

The Game On! Diet

Kick Your Friend's Butt While Shrinking Your Own

Krista Vernoff and Az Ferguson

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For Kimberly Skeens, who helped me go from there to here.
And for Kevin and Coco, who make here the happiest place on earth.

—*Krista*

For my mother, Pam Ferguson, my rock,
whose love makes me feel like a giant.

For my father, Michael; one could not ask for a greater mentor.

And for my sister Jasmin, who has always celebrated my life even when I,
being the naughty brother, forgot to celebrate hers.

—*Az*

It is a happy talent to know how to play.

—*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

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Foreword

This is not really a diet book. I hate diets. Everyone I know hates diets. Diets are stupid and hard and not fun, and worse than that, they rarely work. I can only pull my theory on why they don't work from my own experience, which is that they suck and are stupid and not fun. But more than that, if you have any rebellious spirit in you whatsoever, you're gonna rebel against the deprivation of a diet. And whether you rebel at the beginning, the middle, or the end of the diet, the results will be the same: you'll eat like crazy and refuse to move your butt an inch off the couch for weeks. You'll undo any good you may have done, and, if you're like me, you'll end up fatter, flabbier, unhappier, and with lower self-esteem than you had when you started.

Maybe you're not like me; maybe you're like my coauthor, Az, and you thrive on restraint and restriction and deprivation. And if so, yay you, and we can still be friends. (I only hate Az and resent his discipline, like, fourteen percent of the time.) My point is, this book is not going to offer you any fads, any extremes, any swanky new science that says if you eat only protein, or only citrus, or only peanut butter, or only watermelon (all diets I've tried at some point, by the way) you will drop seven sizes in two days. (If that's what you're looking for, we can't help you. Good luck, God bless, return this book now and get your money back. We'll miss you.)

This book isn't even so much about encouraging weight loss as it is about encouraging health and an attitude that will allow you to accomplish healthy weight loss if that's your goal, or toning up if that's your goal, or getting up off your couch for the first time in three years if that's your goal. Truly, I think you're great just the way you are. But if you're not feeling so great, I think the super-fun game you're about to play will help.

I should note here that I am not anything resembling a doctor (though I write some on TV) and neither is Az. Az is really into fitness and we are friends and we played a game together and it made us healthier and now we want to share it with you. Any health advice we offer in this book is coming from copious research and conversations we had with people who are much better educated than we are in the fields of medicine and health (and we have credited those people throughout the book).

Az invented this game to help me lose weight and feel better about myself. Isn't he a good friend? I had a baby a while back (the world's most amazing baby) and while I was pregnant I gained fifty pounds. Fifty. 5-0. 'Cause that's what happens when you're nauseated from the time you wake up until the time you go to sleep and the only thing that staves off the nausea is eating something bready every 15 minutes. And like I mentioned, I got the world's most amazing kid out of it and I don't regret any of it, so there. BUT. Four months after giving birth I was still carrying twenty-four of those extra pounds—which maybe wouldn't have bothered me so much except that when I got pregnant, I was already twenty pounds heavier than I'd ever been.

So, I was bigger than is physically comfortable for me. I had nothing in the closet that fit, which might have been okay if I was still steadily losing weight, but I wasn't. In the prior two months, I had lost only two pounds. I figured at the rate of a quarter pound a week, it would take me, like, forty years to lose that weight. (Math: not my thing.) My maternity clothes were too big, everything else was too small, and the extra weight put me in a size that required me to shop in specialty stores, which was n

entirely okay with me.

