

# WINNING LOSERS

Shedding excess flab isn't simply the result of having the occasional salad – it's a dedication to a healthier lifestyle that will change how you look at yourself, say Leena Salim, Ravi Maan and Darren Wee **BY GENE KHOR**

## RAVI MAAN, 25 ENGLISH AND SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHER

Height: 1.8M

Heaviest Weight: 115kg

Heaviest BMI: 35

Current Weight: 75kg

Current BMI: 23

Ravi Maan's weight-loss journey can be best described as a non-committal partner in a stormy relationship. "It's seen its ups and downs," he says. "But I wouldn't have learnt to be as disciplined if it was easy."

Even at his heaviest – 115kg – in 2005, Ravi didn't think he was that fat. "I played sports growing up, like tennis, football and basketball," he recalls, "I honestly felt I had enough exercise to allow me to eat as much of whatever I wanted."

He would soon find himself sorely mistaken when enlisting for National Service (NS) and classified as an obese recruit that same year. "During the training, I had guys as big as me outrun me, while I heaved and wheezed along!" he says. "It was a sobering experience, as I thought I'd led an active enough lifestyle to prepare me for the army."

Even so, Ravi enjoyed his three months of Basic Military Training (BMT). "When you're around other fat guys who are killing themselves trying to lose weight, you get caught up in it too."

Ravi emerged from BMT at a more streamlined 92kg. However, the pace was slower in his new unit, where he was an ammunition storeman – and he put on 8kg in six months.

Thankfully, his campmates were on a fitness streak, regularly comparing workout routines and diets. An inspired Ravi would run after work almost every night, as well as play football twice a week. He also cut down on carbohydrates like rice, noodles and bread, while upping his greens and lean meat intake.



"It was partly due to peer pressure – I wanted to be part of the conversations as well," says Ravi with a laugh. By the time he completed NS in 2007, he was 82kg.

After studying in Perth, Australia, he returned in December 2009 with a Communications and Political Science degree – and 10kg fatter. "Studying hard led to me eating more from exam stress. And partying just as hard didn't help either."

With the party now over, he started hanging out with ex-army buddies who were also training to slim. "We approached our diets like a maths equation – and based it on the notion that expanding more calories than you consumed, would result in weight loss," explains Ravi.

This evolved into a buddy system, which FatSecret ([www.fatsecret.com](http://www.fatsecret.com)), an online weight-loss portal, helped maintain. The site would do a daily calculation of their calories consumed, as well as those burned from exercise. It then displayed the results to group members.

Before becoming a teacher four months ago, Ravi's schedule saw him exercising five days a week. "I'd play two-hour tennis games thrice a week, as well as swim 20 laps and run 6km weekly," he says. Though he has now started working, Ravi still manages to keep to most of his exercise commitments.

For someone who used to knock back five egg *pratas* with a bowl of mutton gravy on the side, tuna sandwiches are now a lunchtime staple, being high in protein, and low in fat. Dinner meanwhile comprises meat dishes – grilled, baked, or steamed, but never fried – with a side of vegetables.

Though friends and family compliment him on the weight-loss, Ravi feels his biggest transformation has been mental. "I feel like I can do anything now," he says. "Like wakeboarding; I first tried it in October 2010 and it was a blast! If you'd asked me to when I was 115kg, I'd have said you were crazy!"

## LEENA SALIM, IN HER 30S SINGER, DANCER, ACTRESS AND HOST

Height: 1.7M

Heaviest Weight: 110kg

Heaviest BMI: 38

Current Weight: 63kg

Current BMI: 22

Performer Norleena Salim is half the woman she used to be – literally. Best known for playing hefty housewife Rosnah, she tipped the scales at 110kg in the long-running local English sitcom *Under One Roof* from 1995 to 1999. Having spent the past six years in Brisbane, Australia, she's now seeking to re-establish herself in our entertainment scene – and to show off her svelte new figure.

Unlike Hollywood starlets and their quick-fix nip-and-tuck procedures, Leena took no shortcuts. Her weight-loss tale began in September 2007 after she clinched a 3-year singing contract onboard a luxury cruise ship.

With the lifts crowded with guests, Leena got to the lounge where she performed by climbing up nine flights of stairs, several times a

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day. "Surprisingly, it wasn't that hard, even in heels," she says. "I guess I was too focused on starting my show on time."

