

Through smart food choices, social media, and miles and miles of sweat and tears, 12 formerly obese folks took charge of their eating habits and embraced their inner athletes. Here—and in an upcoming documentary—they share their hard earned tips and strategies for living a healthier, happier, *leaner* life

BY LISA MARSHALL

JUST BEFORE 8 P.M.

on January 4, 2013, a dozen sleep-deprived but elated runners staggered across the finish line of the Ragnar Relay in Key West, Florida, having just covered 197 miles over 36 hours as a team. As the athletes traded celebratory high-fives and embraces before a cheering crowd, it was hard to imagine that they had once collectively weighed an additional 1,200 pounds.

Just a few years earlier, not one of the 12 runners could climb a flight of stairs without pausing. Many had suffered from diabetes, high blood pressure, and other by-products of obesity. They began their weight-loss journey alone but shared a common process: dropping

BIG LOSER

Team member
Katie Foster lost
120 pounds.



GUTS

pounds the old-fashioned way, with diet and exercise—specifically, running. They met in 2011 through social media, bonded over their struggle, and in February 2012, formed Team Fat to Finish Line. Their goal: run the 36-leg Ragnar Relay the following January.

Prepping to run three 2- to 10-mile-long legs was daunting. The runners suffered crippling periods of doubt—both internally and from family and friends who considered them too big to run. Others got grief for taking time away from their kids and spouses to train. For anyone struggling to make a life change, the themes were universal, says teammate Jennifer Roe, 41, a filmmaker from New Jersey who helped form the group. “Once I heard their stories, I knew there was a movie here.” Roe began crisscrossing the country, filming her teammates’ emotional back stories and documenting their milestones. During the relay, as the blistering heat yielded calf cramps, sour stomachs, and a few tearful meltdowns, the cameras rolled on. The resulting documentary, *From Fat to Finish Line*, will debut in theaters this spring.

The group’s story illustrates that while dietary changes are vital for losing weight, exercise is key to keeping it off, says James Hill, Ph.D., director of the Anschutz Health and Wellness Center in Denver. That’s because exercise helps fix a metabolism broken by inactivity. Sedentary individuals, overweight or not, are less metabolically flexible, meaning their bodies have trouble switching between fuel sources, so they burn less fuel and store more fat. “A healthy metabolism says, ‘Bring it on—fat, protein, carbs—we’ll use it all,’” says Hill. A busted system simply stores those nutrients as fat. Shed pounds by trimming calories alone, says Hill, and you’ll have to maintain the perfect diet forever, or risk gaining weight. But keep moving, and you can correct a flawed metabolism—meaning after a few months, you can eat a wider variety of foods, and stay lean.



THE DOCUMENTARY

For updates on the release date of *From Fat to Finish Line*, and for more info on the team members, go to facebook.com/FatToFinish.

TO GLORY



LOST 92 LBS. RIK AKEY

44, LIFE INSURANCE
OPERATIONS CONSULTANT
WAUWATOSA, WISCONSIN

STARTING WEIGHT: 275
WEIGHT NOW: 183

EASE INTO IT

Before his 40th birthday, Rik Akey looked at his diabetic, 340-pound father and saw a “frightening preview of coming attractions.” Akey himself was pushing 285 pounds. He’d always admired his neighbors who ran, but when he tried to run, he’d get hurt. “I was working out in old lawn-mowing sneakers,” he says. “I would get shin splints so bad I couldn’t walk.” He eventually hired a personal trainer. Together, they went to a specialty running store to get Akey shoes that matched his gait and weight. He started running on the treadmill at home, where he could focus on proper form, and after six weeks, he could run a mile. Today, Akey is a coach who has run 10 marathons (his PR is 3:29). His advice: “When you’re new at something, you have no bad habits to break. Ask for help, and start out doing it right.”

THE TAKEAWAY

- ▶ **Get over it** Feeling self-conscious about stepping into a running store or lining up for a race? Consider this, says Akey: You have no idea how the people around you looked a year ago—they may have struggled with weight, too. “If anyone pays attention, they will think, *Good for that guy. That takes guts,*” he says. Need backup? Bring a friend.
- ▶ **Shop smart** Heavier runners often think they need extra support, but in most cases, they don’t, says Michael Chin, D.P.M., a podiatrist and medical director of the Running Institute of Chicago. Thick-soled shoes can cause you to land too far to the outside of your feet and develop shin or heel problems. Get shoes for your body and running style at a specialty running store.
- ▶ **Stride right** With each step, a runner loads three times his body weight onto the bones, ligaments, and joints. Proper form can lighten that load: Take short, quick steps. Focus on landing on your midfoot rather than your heel. Swing your arms forward and back, not across the midline of your body (all that twisting can throw your gait off).



