

Foreword by Michael Dansinger, M.D.
Nutrition Doctor, NBC's *The Biggest Loser*

Cutting Myself in Half



*150 Pounds Lost
One Byte at a Time*

Taylor LeBaron
and Jack & Mary Branson

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Praise for Cutting Myself in Half

“Way to go, Taylor! I am honored beyond words at being given a place in your transformation. I know what dedication and hard work it took for you to stick to your guns and accomplish your weight loss goal. Great job!”

—**John Schneider, actor**
aka Bo Duke, The Dukes of Hazzard

“Taylor’s approach to better health through physical activity and managing weight has successfully adapted a number of research-based behavioral methods into a teen-friendly format.

I believe that its focus on practical self-management will be effective for many over the long term.”

—**James J. Annesi, Ph.D., Director of Wellness**
Advancement, YMCA of Metropolitan Atlanta

“Taylor is the embodiment of what the Marines are all about. Dedicated, hard-charging, and mentally/physically alert. The Marine Corps would be proud to have him in the ranks.”

—**Lt. Col. Bill Howey USMC (Ret.)**

“We applaud Taylor’s personal efforts and his willingness to help other teens get healthy. If more teens took personal responsibility for their health and fitness before they enter the workforce, our nation’s employers would spend significantly less on healthcare and productivity losses due to unhealthy employees.”

—**Beth Reynolds, Wellness Program Manager**
Alere Medical, Inc.

“Child and teen obesity have reached epidemic proportions in the United States, and it’s rare to see someone as young as Taylor take the initiative to confront the problem. Often teens who attempt to lose weight try extreme methods that produce only short-term results. Taylor, however, developed a safe, healthy plan that can keep him fit for life.”

—**Bob Bagheri, M.D.**
Taylor’s doctor since he was three years old

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DISCLAIMER: The information contained in this book is not intended as a substitute for the advice and/or medical care of a physician. It is recommended that you consult with your physician before embarking on any eating, exercise, or lifestyle regimen.

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To my mother, Penny LeBaron

*I could not have gotten fit without her help.
Sometimes she was sick. Other times, she was tired.*

*But she always drove me to my workouts.
And her help with my fitness program is small
compared to her support in every area of my life.
She encourages me when I fail and applauds me
on my accomplishments.*

I love you, Mommy.

Give Yourself Permission to Be Fit

START FEELING GOOD ABOUT YOURSELF TODAY. Then lose the weight tomorrow. An awesome person is already there inside you. *You know him.* He's funny, he's smart, and he's amazing. You just need to give that incredible person the body he deserves.

Contents

[Foreword](#) by Dr. Michael Dansinger of *The Biggest Loser*

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Introduction: A Tale of Two Boys](#)

[Part One: Answering the Call of Fitness](#)

[1 Growing Up Chunky](#)

[2 Fighting Back](#)

[3 Playing THE ULTIMATE FITNESS GAME \(UFG\)](#)

[4 Sharing the “Secret”](#)

[5 Overcoming Obstacles](#)

[6 Being All I Can Be](#)

[Part Two: How You Can Answer the Call, Too](#)

[7 Are You Where I Was?](#)

[8 Your Plan of Attack](#)

[9 Your Personal Strategy](#)

[10 Your 24/7 Coach](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Appendix: Smart Substitutions & Reductions](#)

Foreword

If you're a teen who struggles with weight, get ready to change your future. But be warned—the change is totally up to you. You cannot win the **ULTIMATE FITNESS GAME** unless you take personal control of your eating and exercise. Regardless of the circumstances that brought you to the point of obesity, it's up to you to turn things around.

Blaming people and circumstances is reasonable and fair, but it won't make you a single pound lighter. It's true that schools require you to sit during most of your waking hours, then serve you fattening lunches. It's a fact that restaurants and food manufacturers disguise unhealthy foods in delicious and tempting super-size packages. Everywhere you turn, someone is pressuring you to have another bite, try a new dessert, or clean your plate. While adults may tell you that you need to lose weight, few are setting an example of how to do it.

You can find plenty of people and circumstances to blame, but that won't solve your problem. That won't get rid of the teasing. It won't bring back lost opportunities. It won't help you live life to the fullest. It won't erase the dangers of diabetes, heart disease, or other obesity-related illnesses that may lie ahead if you become an obese adult. Blaming others doesn't get you one step closer to a fit and healthy body.

Parents, doctors, teachers, and friends can be great allies, but you can't rely on them to solve your weight problem. And isn't it true that they don't really seem to understand, anyway? Unless you've been an overweight teen in the twenty-first century, you can't fully understand.

Taylor LeBaron understands. He is one of the fortunate few teens who has found a way to radically transform his body, and he's translated his methods into a system that you can use, too. It's a system presented as a game—a game called the **ULTIMATE FITNESS GAME (UFG)**—that *you* can learn, practice, and master. Once mastered, you will have taken control of your health, your weight, and so much more.

