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## Losing it: Dateline ultimate diet challenge

**Six alumni pursue different diets before High School reunion**

**By John Larson**  
 NBC News  
 updated 3:42 p.m. CT, Mon., Jan. 5, 2004

If you made a New Year's resolution to lose weight and already you've blown it, here is some inspiration to help get you back on track. A year ago, we met six members of the class of 1978, all wanting to shed pounds before their 25th high school reunion this past fall. We offered to help them. Each was given a radically different weight loss plan. Which diet was most effective? Which classmate had the most heads turning at the big reunion? Dateline went along to find out.

Think back 25 years. Can you remember your high school fight song? These folks can. Sort of, so their fight song is a little rusty. But high school is very much on their minds these days. Their 25th class reunion is just ten months away.

And that got us thinking. Since a 25th high school reunion is such a rite of passage, a time many might worry how they measure up -- who's done well, who hasn't, who looks great, who doesn't -- we wondered if there was anyone approaching their 25th who might want to lose a few pounds.

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**'Before' the diets**

These six members of the class of '78 wanted to shed some pounds before their big high school reunion last fall. Which classmate, and which diet, will be most successful? Watch this preview, then read the full story below.

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So we sent a letter to the class of 1978 at Quincy High School in Massachusetts, a blue collar suburb of Boston, looking for volunteers. They had to have at least 30 pounds to lose, and be willing to let Dateline follow their ups and downs of weight loss all the way to their reunion. For many of them, it would turn out to be, one of the greatest challenges of their lives.

Our volunteers could pick one of six weight loss methods -- from Atkins, Weight Watchers or SlimFast to intense exercise, having your own famous weight loss guru -- even hypnosis. The idea was to see how well the competing diets work and who can lose the most.

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six volunteers: one of the toughest guys on the Quincy football team; former high school class secretary; a soft spoken ladies man who almost everyone liked; the homecoming queen; and perhaps the finest athlete Quincy high ever had, everyone knew him as Gio.

Five were all popular back in high school. But not our sixth. Eleanor Talbot was one of the brainier girls, president of the math club. She has never known what's it's like to be thin and she's taken the brunt of cruel jokes even by one of our dieters. But now everyone is in the same boat -- middle aged and overweight.

For the Dateline Diet Challenge, class secretary, Lynn Frank chose to lose weight with what we call intense exercise. Although she's never

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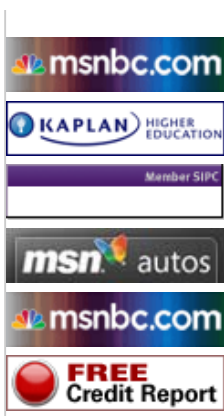
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done anything athletic in her life, she agreed to train for a marathon, that's right, the Maui Marathon nine months down the road. she's the mother of seven children. Four girls, three boys. seven good reasons she believes for her to try something totally outside her comfort zone.

**Lynn:** "I just see something going on in kids today, there's just such a lack of motivation and then I think about myself, I do the same thing day in and day out, I'm never challenged I've got it down to a science you know, I'm as complacent as they are."

FACT FILE		<b>'Dateline NBC' Diet Challenge</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weight Watchers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slim Fast</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Atkins diet</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extreme exercise</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hypnotism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jorge Cruise weight-loss program</li> </ul>	
<p>Extreme exercise programs are modeled after military boot camps and involve long, often grueling workouts to lose weight and achieve optimum fitness levels. Evolution Sports Science, a performance training company in Massachusetts, offers various extreme exercise programs for interested clients, many of whom work in high-pressure professional careers. ESS aims to develop their clients' physical and mental abilities using personalized plans, coaches, fitness testing and training. Lynn's diet was devised by nutritionist and exercise physiologist Felicia Stoler, based on USDA food pyramid diet.</p>		

Sources: Weight Watchers Inc., Slim Fast, The Atkins Center, Evolution Sports Science, A Better You Hypnosis Center, Jorge Cruise Inc. [Print this](#)

Back in high school, "Gio" was voted most popular and was a three-sport superstar. He even tried out for the New York Giants. He stayed in shape working construction and exercising until two years ago when a back injury cost him his job and all but immobilized him.

**Gio:** "It's been terrible. To have your kids come home and see you on the couch and not provide for your family is just-- I can't take it no more."

To kill time while waiting for approval for surgery, Gio started eating. To his family's horror he ballooned up to 250. So the high school's greatest athlete faces his 25 reunion unemployed, injured and overweight. For our diet challenge, Gio picked the Slimmest diet and its six daily eating occasions that include low fat food, shakes, snack and meal bars.