~~And so I said to Az one day, “Wanna help me lose some weight, oh fitness-guru friend of mine? And he said sure, and he came over and taught me about healthy meals, and he taught me a kick-ass interval training thing on the stationary bike, and I was all grateful and motivated, ’cause Az is Australian? And he has that lilting accent? Where everything ends in a question? And it’s really quite motivating somehow? But then Az left and I had a script to write and I sat back down with my laptop and my donut and that was pretty much that. (Fine. I have exaggerated slightly. I actually did what he said in a very half-assed way for the next three months and during that time I lost four, maybe five pounds.)~~

Now, Az is one of those people who, if you set him a task, he will accomplish it or die trying. And I think it got his goat that I asked for his help and then didn’t really take his advice. But what’s fascinating about Az is that he didn’t judge me for not trying hard enough; he judged himself for not having found a way to motivate me. So he sent me an e-mail three months later proposing a game: a dieting game. A kick-ass, competitive, team sport sort of dieting game that we would play with our friends.

Now, I am all sorts of competitive. And if you give me someone to compete against? And a team to answer to? It changes *everything*. The meal plan was the same one Az had given me months before. The exercise plan was the same. But everything was different, ’cause now it wasn’t about fitting back into my clothes. It was about kicking someone’s ass, and maybe fitting back into my clothes as a bonus. And that made *all the difference in the world*.

I suddenly found that it actually *was* possible to find 20 minutes a day to exercise. And on days when I felt like it wasn’t possible, all it took was some nagging from my teammates to motivate me. (Especially ’cause we did a girls’ team against a boys’ team and we really, really wanted to kick some boy butt. And I should mention here that the game is judged on *points won*, not on *weight lost*, which makes a battle of the sexes not only possible and fair but raucously fun.)

On more than one occasion, I came home from a ten-hour work day, put the baby to bed, ate dinner, and watched TV with my husband, and then, at midnight, realized I hadn’t exercised, which meant losing serious points for myself and for my team, which meant that there was no way I was going to bed without exercising first. A working mom—a working *writer*—exercising at midnight? I think this may be previously unheard of in the history of the world.

In the past, when faced with the same situation, motivated only by the notion of burning some extra calories and maybe upping my metabolism a little, no way was I getting on the bike at midnight. But motivated by my desire to win a game? By my desire to beat my husband (who was on the opposing team)? By a fear of pissing off my teammates and having to hear about it the next day? I got on the freakin’ bike.

Night after night after night, I got on the bike. Meal after meal after meal, I stuck to Az’s simple plan (which, by the way, never left me feeling hungry or deprived). And four weeks after the game started I was back in my pre-pregnancy clothes. And two weeks after that, they actually fit. And two weeks later, they were loose. Over that initial nine-week game, I lost more than fifteen pounds.

And the thing is, if you like games, this one is a stupid amount of fun. I *loved* taunting my husband when he would lose points for snacking. I *loved* tallying my points at the end of the day and singing my sister Sydni’s loser song to him as he went to sleep. (“Hey! Hey! Hey, hey, hey, hey—loser, loser, loser, you are a loser...”)



Before



During



After

Krista Vernoff, *40 pounds lost*

But here's the craziest thing: We ended our game on December 20. (The boys' team won, by the way, which I am still not over. Stupid boys.) So after December 20 comes Christmas. And over Christmas we gain weight, right? Except I didn't. What's weirder? I lost three pounds from December 20 to December 31. Without trying. Without even thinking about it. Why? I think it's because, in playing the game, I learned something about food and health and the way my body works. More important, I got in the *habit* of doing things a little differently. So this game is really about helping you change your habits for the better. We just distract you with all the fun. (And by the way, to date, I have lost forty pounds playing the game and I feel better than I have in years.)

All right, that's it. That's my sales pitch. And if you don't want to play, that's cool. No judgment here; I'm sure your life is perfectly happy. But then, I'm kinda laid back about these things. So, for good measure, here's a word from the man himself. Don't forget to read it with that Australian lilt...

••• A Note from Az •••

Our health is the key to taking our lives to the next level. It is fundamental to everything we do, to who we are right now and who we can be in the future. Without our health nothing is possible, and so it goes that with only a portion of our health in place, only a portion of what we're capable of is possible.

Optimum health is actually our natural state of being; our bodies naturally gravitate to what they need. Think of a baby in her first year of life. She eats on a regular basis, lots of small meals. She gets most of her meals from fluids, which keep her fully hydrated. She sleeps for large portions of the day to aid her growth and recovery. And when she wakes, she's raring to go!