GOOD GUIDANCE

With so many slim-down-now! resources out there, what do you really need?

PERSONAL TRAINER

GET IT...
if you struggle with motivation and/or respond best to personal interaction.
FORGET IT...
if you’re a self-motivator.

NUTRITIONIST

GET IT...
if your primary goal is to clean up your eating habits and/or you’ve struggled with diets.
FORGET IT...
if your primary goal is to start exercising (one big change at a time). Find nutrition tips at runnersworld.com/nutrition-weight-loss.

TRAINING PLAN

GET IT...
if goals motivate you. Find plans and training advice for all levels at runnersworld.com/training.
FORGET IT...
if it just feels like one more task. Focus on simply moving more. Get guidance on just that at runnersworld.com/the-starting-line.

A RUNNING GROUP OR EXERCISE CLASS

GET IT...
if you’re motivated by shared goals and camaraderie.
FORGET IT...
if you’re shy. Connect with runners virtually at first, like those under the Community tab at runnersworld.com. Finding peers may inspire you to join local running groups.

Credit by DUMMY NAME; Credit by DUMMY NAME

LOST 85 LBS.
ADA WONG

31, PROJECT MANAGER
 PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

STARTING WEIGHT: 260
 WEIGHT NOW: 175

CHANGE YOUR THINKING

When Ada Wong, then 27, was on TV's *The Biggest Loser* in 2010, she discovered what really drove her struggle with weight. As a toddler, Wong had witnessed the accidental drowning of her baby brother. She grew up feeling like a disappointment to her parents and

fearing they held her responsible. She turned to food to cope, eventually packing 260 pounds onto her 5'6" frame, and tried diet after diet to lose it. Once on the show, she dropped 100 pounds (using an admittedly unsustainable workout regimen). But it was finally confronting her parents about her feelings that helped her keep it off. "Getting it all out in the open was freeing," she says. "It helped me get on with my life, and focus on myself." Three years later, she's completed three marathons and an Ironman. "Now, instead of eating when I'm upset, I vent. I am much more vocal."

THE TAKEAWAY

ID triggers Most yo-yo dieters have some emotional component to their weight problem, says Deborah Beck Busis, L.C.S.W., diet program coordinator

for the Beck Institute for Cognitive Behavior Therapy in Pennsylvania. To distinguish hunger from emotional eating, pause to consider what you're feeling—if it's tension, restlessness, or a watery mouth from a simple craving, it isn't hunger. "True hunger is that empty, rumbling feeling in your stomach," Busis says. Distract yourself: Call a friend, do a crossword puzzle, or drink tea. Better yet, work out. **Own it** List the reasons you want to lose weight; read that first thing every morning. "It gets the idea clearly in your head: *Here is why it's worth it to stay in control today,*" says Busis. **Take action** If you do binge, write how you feel afterward. Carry that description with you and read it whenever you're tempted to overindulge. "Ask yourself," says Busis, "*Do I want one cause of my bad mood, or two?*"



GRAVING CRUSHERS

Keep these healthy options on hand for when you can't defeat the urge to eat



FREEZE-DRIED VEGGIES

Serving size: 31 grams (140 calories)
 Veggies like edamame deliver the satiating crunch of chips with less fat and more nutrients.



SALMON OR TURKEY JERKY

Serving size: 1 ounce (80 to 90 calories)
 Packs 9 to 13 grams of protein, and the savory taste satisfies late-day cravings.



NUT BUTTER

Serving size: Single-use pack (200 calories)
 Fat keeps you full longer; delivers 3 grams fiber and 6 grams protein. Smear on celery sticks or eat plain.



ORANGE OR GRAPEFRUIT

Serving size: One (69 to 104 calories)
 Loaded with water, citrus helps you feel full. Peel ahead of time and store for a quick snack.



VEGETABLE JUICE

Serving size: 11.5-ounce can (70 calories)
 Fiber in veggie juice fills you up more than fruit juice, and its 14 grams of carbs pack a decent energy boost.