Six months later, 20 to 30kg was shed from this unintended workout – something Leena didn't notice until her backup dancers pointed it out to her. "Sure, my dresses had become looser," she says. "But as it happened over time, it never struck me that I'd lost that much weight,"

When Leena returned to Brisbane during a two-month break, she did the natural thing – shop for new clothes. Like a kid in a candy store, she found herself spoiled for choice.

"It used to be frustrating, as they'd never have pieces in my size," says Leena. "But now, I could try on whatever I wanted to, instead of limiting myself to plus-sized racks."

Not taking her new figure for granted, Leena made friends with the ship's gym trainers when she returned to her performing schedule. Besides Pilates and yoga classes, she also learnt different exercise machine routines from them.

"My workouts were never a chore, because they'd always change things," she says. "To me, the machines were more like toys to play with."

One thing that didn't change much was her diet. Leena continued eating what she wanted, but with one difference – moderation. "Instead of three big meals a day, I had smaller ones every three to four hours. This way, I would not get hungry and be tempted to snack."

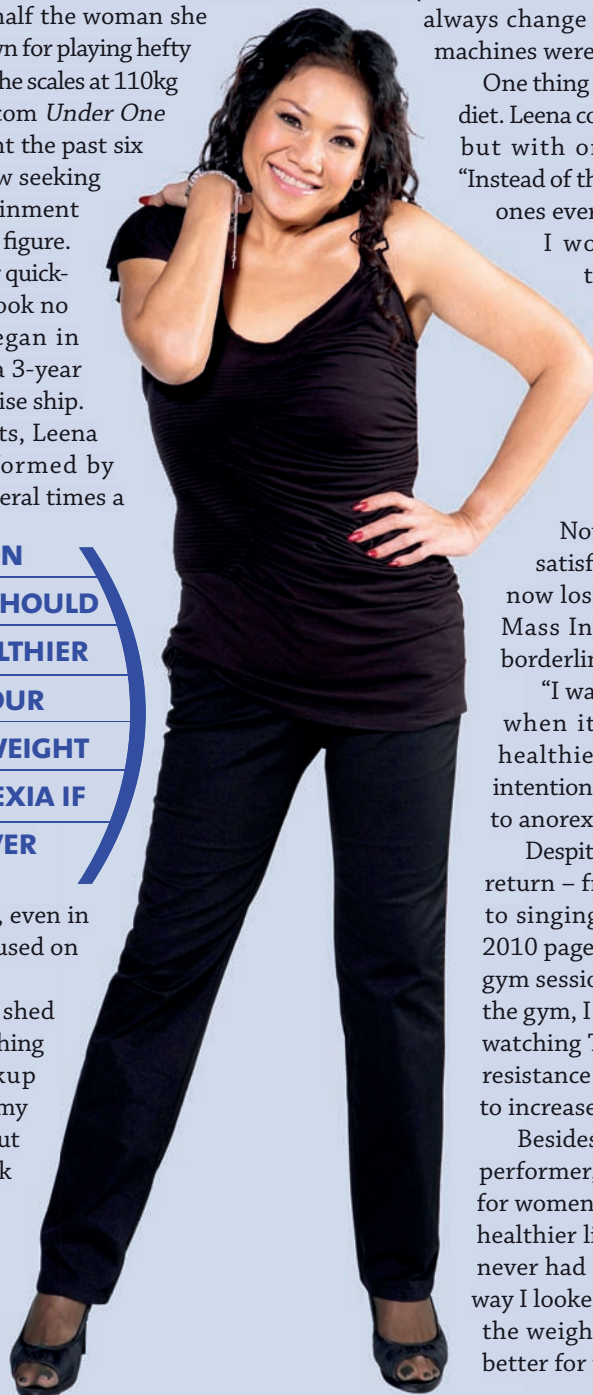
She continued to eat "fatty" foods – but the good kind. The fats in avocados, walnuts and fish, for instance, have lower cholesterol counts, and also helped stave off cravings.

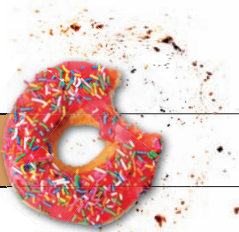
When her contract ended in November 2009, Leena still wasn't satisfied with her weight – as she had now lost too much. At 54kg, her Body Mass Index (BMI) was 18, which was borderline underweight.