So what gets in the way of this natural process? We do. We have developed so many belief systems around our health and our bodies and food and exercise and what's right and what's wrong and what's possible. We have so many associations and so much negative conditioning that we end up either extremely confused or just plain resigned to suffer. So we do the bare minimum for our

health until we're sick or defeated or both. Just a few years ago, this was true for me. My spine was in such a terrible, painful condition that I'd been advised I needed surgery by three separate doctors. In fact, I had the surgery scheduled. I was terrified by the idea of scalpels slicing into my spine. And then I considered the possibility that my own body, given its fullest opportunity, had the potential to heal itself. I canceled the surgery, and I embarked on building the muscles in my back to better support my spine. Now, that's a bit of an oversimplification of the intense process I took on, but the fact is I didn't have the surgery and just a few months ago, I qualified for the Boston Marathon by completing a marathon in just over three hours. Today, aside from some occasional tightness that I treat with yoga, I am pain free.

I fully committed to my health—to giving it my all—and I changed the course of my life. Now I want to help you change the course of yours.

Playing this game, you'll learn so much about not just your health but also your true self—and you'll have an absolute cracker of a time doing it! No matter what level you're at, Olympic athlete or couch potato, playing the game will take you closer to your optimum health. Oh, and I have to warn you. There is a huge responsibility that goes with the amount of energy and well-being you'll have at the end of this four weeks: You'll no longer have an excuse for not living the life of your dreams! Actually you'll probably have to dream bigger to burn off all the excess energy you'll have!

I hope you play.

I hope you win!

But win or lose, at the end of four weeks, you'll be closer to fulfilling your true potential on this earth—and it doesn't get better than that.

GAME ON PEOPLE, GAME ON!!!

HOW TO PLAY THE GAME: An Overview

(Or, I'm Really Too Lazy to Read This Whole Book, Plus, I'm So Out of Shape That Turning Pages Kinda Hurts.)

You will never win if you never begin.

—*Helen Rowland*

So, you probably are gonna have to read a few more chapters to get the hang of this thing. But as with any game, there are some basic rules of play, which we will share with you now. Me, I tend to be that person who, when I get a new board game, I accidentally throw out the rules with the plastic wrapping and then I just have to make crap up. And so I have learned the hard way that games are usually more fun when played by the *actual* rules than when played by the rules I create in my warped little brain. With that understanding, here are the rules as created in Az's warped little brain...

The object of the game: To score as many points as possible.

At the end of the game, *the team with the most points wins.*

Setting Up Your Game

Form two teams or more.

Two players or more per team is ideal.

Teams need not be of equal size (e.g., a team of three can play a team of four).

Each team must designate a Scorekeeper.

Pick a Prize

Your team and the opposing team must agree on a prize to be awarded to the winning team at the end of the game. The prize can be material (tickets to a show) or service-oriented (driving the carpool for a month, doing the winners' laundry for a month). The prize must be significant (it should hurt a little to lose).

Choose a Start Date

All team members must agree on a start date. Because each week allows for a day off and a meal off, all holidays can be fully celebrated and impending holidays should not be prohibitive to starting the game.

How to Play

The game is played for four consecutive weeks.

Each player must use the enclosed score sheet to tally his/her total points per week. Each week, the point tallies must be reported to the team's scorekeeper. The scorekeeping is based on an honor system—*integrity is essential.*

Keeping Score

A perfect day is worth 100 points. A perfect day includes:

- 30 Meal Points: You earn 6 points per meal for eating five fully sanctioned meals. No snacks between meals.
- 20 Exercise Points: You earn your exercise points by doing some form of exercise for 20 minutes per day.
- 10 Water Points: You earn your water points by drinking three liters of water per day.
- 15 Sleep Points: You earn your sleep points by sleeping for a minimum of seven hours a night.
- 20 Transformation Points: You earn 10 points a day for practicing one healthy new habit and another 10 points a day for eliminating one unhealthy old habit.
- 5 Communication Points: You earn your communication points by being in contact with at least one teammate and at least one opponent each day. (Phone calls, e-mails, and text messages count.)