The skills you use to transform your body are the same skills that allow you to unleash the greatness within you. Learning and applying Taylor's fitness plan will endow you with the confidence and lifestyle that will bring new meaning to “live life to the fullest” and “be all that you can be.”

Today's teens are tomorrow's leaders. The future depends on you. The world, as well as your body, is what you make of it. You can take control or just let it slide. You can lead or follow the pack. You can win or you can lose. If you're ready to win, and win big, then read on to see how it's done!

I wish you great health and happiness in the future.

—Michael Dansinger, M.D.
Nutrition Doctor, NBC's *The Biggest Loser*
Nutrition and Weight Loss Expert, WebMD
Diabetes Reversal Program, Tufts Medical Center

Acknowledgments

Have you seen some of the crazy diets out there? One says to eat all protein and no carbs. Another promises that eating only grapefruit and bacon . . . or cabbage soup . . . or drinking apple cider vinegar with each meal will cause a big weight loss. Diets like that don't work for long because one or two foods can't give us everything we need to be healthy.

When I started putting together my total fitness plan, I soon realized that I needed a variety of vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients. Each type of food provided something, whether big or small, that I needed for my body to be strong.

I also discovered that I needed the help and encouragement of a lot of *people* to carry out my fitness plan and to share my story with others. Some played a small but important role. Others played a huge role. But I couldn't have done it alone, and I'm grateful to the following people for their help:

My mother, Penny LeBaron. If the people in my life were parts of a healthy diet, my mom would be the protein. She keeps me strong and gives me constant encouragement. She taught me that anything is possible.

My grandfather, Jack Branson. He's truly one of a kind—a unique and honorable guy. I would do anything he asked of me, without question. He's taught me precision and dedication. He helped me conquer a mountain. He's the calcium that's given me a strong structure.

My grandmother, Mary Branson (Nana). She makes it possible for me to keep my weight off and stay motivated by always complimenting my new look and by providing healthy foods. She has always loved me, no matter what my size. She is truly the best grandmother anyone could ever have. She's the “good carbs,” my comfort food.

My brother, Elliott. For a kid brother, he's great. He's told me many times that he's proud of me for getting fit. Elliott's the fiber that I might not always notice, but I'd miss it if it weren't there.

My great-grandmother, Catherine Kinney. Everyone calls her MomMom, whether she's related to them or not. MomMom is one of those people who is proud of her family no matter what. She loves to brag about all of us. She was proud of me when I was more than 100 pounds overweight, and she was proud of me when I lost the weight. MomMom's the natural sweeteners—apples, oranges, grapes—that are always a treat.

Then there are all the vitamins and minerals. They may be measured in teaspoons or capsules instead of cups, but their contributions are powerful:

My uncle Dave (Adam) Branson. He adds the spice to family gatherings. He's worked hard to promote this book, and he takes time to compliment my weight loss.

Marvin and Loretta Harris. Aunt Loretta is an exercise enthusiast, and she's always encouraged me and given me exercise tips. More important, she and Uncle Marvin have encouraged all my endeavors from bluegrass music to computer programming. And they thought I was cool even when my weight was the highest.

Richard Becker, director of Chrysalis Experiential Academy. He cares about his kids like they were his family. He's been as proud of my weight loss and my book as anyone. I'm fortunate to have Richard as my friend and leader. He's turned learning and life into an adventure.

Dr. Michael Dansinger. He has a genuine concern for helping kids avoid diabetes and other weight-related health issues. I'm glad people like Dr. Dansinger work toward a better future for overweight

teens, and I'm honored to be working with him to spread the word that fitness is within everyone's reach.

Dr. James Annesi, wellness director for the YMCA of Metropolitan Atlanta. Dr. Annesi develops programs that help adults and kids manage their weight and get fit, and maintain their fitness over time. His program, the Coach Approach, was the backbone of my exercise plan.

Dyan Auterson. Dyan first met me when I was a self-conscious, overweight fourteen-year-old who had more interest in Chips Ahoy chewy cookies than exercise. She challenged me, encouraged me, and instructed me. She was my YMCA trainer, and I'll always be grateful to her. She still checks up on me, and she'll always be an inspiration.

Melba Black, wellness director, Forsyth County Family YMCA. When I'd lost more than 100 pounds, Melba displayed my poster-sized before-and-after photos at the Y. She, along with the rest of the YMCA staff, showed me in dozens of ways that they were proud of me. I'm glad to have this opportunity to thank them.

Katherine Wunder. Katherine has been my friend since I was ten years old, regardless of my size. She never judged me, and she has always made me feel confident and accomplished.

