



## **Get the Body You Want**

From the Dare to Dream Series: You're the only one stopping you from making it happen

By Marnell Jameson

Picture your physical best and hold that thought. Are you a little fitter, stronger, leaner, healthier? What would it take to get there? Achieving your fitness goals starts by creating a vision, asking the right questions, then setting realistic objectives. Some women are born to be thin, healthy, natural athletes, but the rest of us have to work at it.

These women overcame severe illness, obesity or lifelong patterns of unhealthy behavior to achieve their personal best. Today they are vibrantly fit and have some lessons for us all. Let their stories inspire you.

### **It's Me, Just Thinner**

Michele Brown remembers waiting for her husband to step off the plane from Iraq in July 2004. It was Don's first visit home since his National Guard unit had been called into active duty nine months earlier, and she couldn't wait to see him. But she also dreaded the moment. "I was nervous because I wanted to be beautiful for him."

She had recently gained 16 pounds, on top of the 35 pounds she'd put on since they married in 1998. Add the fact that he was six years younger, and Michele felt old, fat and frumpy.

When he got off the plane, Don looked handsome and fit—and much thinner. "Where's the rest of you?" she asked.

"I'm all here," he said, hugging all 211 pounds of her.

She didn't want to repeat the mistakes of her first marriage, when she ballooned up to 225 pounds on her 5'4" frame, the result of poor eating habits and giving birth to three children. "I didn't feel feminine or sexually attractive, so I turned away from my husband," explains Michele, a credit union manager in Yakima, Washington.

After that 17-year marriage ended in 1994, Michele dieted and exercised down to 160 pounds. That's when she met Don at a country western bar. "He was dancing, and I thought he was the most fabulous man I'd ever seen," she recalls. But once they married, Michele's old eating patterns returned, and so did the pounds.

Ten days after Don returned to Iraq, in August 2004, Michele walked into an LA Weight Loss center near her home. From that day on, Michele visited the center three times a

week. At every visit she weighed in, reviewed her food journal with her counselor, and together they planned her meals for the days ahead. Sometimes she picked up nutrition bars or soup from the center, but mostly she relied on food from the supermarket.

Within four months Michele had lost 25 pounds and gone from a size 18 to a size 12–14. She's aiming to lose another 25 pounds—to reach 160 and size 10—before she sees her husband again. "When Don comes home for good, I plan to make sure we have a long, sexy, healthy life together," says Michele, now 47.

### **What Works:**

- Michele writes down everything she eats or drinks in a journal before having it.
- She doesn't count calories, but she does measure and weigh her food.
- She weighs in at the center three times a week and plans her menus for the days ahead. Paying each week makes her feel accountable.
- She works out to Richard Simmons' videos three times a week, plus she walks two miles twice a week.

### **Run for Your Life**

Five years ago, Melanie Concepcion-Gonzalez, an analytical chemist for an environmental firm in Anaheim, California, joined a group of coworkers who jog before work. Soon Melanie was up to almost four miles. But while her colleagues said running gave them more energy, Melanie felt increasingly tired. Then she found out why.

In May 2001, Melanie, who is married and has two young sons, was diagnosed with chronic myelogenous leukemia, a serious, often fatal cancer of the blood and bone marrow. After dozens of chemotherapy and radiation treatments, and more than eight months in the hospital, Melanie was waiting for a bone marrow transplant. Weak and weighing a mere 97 pounds, she flipped on the TV and watched the L.A. Marathon. "I looked at the people running that race and said, 'That will be me someday.'"

A month later she had a successful transplant. But it was still another year—and more chemotherapy—before her doctor gave her the OK to return to work, in July 2003. She could barely walk from the parking lot to the building.

Melanie's running colleagues rallied around her and eventually got her to take short walks, 10 minutes at first, then slowly up to 30. Soon they were walking a mile, and within a year jogging four miles. "I truly believe running has kept me strong, mentally and physically," she says.

By last fall Melanie's leukemia was in remission, and doctors say it is unlikely to return. Now 40, she weighs a healthy 120 pounds, and still runs a few times a week. This spring she ran the L.A. Marathon, all 26.2 miles. "Two years ago, I couldn't take two steps, and now I've run a marathon," says Melanie in disbelief. "On the days when I don't feel like running, I picture the time when I couldn't walk across the room. Soon, I'm lacing up my running shoes."

**What Works:**

- A positive attitude: "My sickness was a blessing. It taught me endurance."
- Her family: "When I didn't feel like walking, let alone running, I told myself I had to get strong for my boys."
- Her philosophy: "I truly believe that if you keep your mind healthy and your body strong, you can conquer almost any disease."

**Save Your Heart**

Two years ago, life was good for Janet Tapp, then 42. She was happily married and about to retire from a 17-year career as a day-care provider, ready to start a new chapter in her life. Unfortunately, the chapter opened with a stroke. And it wasn't her first.

Seven years earlier, Janet, who lives in Barrie, Ontario, had suffered a stroke along with a heart attack. Her doctor was blunt: "You need to lose weight." At the time, Janet weighed 200 pounds. When she had her second stroke, her weight was up to 216 and she wore a size 24. She also had a host of risk factors, including high cholesterol and high blood pressure. The doctor was even more direct: "Don't waste my time," he told her. "I have people lined up to see me who want to help themselves."

Shortly afterward, Janet signed up for the Jenny Craig diet program, which includes meals for its clients. "The first time I opened my dinner and saw what was there, I thought I was going to starve." But once she added a salad, fruit and milk, it turned out to be plenty. The one-on-one aspect of the program also appealed to her: "I don't like to sit around in a group and listen to someone who lost four pounds when I gained two."

