

Websites make wagers on losing weight easier

By LEANNE ITALIE

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Neil Ylanan eats for a living and travels constantly as a food expert for a company that supplies in-flight meals to airlines. Toss in those sleepless, sluggish early years of fatherhood — he's got three young children — and he was dealing with significant weight gain.

Looking around his office in Irving, Texas, Mr. Ylanan, 37, realized he wasn't alone, so he rallied four of his fellow foodies at LSG Sky Chefs for an online weight-loss competition.

They named their team "All About the Benjamins," in homage to the \$10,000 top prize offered by HealthyWage.com, one of at least a dozen diet betting sites to emerge after "The Biggest Loser" went on the air and the nation's obesity epidemic grew worse.

Each of the Benjamins anted up \$60 to lose more — up to a safe weekly maximum — than 30 or so teams from the same company and around the map. They had three months. Victory was theirs in October.

"At first we really were all about the Benjamins, but the impetus kind of changed. You didn't want to let your teammates down," said Mr. Ylanan, who at 5-foot-7 began the competition at 245 pounds and ended it at 196.

"I joined a gym. We've all picked up racquetball," he said. "I haven't played racquetball in 15 years."

Research on whether financial incentives lead to weight loss is inconclusive, but that hasn't kept thousands of people off diet betting sites since they began sprouting in 2004. Many of the sites experience dramatic hikes in traffic during the danger stretch between Thanksgiving and January.

"We think of New Year's as our Black Friday," said Victoria Fener, director of operations for Stickk.com.

Each site has its own rules and tools, such as line graphs to track progress, regular emails with tips and

support, and rankings to keep an eye on the competition. Stickk allows users to set their own stakes, including an "anti-charity" donation to a hated cause. The George W. Bush Presidential Library and Americans United for Life are top choices.

Most of the sites are free or require a small fee. Many make money betting optional to tackle weight loss and other health goals.

Regular weigh-ins usually are required, either through the honor system or a third-party source such as a doctor or a health club. Privacy settings keep sensitive details hidden if desired, but Facebook-esque walls provide that sought-after share factor popular with players.

Seth Brown, 28, of Morgan Hill, Calif., got a jump in August on his New Year's resolution to lose 62 pounds.

He had fallen into a routine of burritos, fast food and video games when he lost his job and moved back in with his parents. He put up \$30 to compete against 14 strangers in a public individual challenge at WeightLossWars.com, where Dell, Google and Groupon have sponsored employees.

"I first set out to find a website that acted as sort of a social network for fat people," Mr. Brown said. "I thrive in competitive situations and I loved the idea of competing with a group of people who are in the same boat I am."

He was in the lead with 6 pounds to go heading into the final stretch. The top three contenders will win about \$260 each when the challenge concludes Jan. 16.

Other people like their wagers the old-fashioned way, organized on their own among people they know for token sums, prizes or simple encouragement.

Around this time last year, Marietta, Ga., lawyer Debbie Haughton was facing down her 40th birthday. She joined a 12-week, 40-person pool organized by a friend. She put in \$20, weighed in weekly on the honor system and lost about 10 pounds.



Small prizes, including workout DVDs and pedometers, were awarded along the way. Miss Haughton won a few and went back for another 12-week round after the organizer decided to save up the money to dole out as cash at the end.

Miss Haughton dropped about 18 pounds and walked away with \$200.