Exceptions

Each week, each player gets one meal off in addition to one day off. The meal off and day off may be taken at any time during a given week. They may *not* be saved and carried over into later weeks.

Your day off includes a respite from all rules. This respite may be spread throughout the week (i.e., Monday can be your water day off; Tuesday can be your habits day off; Wednesday can be your sleep day off, etc; or you can take one whole day off from everything).

Bonus Points

You can also earn a 10-point bonus each week by turning in your scores to your team's scorekeeper by a designated time (e.g., noon on Monday).

In addition, each week, a bonus equaling 20 percent of your points earned for the week is awarded for losing 1 percent of your body weight. (Note: If weight loss is not a goal for you, you must set yourself a fitness goal for which you will win your bonus points and inform your teammates and opponents in advance of beginning the game.)

Penalties

There is a 10-point Snacking Penalty for snacking between meals.

There is a 20-point Collusion Penalty. If any player suggests to any other player a compromise of integrity, e.g., saying to an opponent, "If I eat a snack and *you* eat a snack, then we both lose points and it all balances out!" the player suggesting the compromise loses 20 points.

There is a 25-point *per portion* Alcohol Penalty. A portion equals any amount of alcohol up to 6 ounces of wine, 12 ounces of beer, or 1.5 ounces of hard liquor. One portion of alcohol may be

consumed with the meal off without penalty. Alcohol may be consumed freely on the day off.

~~If during any week of play a player fails to earn their weight-loss/fitness bonus, that player loses the privilege of alcohol on the day off for the rest of the game.~~

Winning the Game

At the end of each week, each player turns in their score to the scorekeeper.

A maximum-score week equals seven 100-point days + the 20 percent weight-loss/fitness bonus + the 10-point scorekeeping bonus.

$$700 + 140 = 840 + 10\text{-point scorekeeping bonus} = 850$$

A score of 850 points is the (hard to earn!) maximum points for each week. At the end of each week, the scorekeeper tallies the total points for the team. The total score for the team is then divided by the number of players on the team.

Example:

Team A has three players. During Week 1, Player 1 earns 750 points.

Player 2 earns 850 points. Player 3 earns 780 points.

$$750 + 850 + 780 = 2380$$

2380 is then divided by 3 for a team score of 793 points.

Team B has 2 players. Player 1 earns 685 points. Player 2 earns 750 points.

$$685 + 750 = 1435$$

1435 is then divided by 2 for a team score of 717.5.

So at the end of Week 1, Team A is in the lead!

At the end of four weeks, each team's scorekeeper tallies points for the game.

Example:

Team A	Team B
Week 1: 793 points	Week 1: 717.5 points
Week 2: 760 points	Week 2: 845 points
Week 3: 840 points	Week 3: 810 points
Week 4: 800 points	Week 4: 795 points
Total: 3193 points	Total: 3167.5 points

So at the end of the entire game, Team A has won.

Tie-Breakers

In the unlikely case of a tie, the game goes to the team with the highest number of 100-point days.

Results

As a result of the game, your clothes will be looser, your energy will be higher, and you will be losing a minimum of 1 percent of your body weight per week. If any of these things are not true for you after any week of play, please see Chapter 16, Troubleshooting.

Okay, those are the rules. And playing is even easier than it looks. And way more fun. And though very few calories are burned by turning pages, there's a lot of great information in the ensuing chapters. So—after you call all your friends and challenge them to a game—read on. 'Cause then you'll be sure to win. Especially if you, like, withhold a whole bunch of information from your friends. That would be hilarious. You should be all, “No, I swear, you're supposed to eat chocolate cake four times a day!” Hee. Evil. Forget it. Just win fair and square. You can do it. I believe in you.

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