Along with Gio, Kathy Wynters was voted most popular back in high school, and she was homecoming queen but Kathy says she's almost never felt comfortable with her weight.

**John Larson:** "You weren't thin when you were Homecoming Queen?"

**Kathy:** "No."

Kathy is an active mother of two, works part time and has a busy social life. She's so high powered her husband has a nickname for her: the force.

**Larson:** "What is it, even for The Force, that's so hard about this weight thing?"

**Kathy:** "It's been the lowest priority. It's been-- everything else came first."

In our diet challenge, Kathy chose Weight Watchers, where food is given a point value based on its calorie fat and fiber content. The goal is to stay within your daily point range and attend meetings. and this year, mom comes first.

Next, the ladies man back in high school: Marc Merlis. When Marc's wife saw Dateline's letter she quickly picked up the phone and turned in her husband. And for good reason. His wife is worried. Marc is a baker by trade with a weakness for food. His weight is serious problem. His father died of heart disease at 50 and now Marc's cholesterol and blood pressure are dangerously high. So Marc has agreed to let a hypnotherapist help him focus on his weight and more importantly, his health.

**Marc:** "I remember how I felt when my father died. I was 20, you know? I would hate to have my kids go through that."

The same goes for math whiz Eleanor Talbot. Married with no children, Eleanor is a meteorologist who also lost her father to heart disease at 50.

**Eleanor:** "We're getting to that point in our lives that we're where our parents were, and when we lost our parents. And it's a scary thing."



Dateline NBC

"After" the diets. Do you recognize them?

We offered Eleanor a chance to work one on one with a nationally recognized weight loss coach, Jorge Cruise, author of the best seller "Eight Minutes in the Morning" and "Real Shapes Real Sizes." With Jorge, Eleanor hopes she'll gain insight into why she's so heavy and how she can turn

things around.

**Larson:** "And you think you gotta down deep to find an answer to this?"

**Eleanor:** "Yes, I do, I really do."

Finally our football tough guy, Rick Burnes. Under Rick's yearbook picture it says, "Hey you want your face busted?" Rick chose the

popular high fat, low carbohydrate Atkins diet. He says it's perfect for him.

Rick admits he'll have to climb out of a rut. After 18 years of working odd hour shifts at the post office, he'll have to give up one of his true loves: beer. And he has quite a habit.

**Rick:** "I don't know, fourteen, 15, 16, something like that a day."

**Larson:** "In a day? Annheiser Busch stock just dropped."

In the dead of winter, the Dateline Diet Challenge began. First step, weigh in. Everyone was game - except one, the homecoming queen.

First up, weighing in at 174 pounds, former class secretary Lynn Frank. Her goal is to drop about 35 pounds with intense exercise. To make sure it was safe for an overweight woman to train for a marathon, we asked Jeff Staub, one of the premier endurance trainers in Boston, to evaluate Lynn and oversee her training. He gave her a schedule of aerobic exercise, strength training and running. And Lynn put herself on a diet, 1300 calories a day. One month in she could feel her body changing, but she was down only six pounds.

So Lynn contacted a nutritionist for advice. She was told that she was taking in fewer calories than her body needed to function. By eating so little, Lynn was telling her body to stop burning fat and store it for energy, a common dieters mistake. So the nutritionist increased Lynn's calories to 1600 a day and put her on the USDA food pyramid diet. It worked. one month later Lynn had reduced her body fat by 12 percent, added muscle and dropped another eight pounds.

But after five months of heavy exercise, the running had become sheer torture. And then an apparent catastrophe --a knee injury. Would it bring her running to a stop?

Next up, weighing in at 230 pounds, is the gifted athlete, Mark Giordani. He also wants to lose 35 pounds by the reunion. Initially, Gio took to the Slimfast plan and mixed it with light exercise, but after a few weeks he was complaining of hunger all the time. and nothing seemed to satisfy him. In one month, Gio lost only five pounds and was ready to hang it up.

Slimfast advised Gio to that given his size he wasn't eating enough, and one month later when we caught up with him on vacation in Florida, he was doing better. And it helped. Gio was now down 10 pounds. But that was about the only good news. Back at home, with still no word on his back surgery, by month four, he had had it.

Finally in May, five months into our challenge Gio was approved for a disc fusion to repair two shattered vertebrae in his back. Would this surgery put his life and diet back on track?

