



## After weight camp, the training continues with Internet diaries and counseling

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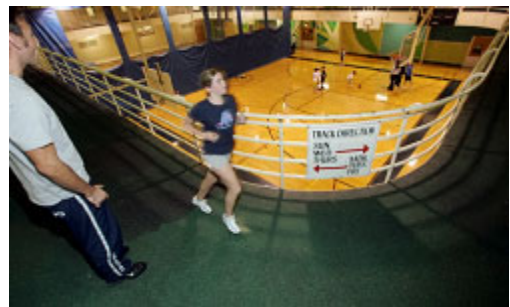
**STAFF WRITER**

**BERGEN COUNTY (NJ) RECORD**


*Camper: I had no breakfast, a chili dog for lunch and steak for dinner with a side of string beans. Should I talk to my mom about getting me sandwiches to take to school?*

*Trainer: Yes. That chili dog is the worst thing you can choose. You have to start steering away from all that fast food. ... NO MORE EXCUSES!!!!*

As 12-year-old Dani Barbers reels off the many reasons that it's hard to keep dieting after you get home from weight-loss camp, her petite older sister illustrates the point by ripping open a box of Mallomars right in front of her. Dani has to resist while her sister chomps away.



CHRIS PEDOTA / THE RECORD

 Dani Barbers, 12, works hard to keep the pounds off.

Last summer, Dani lost 18 pounds, and she's determined to keep them off. She's trying a new tactic - e-mailing a fitness trainer every day to describe exactly what she's eating. He e-mails back daily with pointers and pep talks and an occasional nag.

She feels a bit conflicted about all this Internet counseling. "Sometimes it's helpful, and sometimes it's really frustrating," she says. "My mom is paying somebody to watch everything I eat, and I don't really like that feeling ... but it's definitely easier for me to stay on track when someone is watching."

Dani and fellow veterans of New Image - and some other weight-loss camps - are using electronic food diaries to tackle one of their biggest challenges: fighting fat when camp is over. After Dani's previous two stints at New Image, she gained back the pounds she lost. Now she faces Haagen-Dazs pistachio ice cream in her family's fridge in Tenafly. Friends want to hang out at a pizza place after school. A relentless stream of bar mitzvahs beckon with lavish buffets.

Resisting such temptation is critical. Health experts caution that too many American children are eating too much, with little regard for nutrition or exercise. About 16 percent of 6- to 19-year-olds are overweight, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The percentage of overweight children age 6 to 11 more than doubled in the past 20 years. For adolescents, the percentage more than tripled.

The consequences go beyond health risks; social stigma and poor self-esteem are common. Even though schools today boast high-profile anti-bullying campaigns, middle schoolers interviewed for this story said they'd often heard cruel epithets like "blimp" and "doughboy." One was routinely harassed by a classmate who teased, "If I bump into you, I'll bounce," or "Watch out, you'll break that chair."

Camps such as New Image, based in Norwood, and **Wellspring Camps, based in Cerritos, Calif.**, are taking advantage of one of the prime scapegoats for children's growing girths - computers - to try to battle the problem. It's widely accepted among weight-loss experts that writing down everything you eat can prove that you're noshing more than you think, and keeping careful track often leads to better decisions.

Tony Sparber, director of New Image, says campers typically lost three or four pounds a week during the summer, and Internet counseling afterward seemed a good way to keep them accountable and motivated. "E-mailing fits their lifestyle," Sparber says. "For five minutes a day, they can use it for something productive."

To get a taste of the correspondence, here's an e-mail from a girl complaining she had no time for a healthy lunch because of classes and volleyball: "I had no breakfast, a chili dog for lunch and steak for dinner with a side of string beans," she wrote. "Should I talk to my mom about getting me sandwiches" to take to school?

"Yes," the trainer replied. "That chili dog is the worst thing you can choose. You have to start steering away from all that fast food. ... NO MORE EXCUSES!!!!!"

