

The Biggest Loser Loses

The camera fades in, the theme song begins (I know you're hurting, feels like you're learning...). Images of huge people in pain and suffering plaster the screen. The shot moves to yelling personal trainers and then contestants standing on the scales triumphantly pumping a fist in the air. I quickly turn the television off.

The Biggest Loser has a cult following in Australia and is a multimillion marketing and now diet food range supplier. I have several issues with this show:

1. The amount of weight that contestants lose each weekly weigh in is astronomical. One of the competitors on the current season lost 14.7 kg in one week, equivalent to 13% of his body weight.
2. The training intensity and volume that contestants do day to day is frightening and not best practice.
3. Despite this show - obesity and running marathons are not well matched.

At best I hope that this show motivates over-weight people to take action to improve their health. At worst it will provide unrealistic expectations and a dangerous game.



Safe weight loss is 0.5-1.0 kg/wk. If it comes off fast, it's highly likely that it will come back on just as fast. While many of the competitors seem to make permanent lifestyle changes, some don't. American season 1 winner Ryan Benson regained nearly all the weight he lost on the show. For the first few months, staying active was easy, but then he got a new job that was more demanding, and his wife gave birth to twin girls. "I lost the focus I had gained on the show," he said. Erik Chopin in US season 3 went from 407 pounds to 193. He soon ballooned back to 368 pounds (167 kg) after the show.

It's like the tortoise and the hare race – slow and steady wins the race. Please remember that the contestants in the show are effectively training full-time like professional athletes. They are not required to juggle jobs, family, traffic jams, PTA meetings, or any other of life's events that make it difficult to commit to a lifestyle change.

You don't need to train with the volume or the extreme intensity shown on TV to get great weight loss results. In fact, most people simply don't have the time and don't enjoy working that hard. If you don't enjoy it, you won't stick to it - unless of course you're paid to be on TV. Committing to 3-4 blocks of 30 minutes per week will give you great results and allow you to live a life. This must be accompanied with changes in your diet.

Running a marathon when you are untrained will cause a significant amount of damage to your body. If you're untrained and obese – expect multiple injuries that you'll carry for a long time. Running requires a high degree of strength. If your knees and back hurt after going for a walk then running isn't a form of exercise that you're ready for. Resistance training and low impact exercise such as cycling and swimming would be better options. Many clients that I've worked with need significant amounts of strengthening work before they can start a walking programme, let alone a running programme.

The Biggest Loser is entertainment and for some it's inspiration. I struggle to see it as education. When you're approaching your own programme please be progressive and realistic with your training.