Janet started her diet in July 2003. She nearly quit when she hit 172 pounds and was stuck there for two weeks. That's when her counselor said the "E" word. "I told her from day one that I was allergic to exercise and wouldn't do it," Janet says. Still, she agreed to exercise for seven days—walking on a treadmill for 30 minutes twice a day. She lost two pounds that week. "That was all the motivation I needed."

Other unhealthy behaviors dropped away, too. Janet had been a chronic meal skipper and ate several meals a week at fast-food places. Today she eats three meals plus three snacks daily, almost none at fast-food restaurants. "My body needs food all day to get its metabolism going and to keep my appetite even so I don't gorge."

Now Janet weighs 136 pounds, is a sexy size 6, and has kept her weight off. Her husband can't stop bragging about his skinny wife. "I love to join him in our hot tub, which I never used to do," she says. Perhaps her best day came when she visited her doctor. He looked at her old chart, looked at her, then gave her a hug.

**What Works:**

- At restaurants, Janet asks for half orders. If the restaurant doesn't serve half portions, she asks the waiter to put half the meal on her plate and half in a to-go container.
- When she's done eating, or should be, she puts the handle of her silverware in her food, so she doesn't want to pick up the utensil again.

**Challenge Yourself**

When Pat Puchalski hit perimenopause at 49, she read a book about the changes ahead. The book said she would slow down, take more naps and gain 20 pounds. Her doctor more or less agreed. Pat's reaction: "Not happening." But she did notice that her size 12s were feeling a bit tight. Still, Pat, a fourth grade teacher in Gahanna, Ohio, wasn't sure how to take on Mother Nature.

Then came a curve that triggered a passion. Her husband, Tom, had a heart attack and started a cardiac rehabilitation program that encouraged spouses to get involved too. They joined a local wellness center and started a program that included weekly sessions with a trainer for the first two months. One day Pat's husband said jokingly to her trainer, Scott Schnitzpahn, "Why don't you get her to run a triathlon?"

They all laughed. But as it happened, Scott is a certified triathlon coach. "I could have her doing a triathlon in eight weeks if she wanted to," he said.

The gauntlet was down. Pat started working with Scott three days a week. A triathlon consists of three consecutive endurance races: a swim, a bike ride and a run. "We started slow," Pat says. "I had never run a day in my life, hadn't swum since high school, and hadn't ridden a bike since I was 14."

The first week Pat walk-jogged half a mile, then biked for 15 minutes and took a short swim. Each week Scott pushed her a little harder. The day before the race, Pat told Scott, "Let me get this straight. You want me to jump off a pier into Lake Michigan, swim half a mile, bike 18 miles through downtown Chicago, then run 3.1 miles around the Planetarium?"

She came in third place in her age group for women. Next she decided to run a marathon before turning 50. She ran the Columbus, Ohio, marathon in 1998, then later completed the Boston Marathon in 2004, as well as a long-distance championship triathlon. Eventually she qualified for what many believe is the toughest endurance race in the world: the Kona Ironman Triathlon World Championship. Only 3 percent of athletes who apply even qualify. Last October, she was able to complete the arduous competition in 14 hours, 55 minutes, and placed 10th out of the 20 women in her age group.

Pat, now 56 and a size 4, decided to bring her passion to other women and became a certified triathlon coach. "I want to help other women turning 50 who don't want to accept someone else's version of how their bodies are going to be."

### **What Works:**

- Find an exercise you love.
- Work with a qualified person to help you develop that passion.
- Set goals: Have a big one—to run a marathon—and a small one—to run a mile.
- Find someone who shares your passion. He or she can lift you up when you're tired.
- Dig deep, push hard and don't be afraid of stretching yourself.

### **How to Stay on Your Game**

People who succeed in transforming their bodies need, above all, the right attitude. According to Todd M. Kays, a psychologist specializing in sports and performance and director of the Athletic Mind Institute in Columbus, Ohio, all of us can apply these tips to help stick with a fitness plan and achieve our personal best:

**Get good information.** Consult an expert, such as a reputable dietitian or trainer. Be sure this person is as committed to your goal as you are.

**Focus on the process, not the outcome.** All you can control is what you do today; for instance, what you have for lunch and how much you exercise. You can't control whether you lose two pounds this week or not. People who focus on the process have a higher chance of attaining their goal. Those who focus too much on the outcome ("I have to be a size 6 before the class reunion") generally fail. Plus, by focusing on the process of reaching your goal, you create a way of life.

**Expect setbacks.** They happen, so plan on them. One week you may be faithful to your diet and still gain two pounds, or maybe you were able to jog three miles last week, but this week you can't get past two. That's part of the journey. Cut yourself some slack. The greatest athletes aren't those who have never had a setback, but those who persist through adversity.

**Push through plateaus.** When progress stops, and you can't seem to gain fitness or lose weight, ask two questions: Are my goals realistic, or am I expecting too much too soon? Do I need to change my program? Athletes, for example, often overtrain. Building in more recovery time could get you over the next hurdle.

**Fight head games with honesty.** When people start to give up, they rationalize: "I'm fine the way I am. This is just how my body is meant to be. I can't run a marathon. What was I thinking?" Such self-talk buffers disappointment, but it doesn't get the job done. Take your emotions out of the picture. Be brutally objective and tell yourself the truth: "I'd be healthier if I lost 20 pounds." Or, "I'd increase my chances of living longer if I worked out consistently." When you define your issues objectively, they become a problem to solve, not a criticism of your self-worth.

**Do it for yourself.** Don't try to improve your body simply to please another person. You can never control another person's view of you. While getting your dream body may, in fact, please others in your life, you have to do this for yourself.