"I was too focused on being thinner, when it should have been on being healthier," she says. "Be sure of your intentions for losing weight – it could lead to anorexia if it's all you obsess over."

Despite Leena's busy schedule since her return – from stints on TV channel Suria to singing at the Miss Singapore World 2010 pageant – she still squeezes in three gym sessions a week. "If I can't make it to the gym, I do it at home," she says. "While watching TV, I train with weights, and do resistance training with my exercise band to increase tone and muscle endurance."

Besides carving a niche as an all-round performer, Leena hopes to be a role model for women, empowering them to choose a healthier lifestyle. "I was a fat child, but I never had a problem with my body or the way I looked," she says. "But I chose to lose the weight because I wanted something better for myself." ❖





## DARREN WEE, 25 POWER98 DJ AND DRUMMER FOR LOCAL BAND MONOCHROME

Height: 1.68M

Heaviest Weight: 85kg

Heaviest BMI: 30

Current Weight: 60kg

Current BMI: 21

You'd never guess looking at Darren Wee's slim frame, but the Power98 DJ was once able to put away a 8-piece fast food chicken meal, a large pizza, and a pint of ice cream – all washed down with a 1.5L bottle of Pepsi – in one sitting.

Most Singaporeans are passionate about their nosh, but Darren made it look like an obsession – especially since it had him weighing in at 85kg back in early 2009. He explains that his love for food was a dependency of sorts while serving his National Service (NS) at the time.

"It was a stressful period, because I was also preparing for our album launch in February 2010," says Darren. "I turned to food to help take the edge off, eating up to 10 meals a day sometimes."

The enormity of the month-long event began to make Darren feel a little self-conscious about his appearance – something that never bothered him before. "I'd always felt that eating was a pleasure I wouldn't deny myself. Besides, my girlfriend thought I was cute when I was fat, so why would I think anything was wrong with how I looked?"

Still, he figured it wouldn't hurt looking a little more presentable to help market the band. In May 2009, the plan was simple – jog every evening after work, and cut out all carbohydrates for a month.

"I knew that avoiding carbohydrates completely was unhealthy," says Darren. "But I wanted to lose the weight fast, and figured it'd only be for a month."

The logic here was that without consuming carbs, his body would burn the fats for energy instead. Darren reveals that "to keep himself sane", he'd eat anything he wanted on the weekends. "This actually helped regulate my eating and

exercise," he says. "The following week, I'd feel guilty from pigging out, and would run longer distances."

His plan paid off, as Darren emerged 6kg lighter. "I was shocked; I didn't expect to see much of a result," he says. "But seeing that my plan was working, I figured, why stop after one month?"

Darren began adding gym trips to his regime after he completed NS in October 2009. Abdominal workouts, pull-ups and chest exercises were included to tone muscles.

By the time of the album launch, Darren was running 8km easily, and 25kg lighter. "I was feeling less lethargic, which also contributed to my drumming," he says. "From being exhausted after a 20-minute set, I could now easily play for an hour and a half!"

The transformation after eight months was obvious – a picture of Darren from 2009 looks like a portly caricature next to an *8 Days* photo shoot he did in November 2010, which revealed his toned figure. Indeed, Darren cites his weight loss as the reason behind some of his recent achievements – such as landing his gig as a DJ.

"I was picked with two others out of 180 applicants for Power98's New Blood DJ hunt in October 2010," says Darren. "I don't know if the outcome would've been different had I still been fat, but I feel that my new-found confidence helped me get noticed."

One might joke that most DJs have the right faces for radio, but Darren's body is definitely one to be shown off. And it's the result of numerous changes to his daily life.

"It's not just about losing weight," he says. "It's a lifestyle choice too." In fact, he's hoping to upgrade his six-pack to an eight-pack in the near future.

He's cut out carbonated drinks, but has welcomed carbs back into his meals, though halving the usual serving size. Allowing a weekly treat of fast or fried foods, Darren balances it out with runs every morning and light gym sessions.

"I was fine with my old self," says Darren, "but after losing weight, I realised how much obesity was holding me back physically. It's not cool being obese."

*Catch Darren on Own Time Own Target from 7pm to 8pm, and The Beat from 8pm to 12am, weekdays on Power98FM* 