FACT FILE	Diet Diaries
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mark Giordani - Slimfast Diet</li> <li>• Rick Burnes - Atkins Diet</li> <li>• Eleanor Talbot - Jorge Cruise</li> <li>• <b>Marc Merlis - Hypnotist and exercise</b></li> <li>• Lynn Frank - Marathon training</li> <li>• Kathy Wynters - Weight Watchers</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Marc Merlis - Hypnotist and exercise</b></p> <p><b>Goal:</b> 50 pounds</p> <p><b>Lost:</b> 35 pounds</p> <p><b>Note:</b> Eating times are such because Marc gets to work before dawn. It is hard to be creative and have something prepared at 4am, so he stays the same every day, as with 7:30am. His advice to all who are interested, is that the first bit of food to be consumed should be something that is already prepared and ready to take on the go. At 3pm Marc is always on the go, so those meals stay the same.</p> <p><b>Day one</b></p> <p>4am: Nutrigrain bar, banana and water</p>
	<a href="#">Print this</a>

Next is the homecoming queen. She'd love to take off 40 pounds. The well established 41-year program says lose weight slowly, one to two pounds a week. So Kathy's goal is right on target. The first week, Kathy ate just the minimum of points, 20, and lost five pounds, but still wasn't happy. Two weeks later we found her running the school fundraiser -- and starving again, saving up a day's worth points.

**Kathy:** "So I still have 20 points left, so I can still have four glasses of wine, five glasses of wine. Alright!"

But points are points. And something was working. After one month, peeling off as much as possible. Kathy's lost 10 pounds. And look what fits, her old cheerleading jacket! At her three month weigh in, there was more success. She was down 17 pounds, and seeing results in the strangest places.

**Kathy:** "I went down a shoe size! Did I tell you that?"

But that same day, she left for Disneyland. It turned out to be a dieter's disaster.

**Kathy:** "I had ice cream and I had chocolate and candy apples and all those things."

It would be the beginning of a frustrating stretch.

Next, the ladies man back in high school, Marc Merlis tips the scales at 245. His task is even greater, to lose 50 pounds. During his first hour-long session with Boston hypnotherapist Tom Nicoli, he received suggestions on healthy eating and lifestyle. The session left Marc reeling.

**Marc:** "And the strangest thing, I see this big belly (laughs) the belly button was a big red hole with fire coming out of it. "

Don laugh. Suddenly Marc started exercising and eating well. Three weeks later the hypnotist told Marc everything he'd learned will be reinforced by the color red.

**Tom Nicoli:** "Brake lights, tail lights, lipstick, fingernail polish, clothing. Anytime you see the color red consciously or unconsciously."

Two months in, the man who originally couldn't get into his varsity jacket, now can't be held back. Marc was steadily working with a fitness trainer and he was religiously listening to his tapes of his hypnotist. After three months under hypnosis, his wife had a nickname for him. Incredibly, "droopy drawers" had lost the most so far, a staggering 40 pounds.

That's when droopy's wife got in on the action. She went to the hypnotist to quit smoking. And guess what? Smoke free, fat free. Five months in, for the Merlis's things couldn't be better. And at their son's bar mitzvah this May, lifting Marc was a piece of cake.

Next at 300 pounds, math whiz Eleanor Talbot. Her goal, the toughest math problem she's ever faced, was to subtract 70 pounds by the reunion. Her weight loss coach Jorge Cruise believes eight minutes of daily strength training is crucial for weight loss, but at the heart of his coaching is emotional eating. Cruise conducts weekly conference calls with overweight clients where he encourages them to turn to each other, instead of food to cope with life's problems.

And Cruise also says lose weight slowly, two pounds a week. With 36 weeks to go, Eleanor should lose 72 pounds. One month in, she's on her way, down 13 pounds.

But after three months, Jorge felt Eleanor needed more, so Dateline arranged a weekend retreat to help Eleanor go deeper. It was emotional journey to say the least. The idea is to help her release some of the emotional pain she's held onto. And Jorge plants what he calls "power thoughts," to help her makes changes. It was another breakthrough.

With Jorge's help and her e-mail buddies, after four months, Eleanor had lost 30 pounds.

Finally at 328 pounds, tough guy, Rick Burnes. His goal is the most ambitious of all, to lose 100 pounds by the reunion on the Atkins diet. During the first two week induction phase, eating almost all protein and fat, Rick was in heaven. And he dropped a fast 13 pounds, but quickly ran into trouble.

Rick developed a painful case of gout, a condition he'd had before, that he suspected was a result of the diet. Dateline put Rick in touch with a top Atkins researcher who recommended that he slow down his weight loss. And Atkins fine tuned his diet by sending him "Atkins at home" meals. Combined with medication from his doctor, soon enough the

gout went away and the pounds kept falling off.

