

chicago athlete

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THE BIGGEST WINNER

'BIGGEST LOSER' STAR BERNIE SALAZAR KEEPS RUNNING, SMILING

THE BIGGEST WINNER

By: Mike Knapp



WHEN BERNIE SALAZAR WAITED IN A WINDING CASTING CALL LINE FOR THE REALITY SHOW "THE BIGGEST LOSER" OUTSIDE THE NBC TOWER IN THE SUMMER OF 2007, HE HAD NO IDEA THAT FROM THAT MOMENT ON, HIS LIFE WOULD NEVER BE THE SAME.

"I was tired of being tired," says Salazar. The Chicago resident hoped a spot on the show would help him lose weight and take control of his life for good.

Growing up, Salazar couldn't remember a time he was a normal size. By the time he had reached graduate school at the University of Illinois-Chicago, his weight had taken on a life of its own. If there was a reason to eat, he would eat. A self-confessed "foodaholic," Salazar would find solace in food when he was happy, sad, bored or stressed.

While his girth did win him a spot as a member of the Matadors, the all-male, all-overweight dance troupe of the Chicago Bulls, it didn't do much for his everyday life. Simple tasks like tying his shoes or going up steps became a chore. Salazar had come to a crossroads of sorts, he would either eat himself to the grave or make the most dramatic lifestyle switch of his life. He chose to lose the weight.

He signed up for "The Biggest Loser" and after three months of waiting and several callbacks, Salazar was selected as one of 19 people (from over 250,000 applicants) to move into the show's ranch in Southern California.

The show began taping in October and the first week was—not surprisingly—difficult.

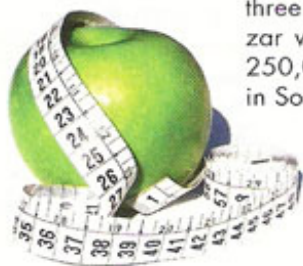
Salazar began vomiting during workouts and was sent to the hospital. After returning, he stuck to his training, worked out 4-6 hours-a-day, competing in various physical challenges and learning healthy lifestyle and eating habits.


He found a rhythm and posted double-digit weight losses a total of three times over the next eight weekly weigh-ins. Salazar had discovered an inner strength that pushed him through the 10 weeks, posting tremendous weight loss and showing unimaginable heart before being voted off and sent home mid-January.

Back in Chicago, Salazar stayed dedicated to his routine, and continued shrinking and thinking and acting healthy. After being dropped from the show, Salazar set his sights on the \$100,000 prize awarded to the contestant who was voted off and lost the most weight by the show's finale.

"I figured, why not me?" says Salazar. "I had come so far, and maybe I had a shot, so why not follow all the way through?"

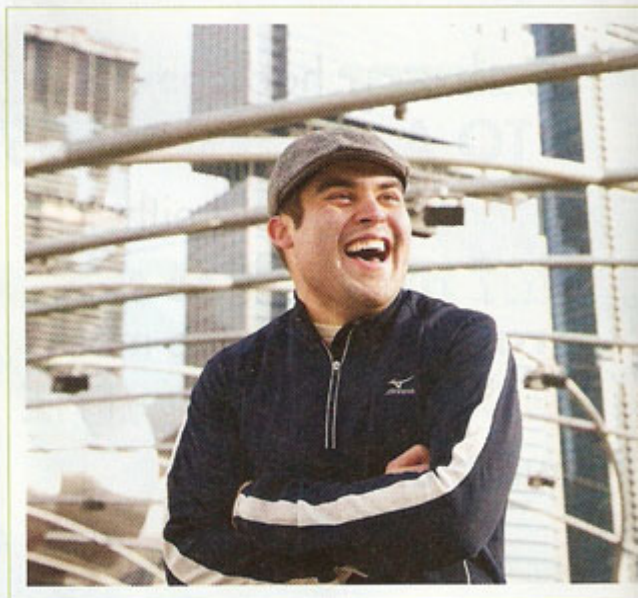
Starting the show at 283 pounds, the 5-foot-5 Salazar lost 88 pounds before he was sent home. Between his last day on the set and the live finale in April, he lost another 42 pounds to finish the competition at 153, having shed 45.9 percent of his original weight.



A close-up photograph of a man's face and upper body. He is wearing a dark blue zip-up jacket. His right arm is extended towards the camera, and he is wearing a black wristband with the white text "you're worth it" written on it. The background is out of focus, showing what appears to be an outdoor setting with some structures.

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Having lost an astounding 130 pounds, Salazar was named the “at-home” winner.

“To me it is an honor,” says Salazar. “It’s one of those things that if you would have told me this two years ago [that] I would be here, I would have laughed.”

After so much personal change and accomplishment, Salazar is committed to paying it forward. He has dedicated his life to helping others lead a healthy lifestyle.

“I couldn’t be happier with where I’m at and I feel it is my calling to spread the word, the fact it can be done,” says Salazar. “When I went on the show, my main priority was to get a hold of what I was battling with. It wasn’t about the money or winning. I discovered I had confidence in myself and came to the conclusion that I was strong enough to really follow through.”

Winning the money was a fantastic plus, but Salazar maintains that being healthy was always his priority.

“I wanted to make sure that when I was on the scale for the last time, I would know I had given it my all,” he said. “For me it was seeing something through. The winning was just an unexpected, wonderful surprise. I still can’t believe I came out on top.”

He credits both of the show’s trainers, Bob Harper and Jillian Michaels, as well as his partner Brittany Aberle with helping him down his weight-loss path.

Though he had never met Aberle before the show, the two were paired-up to fit the season’s “couple” theme. Competing against teams of siblings, spouses and lifelong friends, Salazar and Aberle became close through the competition.

To this day, Salazar is still constantly in touch with Aber-

le, who lives in San Jacinto, CA, and in December, they teamed-up again to run the Rose Bowl Half Marathon.

“She is really my best friend,” he says. “I discovered that you can’t do this alone. She has been there for me and continues to be there for me. [Her friendship] is one of the best gifts I got from the show.”

Along with that race and the Chicago Distance Classic last August, Salazar realized another goal when he was able to finish the Bank of America Chicago Marathon last fall. While he had hoped to run the race in four hours, his time of 4 hours, 15 minutes, 59 seconds was a solid effort in the heat and humidity that accompanied race day.

“I realized at that point [while running the race] that losing the weight wasn’t just for a television show,” he says. “It was making the transition to leading a healthy lifestyle. To be the one running, to be the one doing it for me. The range of emotions I experienced, I still get choked up about it.”

Since the show ended, the popular and outgoing Salazar has finished his master’s in education at UIC, has become a motivational speaker, is active with several organizations and charities and is working on a children’s book dedicated to health and fitness.

He believes that his personal journey helps him relate to others and what they are going through. His message is simple: take small steps. Small steps add up to big things and big things can open doors to change your life.

“I take those small steps every day,” he says. “I don’t want to go back, this is my lifestyle now. What we need to realize is that we are all worth the time it takes to do this for ourselves. When you do that, you never know where life is going to take you.”