Walter Keeping. He's a teacher who made a difference. He's cool and enthusiastic, and he was the start of my wanting to learn. He always has a story to tell, and those stories have stuck with me. He inspired me to reach my potential, including getting fit.

Lorri Allen and Larry Estepa, the hosts of *Mornings with Lorri and Larry*. They provided me with the opportunity to do my first live television appearance and helped me realize that people would be interested in how I lost weight. Lorri and her husband, Mark, helped me learn to share my story with the media and with small groups. They've been a fantastic help and encouragement.

The great products available now to help us eat healthy: Healthy Choice dinners, Special K cereal and crackers, Nature Valley granola bars, and Egg Beaters. Our family travels at top speed all day, and it's good to have fast, healthy alternatives to gooey snacks and drive-thru meals. And I'm especially grateful for my super treat, my I-never-feel-deprived gourmet dessert: Coca-Cola Zero.

Bob and Ruth Hall, topnotch editors and family friends. They gave me the gift of their time and expertise as we put the finishing touches on this book.

My phenomenal agent, Claire Gerus. When I learned that someone as experienced and talented as Claire was interested in my book, I was hopeful that my fitness plan could help others.

Health Communications, Inc. (HCI) and the topnotch team that made this book possible. One of the best things Claire did was to connect me with just the right publisher. HCI chooses to publish books that change lives, and that's what I hope this book does. Special thanks to my editor, Carol Rosenber, who strengthened the book without changing my message.

At the end of a day, I'm satisfied when I've had all the necessary vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients—in the right quantities and proportions. I know that's a big step toward a healthy lifestyle. And I'm just as satisfied, at the end of the day, when I think about all the people who touch my life and have a part in helping me reach my potential. They're the components that keep me fit and healthy and ready to face my new thin life. Thank you, family, friends, and other special people!

—Taylor LeBaron

Introduction

A TALE OF TWO BOYS

This is the story of two boys.

The first boy had a DNA code that made him prone to being overweight. His natural build, coupled with his stationary hobbies and junk-food cravings, caused his weight to soar to nearly 300. Even as a preteen, he had trouble finding clothes to fit. He got winded after just a few minutes of walking, so running and other sports were out of the question.

He took some good-natured teasing about his weight. Once, as he changed after gym class, a boy shouted, “Whoa, dude. You need a bra.” The other kids roared.

“Whatever,” replied the boy, pushing the comment to a deep recess of his mind where it wouldn’t hurt.

The boy knew his weight was a serious problem, and he avoided scales. By his early teens, he worried about cholesterol, diabetes, and high blood pressure. He avoided amusement parks because he was over the weight limit for most rides. He slept in his jeans so they would be loose enough to wear to school.

The other boy was thin and agile. He sat cross-legged on the floor and scrambled up trees with ease. At nearly six feet tall, he tucked his size-small shirt into his skinny jeans with the 30-inch waist, fastened his belt with a buckle that said BUILT FORD TOUGH, and attacked each day with enthusiasm and confidence.

This boy could run five or six miles at full speed without a break. His biggest worry was getting his heart rate up high enough to get a good workout during his almost-daily trips to the gym.

The kids at school knew he was tough, and one day, a boy who outweighed him challenged him to arm wrestle. When the boy won, the other kids asked him to flex his muscles.

“Dude, you’re strong,” said another kid.

“Yeah, whatever,” replied the boy, making light of the compliment but storing it in the deep recesses of his mind where he could replay it later.

This is the story of two boys. The trouble was that one boy was inside the other.

—Jack and Mary Branson

Part One

Answering the Call of Fitness

Growing Up Chunky

My favorite TV show has always been the old *Dukes of Hazzard* series, and I often dreamed of being like Bo Duke. John Schneider, who played the part, was thin and agile. He never used the door of his car, the General Lee. He just jumped in through the window. He hoisted himself up with his arms, slid his legs through the window of the General Lee, and—voilà!— he was ready to ride.

One day, I decided to duplicate Bo's stunt. Somehow, I raised myself up and got my legs through the window of Mom's car. But my body was too big to fit through the window. I was stuck— too big to slide into the car and too far in to get out safely. The only way out was to fall, so I tumbled into a heap on the driveway, hoping none of the neighbors saw me. The stunt I'd planned for fun turned out to be one of my worst "fat" memories.

I can talk about my fat memories now, but for a long time I couldn't think of myself as fat, and I refused to see my size as a problem, especially *my* problem.

I told myself it was my binary code. I was designed to be big. It was my natural build. After all, I was a big baby—9 pounds, 4 ounces—and a sturdy toddler. By elementary school, I was always one of the biggest kids in my class.

At the beginning of each school year, I would try to scout out a kid of equal or bigger size to boost my confidence. That way, I could tell myself I wasn't the only big kid in the class. When I couldn't find someone my size, I knew I'd take all the ribbing that year. If there was another fat kid, I knew they could take the fall with me. I could share the insults.