**At five months**

**Gio: 14 pounds**

**Kathy: 22 pounds**

**Lynn: 17 pounds**

**Marc: 39 pounds**

**Rick: 67 pounds**

**Eleanor: 30 pounds**

Everyone was right on target, but they were about to enter the dog days of summer. We kicked off the summer of the dateline diet challenge with a party. Our dieters came together for the first time in six months.

Gio, the host, was recovering from back surgery. But as it turned out, Marc Merlis, the ladies man, wanted to take care of something. When Eleanor said she'd been hurt, teased in high school, turns out, Marc had been one of the teasers.

And with that, once again, we weighed our dieters. Incredibly everyone was right on target. Collectively they'd dropped a boat load. And so the summer began.

Our mother of seven who'd never done anything athletic in her life ran in her first race, four miles. Her injured knee held up fine, but it made her realize she had another problem. She felt her cardio was still not in shape, so work she did. One month later, she'd built herself up and brought her weight down 27 pounds. By mid July, coaching basketball helped take Lynn's mind off a seemingly impossible task ahead. Her training schedule called for a long run, 15 miles. She started early, 5am to avoid the July heat.

If you think this run is too perhaps great a challenge you should know, Lynn is a devout Roman Catholic. If she is going to succeed, she believes it will be largely because of her faith. And she was determined to set an example for her children.

After three grueling hours, she accomplished something she'd never done before. But of course the marathon is almost double that.

For our injured athlete on Slimfast, 2003 will always be the summer of pain. For Gio, the slow recovery from his back operation was excruciating. For weeks, food was the last thing on his mind, but as he adjusted to the pain, his appetite came back. He even asked Slimfast to help him figure out how to lose weight when he could barely move. The representative tells him what's important is to make healthy choices and watch the portion size. Two months later Gio was not losing weight but he wasn't gaining either.

In July we caught up our homecoming queen at a charity golf tournament. She told us she was now working out six days a week, but

her diet was going about as well as her golf game. She'd hit a plateau, and despite a meeting with who told her, given all her exercise, she needed to eat more. But she still was losing weight at a snail's pace.

In late June, there was trouble in hypnosis paradise. It had been six months since Marc had seen the hypnotist. He'd blown off exercise, stopped listening to his tapes and now he was sneaking food and lying about it. By August he'd gained back 15 of the 40 pounds he'd lost. There was only one thing left to do: go back to the hypnotist, who had a lot to say. After a 10 minute tune-up, presto, Marc was back at the gym, listening to tapes and eating healthy again.

By July, our math whiz Eleanor was back for another one on one with her weight loss coach, it would be an eye opener. They went back to Eleanor's childhood, and her tough times at school. And how she was mocked for being overweight. And he asked her to become that young girl and voice how she felt. He offers her different positive messages and again it works. Eleanor continued her steady weight loss throughout the summer.

In late July we found Rick training for local roadrace. Since the beginning he'd been as dedicated to exercise as he had the diet. And he was at peace with himself.

**Rick:** "I've come to the conclusion that I've already succeeded, I've done probably as good as anybody expected and I know myself that I've done well."

Seven months in he remained a textbook Atkins dieter. A late night snack consisted of four double cheeseburgers, no bread, no ketchup.

**Rick:** "I hate to say it, but I'm enjoying saying it I really don't cheat too bad. What I do is I really count the carbs and I'll up the carbs on a particular day. "

Like he did on one weekend in August, upping his carbs from 20 grams to 70 to run the Falmouth Roadrace.

**Rick:** "I've been up since 3:00 this morning. so I'm too tired to warm up."

It's a scenic and hilly six mile race. And Rick would finish easily a race he never could have considered running in previous years.

**Andrea:** "I'm extremely proud of him. His energy's up, he looks 10 years younger, I think he looks wonderful. To me he looks like the man I married."

**Rick:** "Starting tomorrow, I'm going to go back to the 20 carbs."

And he was determined to keep going.

It was the home stretch for the dieters, one month to go, and Lynn had that little issue remaining of the Maui Marathon.

### **The home stretch**

In late September, with two weeks to go, Gio's back problems continued. The surgery didn't work. In the meantime, truth be told, he'd gained a couple pounds.

In September, homecoming queen Kathy was finally losing weight thanks to a new program: flex points. With flex points she can enjoy a few treats as long as she sticks to a fixed number of daily points.

By the end of the September, at her monthly book club meeting which they call "reading between the wines," she was so close to her goal, she was not about to waste her valuable food points on wine.