AIM HIGH

Katie Foster dropped 50 pounds for her wedding in 2003. But after it was over: “I started eating and just couldn’t stop,” she says. Six years later, Foster weighed 253 pounds. When she tried to teach her son how to ride a bike, she made it halfway down the street before she was gasping for breath. “I had to watch my sister do it for me. I felt like the worst mom in the world.” She started counting calories again, only this time, she added running. Three times a week she went out, running a little longer each time. Foster signed up for a 5-K eight months off, and by race day she was logging nine-milers. She clocked a 27:16. After losing nearly half her body weight, she had surgery to trim away excess skin. On her blog, runsfor cookies, Foster admits her sweet tooth is still intact. “I realized that to maintain my weight loss, I either had to cut out all my sweets—or keep running.”

THE TAKEAWAY

- ▶ **Set daily goals** Stay motivated by focusing on daily mini-goals, like sticking to your meal plan or running slightly longer. “If you run one full minute today and you couldn’t do that yesterday, you are better than yesterday,” says Foster. “That’s empowering.”
- ▶ **Dream big** When she signed up for that 5-K, Foster couldn’t even run a mile yet. But studies have shown that dieters who aim for something (a race, new running shoes) lose more weight than those who don’t.
- ▶ **Run more** “You have to walk 50 percent farther and spend twice as long to expend the same amount of energy as you would running,” says Paul Williams, Ph.D., a scientist at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in California. Plus, running boosts your postrun calorie burn and production of hunger-squelching hormones.
- ▶ **Indulge (a little)** Depriving yourself too much can tempt you to binge, says Foster, who avoids baking. She buys a cookie at her favorite bakery and saves it for after her long run.



LOST 120 LBS. KATIE FOSTER

32, STAY-AT-HOME MOM
NEWPORT, MICHIGAN

STARTING WEIGHT: 253
WEIGHT NOW: 133

SPEED SHRED

Crank up your workouts to torch calories

The faster you move, the more calories you burn per minute. Plus, bursts of intensity interspersed with rest periods improve the body’s ability to burn abdominal fat and regulate blood sugar. Find your skill level below, and do the following workouts once a week. Over time, add repeats or pick up the pace.

WALKER OR RUN/WALKER

Walk or run/walk at an easy pace for 10 minutes. Speed up for 10 minutes, to where you can talk only in phrases. Run/walk easy for 10 minutes. Repeat sequence.

NOVICE RUNNER

Run one minute moderately hard (talking should be uncomfortable). Walk/jog one minute. Repeat three times.

INTERMEDIATE RUNNER

Run 400 meters (once around a track) moderately hard. Jog or walk 200 to 400 meters. Repeat four to five times.

Credit by DUMMY NAME; Credit by DUMMY NAME

LOST 102 LBS. JENNIFER ROE

41, FILM PRODUCER
BERGEN COUNTY, NEW JERSEY
STARTING WEIGHT: 255
WEIGHT NOW: 153



GO PUBLIC

In 2010, Jennifer Roe lost 66 pounds by dieting but hit a plateau at 190. When she decided to set goals outside of her comfort zone, the nonrunner signed up for a half-marathon and began blogging about her training. “I knew nothing about running,” she says. “It was almost like I was telling people I’d decided to go to the moon.” Even with fewer than 10 followers, she felt obligated to keep them up to date, and not let them down. So when she finally ran three minutes without walking, she posted: “I loved it, I felt empowered.” And when she ran her first mile, “I cried like I had just run the Boston Marathon.” On good days, her followers’ encouragement fueled her. On bad days, she’d review her blog to remind herself how far she’d come. Soon, she started following other blogs, like Foster’s runsforcookies.com, where she found diet, training, and gear advice and—most important—a community that defied her stereotype of runners

as “sleek gazelles.” Says Roe, “I realized there were a lot of people like me. I didn’t feel so alone.” When she reached her goal weight in January 2011, she had 50 followers to thank—today, she’s got almost 400.

THE TAKEAWAY

Tell the truth When using social media, keep it real. If she quit early on a run or fell off her diet, Roe’s followers often confessed they’d been there, too, and helped her get back on track. “The crappy stuff

always gets the most response,” says Roe. “People can relate.” **Write often** The more you post, the more invested your followers become in your journey, and the more likely they’ll stick with you. Roe blogs twice weekly. Foster, whose blog boasts 7,000 subscribers, posts almost daily.