If you're reading this book, you may have some unpleasant fat memories of your own. If so, you can probably relate to the physical and emotional challenges behind my memories. Follow me through a few more memories, and you'll realize that I understand where you are because I've been there.

Then follow me through the rest of the book as I describe how I faced my obesity and how I changed my life by changing my weight. I hope that soon you'll relate to all segments of this book: living with obesity, deciding to get fit, developing and carrying out a plan, and experiencing a new and exciting life in a thin, healthy body. Read on.

MY FAT MEMORIES

On field day at the end of first grade, the teachers announced that one of the games would be tug of war. As we ate lunch, the kids argued over whose side I would be on.

"We'll win if we have Taylor," one kid said.

I was big, and they assumed I was tough. It felt great. But when it came time for tug of war, my size just got in the way, and I wasn't as strong as the wiry kids. Our team lost.

In third grade, I remember the kids talking about how much they weighed. A kid pointed to me and said, "*He* probably weighs over 100." I did. I weighed 130.

By sixth grade, my weight was snowballing. On the last day of school, I dropped a book. When I bent over to pick it up, the extra flesh on my face hung down.

One of the kids standing nearby said, “Look at Taylor. He’s got a double chin.”

Everybody laughed, including me. But I felt an actual physical reaction to the humiliation: my arms and legs tingled, and my face flushed. And here I am, years later, remembering what the room was like, what the kid said, and exactly how I felt. Words hurt.

That kid probably forgot his words as soon as he said them, but every word stuck with me. The jokes and insults about my weight were like burrs that you get when you walk through a thicket. You keep walking and shaking your legs to get rid of them. But the more you walk, the more burrs stick to you. The more I walked through life with insults sticking to me, the harder they were to shake.

My Highest Weight

The summer before seventh grade, my great-grandmother died. Our family went to Kentucky for the funeral, and I refused to dress up. I loved my great-grandmother and I wanted to look good and show respect for her at the funeral, but I knew the only clothes that fit without strain were huge jeans—rolled up multiple times—and a stretched-out 2X T-shirt, not tucked in.

Before the funeral, we stopped at my other great-grandmother’s. I was alone in her apartment and decided to weigh myself. I carried the scale into her kitchen, on a flat surface, so I could get an accurate weight. It had been a while since I’d been weighed at the doctor’s so I had no idea what to expect. But I wasn’t prepared for what I read on my great-grandmother’s scale: 297.

My Biggest Eye Openers

By seventh grade, classroom desks were a problem. I attended a small private school with just a few desks in each room. Usually one desk near the back of the room had a separate chair. The others were typical kid desks with chairs attached. I found the biggest desk in each classroom and tried to stake it out as mine. But sometimes, if I didn’t get to class early, someone else would grab the big desk, and I’d be packed into a small one. I’d spend the next fifty minutes in agony, unable to take a deep breath or turn from side to side. Then I’d have to squeeze myself out when the bell rang. Hours later, I’d still have a deep red mark across my stomach where the desk had cut into the skin.

One afternoon, our class took on a project to clear the nature trails around our school. It felt weird to see the other kids walking and laughing and skipping, because just a few minutes into the work, I was dying. My calves ached unbearably, and I nearly passed out. The whole team—students and teachers—had to stop to help me. They got me some water and everyone crowded around, wondering if I could finish the project. I slowed down the entire team, and I’m sure the other kids secretly resented me.

No one said much to me during the rest of the project. They didn’t have to. I was saying plenty to myself. I was telling myself that I wasn’t carrying my load on the team, that there were certain things I couldn’t do and probably would never be able to do. I was sure I’d never be an athlete. I couldn’t be a police officer or join the military. I’d never be John Schneider’s stunt double.

Even though I was angry at myself for slowing the team down—and even though I knew my future options were limited—I wouldn’t fully admit that my weight was a problem. Half the time, I would think: *I’m big, I’m strong*. Other times, I would feel fat. When I told myself that I was just big, the confidence didn’t last long. Someone usually made sure I knew I was fat.

Other kids would make fun of me—not on a regular basis, but it happened. They’d be climbing on

gym equipment or sitting on a table, and someone would say, “Don’t let Taylor on that. He’ll break it.” I’d laugh with the others, but I’d feel that familiar tingling and flushing.

In spite of the occasional insult, I wanted friends, and being overweight separated me socially—and even physically—from the other kids. When our class took field trips, the kids would banter and bond with the kids they sat beside on the bus. But no one wanted to sit beside me because there wasn’t enough room. I’d try to scrunch up against the window, but the seat next to me was always the last seat chosen. To make room for someone to sit beside me, I’d have to press my legs against each other so hard that they’d go numb.