Marc was doing great, Eleanor was on a road that she hopes she will never get off, and Rick was playing rugby with 20 year olds.

And then there's our marathon lady Lynn Frank. When we met Lynn in January, she could barely run a mile at 174 pounds. When we caught up with her in Hawaii, she was a trim size 6 and a slim 140. Now all she had to do was run the marathon.

We wish we could tell you she made it with ease but when she showed up at the starting line at 5am, we learned she'd badly re-injured her knee just five days earlier. At the starting line though, she took off strong. Waiting at mile one, were her mom and her husband.

By dawn, about six miles in, she was even giving me a hard time. But she had no way of knowing just how tough the course would be. Perhaps the greatest challenge is this series of hills about halfway into the race. It's a little like running up and down and up and down the stairs of a 20 story building. The Maui hills stretching from mile eight to fifteen were like nothing she had trained for.

And soon enough the jokes were over. But it was the heat that was real killer, close to 90 degrees. Much hotter in stretches. Seasoned marathoners were dropping like flies. And perhaps the weight of all her expectations, for her kids, for the reunion, was too much. Because at mile 16, we found Lynn walking. Could she make it to the finish line? She still had 10 miles to go.

### **Reunion time**

October 2003, 10 months into the diet challenge and 25 years since they graduated high school, the night finally arrived. Right away, their classmates noticed how great our dieters looked.

Eleanor showed off her pants from the first interview. And the so-called ladies man was charming the ladies. Thanks to marketing skills of our

homecoming queen, Kathy had helped turn it into the largest reunion her class had ever had.

Everyone seemed to know about the Dateline Diet Challenge, and everybody wanted to know how much they'd lost. And that's exactly what we were here to find out. Earlier that day we sat down with our dieters. We'll weigh them all, but first we wanted to know, what had helped in their struggle to lose weight?

They all agreed, Dateline cameras gave them a big advantage over the average dieter. But our cameras aside, they all agreed any diet should include regular exercise. They also say drink plenty of water.

And they all believe there is real power in having a goal. their advice? Find a diet plan that works for you. And don't underestimate just how difficult real weight loss can be.

So who did the best? In truth they all did extremely well, but we thought we'd give awards for the fun of it. The final weigh in would be the moment of truth.

Coming in sixth place, our injured athlete on Slimfast, who battled pain all year but still lost 20 pounds. At 210 pounds, Gio fell 15 pounds short of his goal weight.

In fifth place, our ladies man under hypnosis ladies man Marc Merlis also tipped the scales at 210. His total loss was 35 pounds, yet 15 pounds short of his goal.

in fourth is our homecoming queen. Though Kathy refused to weigh in, confirmed Kathy had hit her goal, and dropped hard earned 40 pounds.

In third place, after 10 months with Jorge Cruise, Eleanor was just 10 pounds short of her goal, but had lost a truly impressive 60 pounds and plans to lose another 60.

As for our top two, hey, that's a judgment call. Nonetheless we're saying second place goes to our Atkins man and football tough guy, Rick Burnes who not only tackled losing 100 pounds by the reunion, he surpassed it. He slashed 16 inches of his waistline, and dropped a whopping 108 pounds.

Back at the reunion, we played a tape with the results of the diet challenge. And there was only one story for which the room fell silent. It was the story of our marathon lady, the woman who took on the biggest challenge of her life, for her kids, and relied on her faith to get her through. The Maui Marathon would turn out to be a grueling test, mile upon mile, hill after hill, all in 90 degree heat.

When we found Lynn walking at the 16 mile aid station, we were concerned. Lynn tried pressing on, pacing herself, toughing it out until mile 21. It was the furthest she had ever run. They say this is where

many runners have hit the wall.

When we got to the finish line, 5 hours into the race, when Lynn had hoped to finish, she was no where in sight. And we found ourselves wondering, did we really think a 43-year-old mother of seven who'd never really done anything athletic in her life could run a 26 mile race?

But for those who know her, there was never any doubt. In 10 months, Lynn Frank had gone from out of shape and overweight to official finisher of the Maui Marathon. Not only had she reached her goal of losing 35 pounds, she ran a marathon in five hours and 23 minutes. Lynn's incredible finish brought her class to its feet. And for that we think she deserves the title winner of the Dateline Diet Challenge.

Collectively they lost 300 pounds, so now the big question is, who will keep it off. We got a promise from all six that we can visit them again in a year, in the meantime, there's tomorrow's breakfast.

**Gio:** "I'm going to IHOP tomorrow, and I'm getting the whole left side of the menu."

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