Make a connection Respond in some way to every comment. It shows respect for your followers, says Foster. Note which of them blog, and follow them. Doing so just might widen your own support network.



SOCIAL LIGHT

Group weight-loss interventions provide accountability, and it’s easier to find a group with social media, says Gabrielle Turner-McGrievy, Ph.D., a University of South Carolina researcher who studies tech tools for weight loss. In one study, she found people who were the most active on Twitter lost the most weight, with every 10 tweets corresponding to an additional .5 percent of weight loss. She also found that people who track their eating habits with an online app lost more weight. Combining group accountability with tracking can be a potent weight-loss tool. “People think, ‘I want a cookie,’” says Turner-McGrievy, “but they don’t want to write it down, particularly in a public forum, so they don’t eat it.”

GET CONNECTED

Find support for your weight-loss journey in these social spheres

SMARTPHONE APPS Track calories, find nutrition information, and record workouts with apps like Loselt, Fooducate, and Pact (all free; for iTunes and Android). One study found those using an app exercised more and ate 600 fewer calories daily. “Frequency of self-monitoring is related to weight-loss success. Apps make self-monitoring easier,” says Turner-McGrievy.

TWITTER If you’re shy about going public, Twitter gives you a voice without requiring your real name or your photo. Try it as a stepping-stone to something more revealing.

ALL IN ONE APP-WEB INTERFACE Sites like Sparkpeople.com and myfitnesspal.com combine self-monitoring (they integrate their apps into the Web site), social networking, and blogging in a single space. Good for social-sharing newbies—they’re one-stop shops and easy to use.



LOST 60 LBS.
ALLISON ROMANO

34, DATA ANALYST
 NAUGATUCK, CONNECTICUT

STARTING WEIGHT: 264
 PRE-PREGNANCY WEIGHT: 204

LOVE WHAT YOU EAT

"I once lived for two years on Cheez Doodles and Dinty Moore stew," laughs Allison Dederer Romano. It wasn't funny when, in 2010, she tried to book a helicopter flight in Hawaii for her anniversary and learned that she'd have to buy two seats because she weighed so much (240 pounds). Worried about what her heft could mean for the baby she wanted to have, she vowed to lose weight. She looked for alternative ways to make her favorite foods and began planning meals in advance. She also followed the Couch to 5-K plan online, and worked her way up to running 30 miles a week. Romano had dropped 60 pounds and says she was in the "best shape of my life" when she got pregnant, and credits her life change for a smooth pregnancy. At press time, she was at 31 weeks and had no signs of gestational diabetes (common among obese moms-to-be). She was also still run/walking five miles a week and looking forward to ramping it up postpartum. "I'm itching to get back out there."

THE TAKEAWAY

- ▶ **Change gradually** At first, cut no more than 300 calories a day. After two weeks, reduce again. For most people, a 500-calorie-per-day reduction (which should lead to at least one pound lost per week) is plenty, says Leslie Bonci, R.D., coauthor of *Run Your Butt Off*.
- ▶ **Divide and conquer** You need fat for flavor, carbs for energy, and protein to feel satiated. Divide your plate into 1/4 protein (a chicken breast or soy patty), 1/2 fruit and vegetables, and 1/4 grain (brown rice or quinoa); and twice a day, add a serving of healthy fat (olives, avocado, nuts, or oil-based dressing).
- ▶ **Run with baby** If you've been running for a few years, pregnancy shouldn't stop you; just scale back the volume and pace, says Bryan Heiderscheit, P.T., Ph.D., director of the Active Moms program at the University of Wisconsin Runners Clinic. In the first trimester, slow down; in the second, reduce volume by 25 to 50 percent.



PERFECT SUBS

Runner Allison Romano shares a few of her favorite imposter meals

MEAT LOVER'S PIZZA
THE FIX

Homemade pizza with reduced-fat mozzarella, Italian turkey sausage, and thin wheat crust

THE VERDICT

"Half the pizza, with a salad, made for a decadent dinner for about 600 calories."

ASIAN POTSTICKERS
THE FIX

Potsticker burgers made with ground turkey, garlic, ginger, sesame oil, plus a side of Asian slaw

THE VERDICT

"All the flavors of potstickers without the grease. Only 253 calories per serving."