Each year, I grew larger. My eating habits combined with my DNA to create a big guy who was quickly outgrowing his environment. Chairs mysteriously broke at our house. Not occasionally, but regularly. We eventually needed all new dining room chairs.

When my brother and I got new bedroom furniture, we both wanted bunk beds. We settled on two regular full-size beds because the bunk beds we wanted had a 200-pound weight limit.

My Greatest Challenges

I always loved carbs, and when I was twelve and thirteen, I had cheese grits and cheese biscuits nearly every morning. Occasionally, I’d vary my breakfast menu by having a tall stack of pancakes drowning in syrup. Mom sometimes used liquid diet drinks as meal replacements, and when I saw them in the pantry, I’d grab one to wash down a snack.

I ate a lot, and almost always the wrong things. I didn’t *think* I ate out of stress, but I knew I ate without realizing it. I just ate whatever, whenever. I ate while watching TV, and it was pretty standard to down three or four flavored milk drinks and half a dozen snack cakes while watching reruns of the Duke boys and the General Lee speeding through Hazzard County. Since I didn’t think about what I was eating, I didn’t feel full until I was stuffed. I ate “whatever” until I felt cramped.

I studied health in school, and I knew how to eat well. I just didn’t do it. And it wasn’t like good food wasn’t all around me. But I ignored the fruit bowl and stayed friendly with the cookie jar. I ate whatever I wanted in whatever quantities it took to give me that stuffed feeling.

My brother, Elliott, was naturally skinny, and he ate more junk than I did. It didn’t seem fair that I had inherited the fat gene, so I told myself that I deserved to eat what I wanted, too.

Mom wanted to lose weight, but every time she mentioned it, I went ballistic. I’ve never liked change, and she thought that was the reason for my resistance to her getting healthy. The truth was, I didn’t want Mom to lose because I couldn’t. In the back of my mind, I was thinking, *If I can’t do it, I don’t want anyone else to.*

My Limitations

I liked being the first to get the mail each day, and I still do. I wanted to sort through the stacks to find my tech magazines and the computer gadgets I ordered, and to check for that elusive, long-awaited personal letter from Bill Gates. I couldn’t trust the rest of the family with such valuable correspondence, so as soon as I heard the mail truck in front of our house, I was out the door.

Grabbing the mail was a cinch. Our house has a driveway that makes the Grand Canyon look level. You can almost roll down to the mailbox. But when I got to the bottom, envelopes and magazines in hand, and stared up at the climb, I’d start to sweat just thinking of it. By the time I lugged myself back

to the house, my heart was racing and my shirt was soaked.

I stayed away from scales except for doctors' visits, so each time I got weighed, I was jolted by a much bigger number. As my weight climbed, theme parks became a challenge. Too many rides had weight limits. Some 220, some 250. As I stood in line with my friends, I worried that the ride attendant would refuse to let me on the ride (humiliation). I worried that the attendant would let me on the ride but I wouldn't be able to fasten the safety belt (devastation). And I worried that I'd fasten the safety belt but my weight would cause the ride to wreck (death and disaster). After telling friends too many times that I'd "changed my mind," and backtracking through the long line for the roller coaster, I decided theme parks weren't for me.

I wanted to try bungee jumping at a sporting goods store at the mall, but I was above the weight limit. I didn't need the attendant to tell me I was too big to bungee jump. The thought of snapping the cable and landing on my head was enough to keep me out of the line.

School activities were the worst because they were mandatory. I couldn't turn around, change my mind, or avoid the activity altogether. I nearly passed out one hot Georgia afternoon when our class did the 20-yard dash. For me, it was more of a never-ending crawl.

My teachers were understanding when I had to stop to catch my breath after just ten minutes of a nature walk, but I could tell that the other kids thought I'd brought it on myself.

Some of the things average-weight kids take for granted were a chore for me. Taking a bath took me twice as long because my body mass took up so much of the tub that I couldn't fill it with enough water to get clean. Halfway through my bath, I had to let out the water and refill the tub.

I needed 3X T-shirts, but they were hard to find. To make a 2X fit, I'd lay it on the bed and reach my arms between the top and bottom layers. Then I'd pull my arms as far apart as I could, stretching the fabric to the max. Sometimes, when I saw the stretched shirt lying on my bed, I'd think, *My shirt is big enough to cover the grill of a Mack truck.*

I needed size-44 jeans, but we could only find two pairs. When I had to wear 42s, I'd lie on the bed to fasten them at night, then sleep in them so they'd be loose enough to wear to school the next day.

Sometimes the things that embarrassed me most were things others probably didn't notice. It was humiliating to buy a shirt and have the clerk get my size from a special drawer below the "regular" sizes. I didn't have to special-order my clothes, but shopping wasn't any fun. I'd always had trouble finding pants that fit. When I was in elementary school, even husky jeans didn't fit, so I usually wore sweatpants. As I got older, I often found that the biggest jeans in a store were still too small. And when I found some that fit in the waist, I had to roll up the pants legs three or four times.

