

My comments: As I'm sure I've mentioned before in the newsletter (and brought up in at least one of my books), research in general has not supported exercise having a humongous impact on bodyweight. However, a lot of studies have used fairly moderate amounts of exercise in this regard. In contrast, large volumes of exercise, and the above can only be considered a 'large volume', especially coming from essentially a sedentary life, can have a fairly large impact.

BL: Our goal was to lose 1lb per day (3500 calories). Our particular trainer's philosophy was that she was going to BURN it off you in the gym and if you had a poor day in the gym the VERY first question that was asked was "Did you eat". It had to be pounded into us that we had to eat. It seemed counterintuitive for many of us in a weight loss contest but it proved itself out when a teammate of mine upped his workouts to 6 hours per day and shrank his food to 500 calories per day (on his own) and only lost 3 pounds in 7 days while everyone else averaged 7-10.

My comments: This is an interesting idea as it's something I noted years ago and have commented on previously. The combination of lots of exercise with big caloric deficits tends to work extremely poorly and seem to slow instead of hasten fat loss for some reason. This is part of why I strongly recommended against lots of exercise in the Rapid Fat Loss handbook; the deficit inherent to the diet is already large enough to the point that adding a bunch of training seems to cause more harm than good. I don't know if the issue is simply metabolic slowdown or if there's something else going on (this my current new project now that the protein book is finally done) but I've seen it happen time and time again: excessive caloric deficits plus excessive amounts of exercise seem to do more harm than good. If you are burning a lot of calories through exercise, you have to eat. If you want to cut calories hard, you have to reduce activity.

BL: So that was a 75-25% Cardio to resistance training mix. Man what the body can do when it has the right trainer to push it. This years contestants work out even more (I went back to the show and worked out with them for 3.5 hours on an off camera day and they still had an evening workout to go). Of course your secluded, no phone, no newspapers, no internet - just you and other fatties so what else you going to do except the hated TV stuff, interviews challenges etc.?

My comments: I think that last point is a good one, another reason why some of what can be done on the show is unrealistic to normal people. Between the huge motivation to win (big money, fame) and basically being locked up where all there is to do is exercise, putting in huge amounts of training is much easier. Especially compared to the average person who is dealing with work, home, family, etc. and probably doesn't have 4 hours per day to exercise.

I also think it's interesting that the main focus is on cardio training especially with the recent tendency towards weight training based fat loss approaches. No matter how you cut it, 3 hours of cardio per day burns far far far more calories than 45 minutes of weight training, regardless of the type (or any small calorie burn afterwards).

I'd also add that, for extremely overweight individuals (who typically gain LBM as they get fat), weight training wouldn't seem to have much of a huge benefit. Possibly if it's done with higher reps/circuit style (to burn more calories, deplete muscle glycogen, etc.). But fatter individuals don't usually have to worry so much about muscle loss in the first place, pounding them with low rep heavy work just doesn't make much sense.

BL: We typically worked out at 75-90% of our max. heart rate based on the 220 formula WITH our trainer and 65-85% of our max. when on our own. The quality of the 'on our own' workouts usually had to do with external factors like music and fatigue from filming etc. We physically could have done 75-90% on our own but it gets AWFULLY boring!

My comments: One or two studies have found that results are superior with exercise with a trainer; one even found that simply having the trainer stand nearby (without actually doing anything) improved results. This is one very potential benefit of having a regular trainer (or a good training partner), motivation to work harder may mean better and/or

faster results.

BL: We cooked all our own food based on the nutrition advice of the trainer (so again individual expertise varies)

Vital stats

Day 1

Resting Heart rate 89-92 bpm

Blood Pressure - 150/90

Pre-diabetic blah blah blah all the other stuff that comes along with being 51% body fat!

AFTER 14 DAYS (equivalent of 2 months in the real world)!!

Resting heart rate 62 bpm

Blood pressure 102/60

Blood sugar normal.

(PS Today 2 years later - it is around the same)

My comments: Frankly this is hard to even believe. Given how much medication is used to treat such things as high blood pressure and insulin resistance, clearly activity and weight loss can have absolutely massive effects. What surprises me the most is the time frame that these changes occurred in.

BL: It is also interesting that the work on the ranch really breaks down to the exact numbers that people see in real life. IE The 'national' average for someone who watches what they eat and works out 6 days per week is approx. 8-10 lb. of weight loss per month(6 days x 4 weeks = 24 hours per month). This same math works out on the ranch 6 days per week x 4 hours per day = 24 hours per WEEK = 8-10 lb. per WEEK. We just condensed a months worth of workouts into a weeks time.

My comments: Frankly, looking at a lot of studies of exercise or diet, many would be thrilled to be getting 8-10 lb/month of weight or fat loss. But I agree generally with the sentiment above, given that attention to diet, a loss of 8-10 lb./month for someone who isn't already very lean is probably attainable. That that amount of weight is compressed into 1/4th the time tends to support that the results on the Biggest Loser are extremely atypical.

BL: For reference - While a TV episode is 7 days in length that is not the case behind the scenes. So some 'weeks' the numbers are larger because some weeks we had 14 days between weigh ins. My season if you lasted until the final day you would be on the ranch 101 days (I got voted off on episode 7 and lost 83 pounds in 62 days) This season is it like 121 days start to finish. And all that gets condensed into a 12-14 weeks show airing schedule.

My comments: This is a bit deceptive on the part of the show in my opinion since it's made to appear that these massive weight losses are occurring every 7 days which clearly they are not.

BL: By the way - Losing and Maintaining are TWO ENTIRELY different problems. My goal now is to keep my cardiovascular system in shape (I love to run) AND build muscle while watching what I eat. So I have had to experiment with tons of exercise routines and programs and play with my diet to no end to learn myself. Oh and I teach on some this stuff so I read a lot.

My comments: This is an exceptionally important point that is often lost. What is done during active weight loss neither has to be nor should it be the same as what's done during weight maintenance. As I point out in both the Rapid Fat Loss handbook and the Guide to Flexible dieting, most research has found that exercise (and quite a bit of it) is actually more important for weight maintenance than loss. Of course, sticking in the long-term with dietary changes is critical as well.

BL: Today - I take in approx. 2500 calories per day and when I am on-point I eat more proteins and fats than carbs. When I 'fall off the wagon' I still stay within my calorie range but I will have more carbs and salt and carbs require 2.7 grams of water for every 1 gram of carbs and salt makes you retain water blah blah blah. People are still amazed that I can drop 10 pounds in a week (I call it 'fake' weight loss) and they don't understand that it comes by simply cutting out the extra carbs and salt while drinking a gallon of water per day and that sheds all the extra water in your body. But I realize that I HAVE to track what I eat or eat the same thing every day which is boring. I teach others what I have learned and I quote some smart guy about those who estimate calories underestimate by 25-50% so keep a food diary/log!

In the interest of full disclosure: We do what boxers and wrestlers do and people gain the weight back after the show because they do not STAY in learning mode.

My comments: Anybody who's played around with lowcarb diets (especially of the cyclical kind) is probably aware of the kinds of water shifts that can occur with such diets. What I think is lost on some people is the sheer magnitude of water that can be gained or lost, especially in larger individuals. The article I linked at the start of the newsletter refers to this and this seasons show had a good example, where one contestant deliberately gained 17 lb. (by drinking 2 gallons of water) so that he could then lose a massive 33 lb. at the next weigh in.

I'd like to thank the individual who took the time to write out the above comments and hope that readers found it informative. As mentioned, I'll return to the standard newsletter format next time.