POTATO SOUP
THE FIX

Zuppa Toscana soup with turnips (instead of potatoes), almond milk (instead of cream), and kale

THE VERDICT

"Feeds the comfort-food craving, with just 400 calories for a huge bowl."

LASAGNA
THE FIX

Lasagna-stuffed spaghetti squash (in place of pasta) with ground turkey, low-fat ricotta, and low-fat mozzarella

THE VERDICT

"I'm very full after eating half a squash, and don't feel bloated and weighed down like I would after a typical pasta meal."

Credit by DUMMY NAME; Credit by DUMMY NAME

LOST 35 LBS. JOHN HULSEY

46, OPERATIONS MANAGER
SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

STARTING WEIGHT: 225
WEIGHT NOW: 190

PAY IT FORWARD

During his first marathon after dropping nearly 40 pounds, John Hulsey hit a wall. It was mile 22 of the 2011 Marine Corps Marathon, and self-doubt set in. "I was afraid I was going to get swept; this was going to be one more thing I started and didn't finish," says Hulsey, a U.S. marine. A friend helped coach him through it. Hulsey has since run six marathons and 20 half-marathons, and has devoted himself to helping others cross the finish line. For followers of his blog, Runner 12 (named after his place in the Fat to Finish Line relay), he is both virtual coach and cheerleader. In a scene from the upcoming documentary, Hulsey helps pull teammate Jennifer Roe out of her own dark, self-defeating place. He believes having people around who look up to him has helped him avoid old habits. "Good or bad, you're going to influence people every day. Why not do it consciously and helpfully? Act as if you matter."

THE TAKEAWAY

Lend a hand People who volunteer five hours per month report greater self-esteem and less susceptibility to addictive behavior like binge eating, says psychologist Maria Pagano, Ph.D., an associate professor at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. "Helping people puts your problems in perspective."

Find kindred spirits Volunteers get the most health benefit when they help someone struggling with similar issues, says Pagano. "When you help a fellow sufferer, it gives you fresh recall of what it was like and why you don't want to go back there." Consider becoming a mentor or leading a discussion at a local weight-loss support group.

Start now No need to wait until you've reached your goal weight or run your dream race to pay it forward. "If you've learned how to break the inertia and run a mile a day, you have something to teach," says Pagano. Lead local group runs, or volunteer at races. [www](#)



ROUTINE MATTERS

Here's how more than 10,000 people have maintained an average 66-pound weight loss for more than 5.5 years*

78%
eat breakfast every day

75%
step on the scale
once a week

62%
watch fewer than 10
hours of TV a week

**On average, exercise
one hour per day**

*Reports a survey by the National Weight Control Registry, led by Jim Hill, Ph.D., of the University of Colorado



To see before and after shots of Team Fat to Finish Line team members, and to watch a trailer of the documentary, get this issue's enhanced iPad edition.

GO, TEAM!

The other six members of Team Fat to Finish Line share the tips that helped them shed the weight

ANDREA BLACK

37, paralegal, Lenexa, Kansas
Weight loss: 133 lbs.
(from 288 to 155)
"Make weight loss about changing your lifestyle, not just your weight."

LINDA KUIL

42, part-time photographer/mom, Shirley, New York
Weight loss: 64 lbs.
(from 229 to 165)
"Don't eat in the three to four hours before bedtime. That's when a lot of bingeing happens."

MEREDITH RODRIGUEZ

39, credit analyst, Mesa, Arizona
Weight loss: 101 lbs.
(from 256 to 155)
"Never give up. It took me more than five years to take off all of my weight."

LEALAH SHAHIN

28, financial administrative programs officer, Oklahoma City
Weight loss: 143 lbs.
(from 280 to 137)
"Run first thing in the morning. It gives you less time to make excuses for why you can't fit it in."

JEN SMALL

40, triathlete/coach/mom, Biddeford, Maine
Weight loss: 122 lbs.
(from 262 to 140)
"It's not about being perfect; it's about being consistent."

CARLY YORK

31, IT professional, Beavercreek, Ohio
Weight loss: 118 lbs.
(from 349 to 231)
"You're never too big to get started running. I ran my first 5-K at 330 pounds and didn't walk at all. It can be done."