My Biggest Fears

I dodged the doctor's office because that's where I had to face my weight. When Dr. Bagheri brought out the growth chart, I could feel my hands tremble. Each time he showed me my weight in relation to other kids my age, I was off the charts.

I insisted on over-the-counter medicine whenever possible to avoid seeing the doctor. I didn't want blood work done because I was terrified that my cholesterol was higher than my weight. I knew obesity contributed to all sorts of health problems—no one had to tell me.

I think Dr. Bagheri understood that. Except for showing me the growth chart, he didn't pressure or embarrass me. It was the nurses who went on and on about my weight. And some of them were

overweight, too.

My Major Awareness

In eighth grade, our class took a field trip to Stone Mountain, one of Georgia's famous landmarks—a mountain carved with a Confederate scene of Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, and Stonewall Jackson. A bunch of the guys decided to check out the trail to the top of the mountain, so I went with them. I saw younger and older people climbing, but I knew I'd never make it to the top. I was relieved when our teacher said we didn't have time to climb the mountain that day. He promised we'd plan another field trip just for the climb. I knew then that I'd opt out of the second trip.

I look back now at photos of myself at twelve, thirteen, and fourteen, and there's no denying I was fat. But I rarely thought of myself that way. In my mind, I was just a big guy. At fourteen, I was 5'11" so weighing more than 200 pounds didn't seem so bad. I just never let myself think about how much above 200 I'd climbed.

I thought about myself like a rugged Mack truck. I enjoyed wearing a T-shirt that said "Built Ford Tough." But most of the time I couldn't live up to that description. In fact, "tough" and "me" were on opposite ends of the spectrum. I couldn't walk far without getting out of breath, and whatever school team I was on usually came in last because I couldn't keep up.

But on that field trip to Stone Mountain, I finally admitted to myself that I wasn't just a big guy. I was a *really, really* big guy who was *really, really* out of shape. I needed only about half the body weight I was carrying around, and the extra weight was affecting my life as much as a virus affects a computer.

My Greatest Advantage

Despite my weight, life was still a blast. I had a knack for computers, so at thirteen I started my own web-design business. My family laughed a lot, did things together, and created fun out of even ordinary days. Being Taylor was overall good.

But when things were *extra* great, I couldn't even jump for joy. Jumping up and down hurt my legs. I felt plenty of joy in my heart, but my weight kept me from showing it.

For several years, I had a recurring dream. It was so vivid that I'd wake up feeling exhilarated. I dreamed I met some sort of fairy godmother, like the one in the Cinderella story, and she gave me three wishes. I asked for \$10 million. I asked for a replica of the General Lee. And I said I wanted to weigh 180 pounds.

What I didn't realize is that I didn't need a fairy godmother to make my last wish come true. . . .

Fighting Back

The more I thought about my weight problem, the more I knew I couldn't totally blame my binary code. Binary code could be rewritten. I could retrain myself and rewrite my future. A really old comic strip character, Pogo, once said: "I saw the enemy, and he is us." That sure fit me as I started looking for reasons I was overweight. I could do a lot to counteract the build I had inherited instead of giving up. The first thing I did was identify what was putting on the pounds. Since I love video games, I approached my weight issue the same way I learn a new game. When I get a new video game, one of the first things I do is check out the opponents to see what I'm up against. When I know the enemies, I can create a plan of attack.

ENEMY #1: STILL LIFE

My first problem was inactivity. I put calories in, but I expended very little energy to burn them. So I decided to exercise. I rode my bike once around our cul-de-sac, and I was exhausted. When I didn't see a difference right away, I gave up. I wasn't ready to face the activity issue yet.

ENEMY #2: TRICKY TASTE BUDS

On to the next challenge: food choices. For my whole life, I'd let my taste buds lead me instead of my brain. And I was coming to the realization that my taste buds were not my friends. They were out for themselves, regardless of what they did to me. They told me that flavored whole milk drinks, nougat candy bars, tortilla chips, packaged dessert cakes, and regular soft drinks had a place in my life. But when I started checking out the makeup of these foods, I realized they shouldn't even be classified as foods. They were pleasure for my mouth but torture for my body.

So I told myself: *I'll lose weight this week. I'll cut out all the junk. And to hurry the process, I'll even skip lunch.*

But the junk cravings didn't go away. In fact, they got stronger. And when I skipped lunch, I was so hungry by supper that I had double servings.

ENEMY #3: SNEAKY SERVINGS

My last hope: food volume. When I first investigated what I put into my mouth, I realized I had no idea what a serving size was. After a few days of measuring, I realized that my soup bowl of cereal held four or five servings and, depending on the type of cereal, could be as much as 1,000 calories, not counting milk.