"Wow!" the trainer wrote to another camper, "This is your best nutritional day so far!"

To get Internet counseling from New Image, campers have to join a class called STRIVE!, which includes twice-a-week meetings for exercise and mutual support. STRIVE! began this fall at the Jewish Community Center on the Palisades in Tenafly, after a successful debut last year in Roslyn Heights, N.Y. Geared for ages 8 to 18, it costs \$336 for JCC members, \$480 for non-members and serves non-campers, too.

At a recent meeting at the JCC, a group of kids 11 to 15 (and most weighing 136 to 240 pounds) talked as they sat on huge rubber balls between disco-beat exercise routines. Their trainer and e-mail counselor, Joe Agosto, led the discussion.

"I ran a mile at school and didn't cry," announced one girl.

"Just so you know, Joe, this shirt's a medium!" another said proudly.

"I am so sick of grilled chicken," lamented a third.

The trainer lectured back: "A lot of you are not consistent enough with e-mailing. I've got a lot of people skipping meals. ... These are things we have to tighten up on!"

Some kids confessed they stopped e-mailing if they went on a binge. Some admitted leaving out a few snacks. "When you're e-mailing him it's intimidating," said Emily Liber, an 11-year-old in Norwood. "But he tells us if we don't e-mail he'll make our workout 10 times harder."

Of the nine campers present with records, three had lost weight since camp ended, and six had gained a few pounds - but all were still down between 10 and 30 pounds from their pre-camp weight.

Cyndi Koch, a Ho-Ho-Kus psychologist who specializes in eating disorders, says she is intrigued by the idea of e-mailing food diaries to a counselor but cautioned that children must be enthusiastic about it, not coerced. "If they're doing it because their parents want them to do it and they're angry about it, it can backfire and lead to more overeating," she says.

"It's very important that it's supportive feedback. If they feel shamed in any way, that feeling of shame and guilt can bring on more bingeing."

The weight-loss industry is extremely competitive, and camps tout their own versions of Internet communications. **Ryan Craig, president of Wellspring Camps, says all his campers have free access to a Web site that helps them monitor their intake and exercise daily. Behavioral coaches observe their charts online and contact them two or three times a week by e-mail or phone. This after-care program was launched after the summer of 2004, and by last spring, 91 percent of campers had maintained their weight or lost additional pounds, he says.**

**Systematic "self-monitoring is the single most important thing you can do for long-term weight control," he says.**

**Craig notes that a group of researchers launched Wellspring Camps in four sites nationwide because traditional diet camps had such lousy long-term results and few tracked campers' weights after they went home. "The fact they don't keep outcome data indicates they're not serious programs," he says.**

In Norwood, Sparber notes that parents' support is key for helping kids stay disciplined. (He was quick to list parents among the many environmental and biological contributors to childhood obesity: Stressed parents feel too rushed to make healthy meals, overindulgent parents don't set limits in our couch-potato culture of television and video games, lax parents don't supervise. "We live in a well-educated area," he said. "Parents know what to do, but they're not doing it.")

He says parents who pay more than \$1,000 per week for camp have a compelling incentive to see lost pounds stay off. Dani's mother, Robyn Barbers, agrees: "It's money invested, time of the child invested, you don't want to see that go to waste."

Barbers defended stocking ice cream and cookies in the kitchen, however, saying the rest of the household shouldn't be denied, and Dani's program approves of small amounts of sweets. Barbers constantly urges her daughter to say no when necessary. "I say this is for you, not me - I want her to be healthy and happy."

Dani says she was glad to have several kind, supportive friends who always changed the subject when she obsessed about food, and she felt motivated to keep trying. "A lot of girls here are thin, and it's a competitive area, a very high-class area," she says. "If you don't look right, people will talk about you."

She gained five pounds since camp but has not come close to pre-camp weight. "I'm happy it's not more than five, and I've been home over two months," she says. "I'm pretty proud."