ENEMY #4: BIG LITTLE THINGS

I soon learned that I could easily consume my day's calories in liquids. Liquid calories are more likely to make you gain weight because after you drink them, even if you feel full, your mind tells you

that you haven't had a meal. I knew I had to give up flavored milk drinks and regular soft drinks. I figured if that was the only change I made, I'd lose a little weight.

I realized that condiments were a big calorie waste for me, too. I loved a giant cheeseburger with mayonnaise and ketchup oozing down the sides. I could save a couple of hundred calories just by vetoing the mayo (180 calories for 2 tablespoons) and ketchup (30 calories for 2 tablespoons).

ENEMY #5: STRESS IN ALL SIZES

I had more to consider than exercise, food choices, and serving sizes. I had to realize why I overate and the reason became clear when I thought back to when I was twelve. In a little over two years, I'd experienced some unbelievable stressors that skyrocketed me from chubby kid to obese teen. I'll tell you more about these in Chapter 5, but trust me, these were *major* stressors.

But stress is stress, and even minor, everyday stressors can cause overeating. Stress of all types caused me to eat mindlessly until my stomach shouted, "We're full down here!" and not another bite would fit. I called it "whatever" eating, and I knew I had to avoid whatever eating at whatever cost.

Toward the end of this major stress time, my granddad bought me my first laptop. I loved surfing the Internet, and one day I found a health site with a huge headline that read: **HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU'RE OVERWEIGHT?**

I keyed in my height and a weight estimate, which I knew was probably lower than my actual weight. The calculation came back: **MORBIDLY OBESE**. The label hurt and panicked me. The image of Taylor LeBaron as morbidly obese was getting too clear to deny. . . .

WHAT NOW?

I knew why I was obese.

→

I was eating too much of the wrong foods.

→

I was spending too many hours in front of the TV and computer—in other words, not getting enough exercise.

Once I figured out what I was doing wrong, you'd think I'd start doing what I knew was right. But wasn't that easy. The decision to shape up was a slow process for me. But I began by paying a little more attention to what I ate, and I eliminated flavored milk drinks and regular soft drinks from my diet.

As for exercise? Well, on the few occasions when I lifted something heavy or did short exercises at school, I liked the way it made me feel. I could feel my muscles, and I enjoyed it. But I rarely exercised, and it didn't stick.

The Gift

The Christmas just after I turned fourteen, my grandparents gave my family a membership to our

local YMCA. Even though I was a little more health conscious, I remember thinking it was a lame gift, and I wanted no part of it. Mom was excited, though, and early in January, she took Elliott and me to check out the YMCA and to get our ID cards.

To be honest, when I looked at all those people grunting and sweating and working hard—running on treadmills and going nowhere—I thought it was a joke. Exercise couldn't possibly make *that* much difference. Our Y membership sat for two months.

Then, in March, Mom suggested that we all set fitness goals. I was not a fan of the idea and didn't want to go back to the Y. I felt self-conscious. All the people there seemed so fit and healthy, and I doubted my physical ability. I figured there would be very little I could do. But at Mom's insistence, we made our second trip to the Y.

The Coach

The Y assigned me a personal trainer, a fit and trim lady named Dyan. She started out with a physical assessment, and I was pleased that my weight was down to 282. (Those little changes in my diet had made a difference.) Dyan didn't make me feel bad about myself. We just sat for a while talking about my weight, what I ate, and what my goals were. I didn't tell her my mom had pretty much dragged me there or that I was self-conscious and embarrassed to be discussing my weight, activity level, and eating habits with such a lean and fit person.

Dyan seemed so different from me. And as I looked around, I realized how different I was from all the people working out, running track, and swimming. I didn't think I belonged in their world. My lifestyle was too different. But then Dyan showed me pictures of her that had been taken a couple of years earlier. She was my size! She told me how she'd exercised and watched her diet and eventually saw huge changes. I listened politely, but I found it hard to believe her. *She must have had liposuction or taken diet pills to have lost that much weight*, I thought.

Dyan went on to say that a fitness program would be a life-changing experience, but I couldn't see how that was possible. I was ready to give up before I started. She said that 90 percent of people who make New Year's resolutions to lose weight give up within eight weeks, but that I didn't have to be one of them. (Secretly, I figured my odds were worse because Mom had made the resolution for me.)

Dyan went over what exercises would be safe for me. She started me out on a few of the weight machines, a stationary bike, and a treadmill. Within ten minutes on the stationary bike, my pulse was up to 190, and I had to stop. I was too big to run and could crack my kneecaps, so I was only able to walk slowly on the treadmill.

Dyan and I met weekly to talk about my fitness strategy. She taught me how to read and understand food labels. She taught me about calorie values, about fat, saturated fat, and trans fats, and how muscles are built and how they deteriorate. She explained body mass index (BMI), which is a measurement of your body fat based on height and weight. She also explained basal metabolic rate (BMR), which is the amount of calories you'd burn if you stayed in bed all day. All this information just made me realize how out of shape I was.

I'd gone far enough that I didn't want to back out. But I felt like all the healthy, thin people would be staring at me. I didn't want them to see the size of my legs. I didn't want them to see me at all. So I showed up the first time wearing sunglasses, jeans, and boots. These clothes became my workout gear for the next several months. I didn't realize at the time that my clothing made me even more noticeable.

The Progress

I started out slow, but I stuck with it. I didn't notice a weight loss right away, but after just a week, started feeling that natural high people talk about. Exercise exhilarated me. I felt like I'd found something I was always meant to do. I felt my muscles getting stronger every day. I began going to the Y four, five, or even six days a week. I began feeling like a character in one of my video games: facing enemies, maneuvering around obstacles, moving to a higher level each time I mastered the current one. I began feeling powerful.

It wasn't long before I *had* to go to the Y, and I became upset if, for some reason, I wasn't able to go. Exercise quickly became a part of what I did each day, and I found simpler ways to exercise on days I couldn't go to the Y. Exercise became my replacement for snacking and my remedy for stress. I felt happy if I was sweating and grunting like the people I once thought were foolish.

After a couple of months, Dyan could tell a difference, but she was the only one. The weight didn't come off fast, but I was changing my lifestyle. And my diet began to naturally change. After working out for an hour, brownies and snack cakes didn't sound as good as a bottle of cold energy water. And I knew I needed the whole fitness program if I wanted to see results, so I started changing what I ate.

At first I thought that I could just count fat and that as long as my diet had less than 65 grams of fat a day, I'd lose weight. I soon realized that those fat grams couldn't come in the form of candy bars and snack cakes because they were packed with calories. Those calories were empty, and I knew I needed protein for my workouts.

I spent a lot of time searching the Internet and visiting web-sites. I typed in questions like "How many calories does a beef burrito have?" and "What is a serving size for steak?" I visited fast-food sites and identified the healthiest foods on every menu so I'd have a good alternative for the high-calorie, high-fat, high-sugar items I'd ordered in the past. For a while, I used an online site to plan my meals and keep track of what I ate. (You can find a great online meal planner at www.healthvault.com.) Eventually, I developed a healthy diet and exercise plan that worked for me, and I no longer needed the site.

I tackled fitness with three strategies:

- 1. Increased physical activity**
- 2. Decreased food volume**
- 3. Healthy food choices**

The YMCA provided computerized exercise plans, so I could watch my progress. They used an incentive program called the Coach Approach that helped me chart my progress as I reached different color levels, much like karate belts. I even earned prizes like wristbands, T-shirts, and gym bags.

By the time summer arrived, I was driven to exercise. I was starting a new school in the fall, and I wanted to be in shape. I worked out two to three hours at a time. I knew I couldn't keep up that pace after school started, but I wanted a jumpstart. I'd finish the workout Dyan designed for me, walk a mile or two around the track, and repeat my workout plan. I felt myself getting stronger from the inside out. I was still a big guy, but I was starting to feel and act like the person I'd always known I was.

It was easier to control food volume when I paid attention to what I ate. I started noticing everything I put in my mouth—the nutritional value and the serving size. I realized I didn't need a big bowl of anything to get the necessary vitamins and minerals, but I was still so large that I needed a lot of calories. I reduced my daily calories slowly because I didn't want to lose weight so fast that my

skin sagged.

The Cravings

The hardest thing about food choices was dealing with cravings. I decided that cravings were sort of like dinosaurs. If they lost their food supply, they'd die. So I stopped feeding my cravings. I knew a lot of people learned to satisfy their cravings with a bite of cake instead of a wedge, and I did that sometimes, too. But my cravings were pushy. If I fed them too often, even tiny bites, they tried to take over.

Every time I felt a craving, I'd work out or jump into an activity I enjoyed. Mom bought me some 20-pound barbells to use for quick workouts at home. I decided it was better for me to lift weights while I watched television than to snack.

Eventually, the cravings started to die, and I'd wake up in the morning and want salmon or other protein. I'd feel hungry for whole-grain bread instead of a muffin. Finally, I was stronger than my cravings.

FITNESS 101

I approached my diet like I tackled a major school research project. I learned about every food ingredient. I researched what I needed to be healthy, and I compared what I needed with what was on food labels. I started going to the store with Mom so I could read labels and choose the healthiest foods. As I developed my own system, I became more focused on carrying out the plan than on feeding my taste buds.

I started liking healthy foods, and after a while, rich foods made me queasy. I was truly changing my inner codes. I was now controlling my taste buds instead of letting them control me. That powerful feeling felt better than any food could ever taste!

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