

Skinny Fat Is Still Fat

Weight loss is not the same as metabolic health, and the scale will happily lie to you.

There is a feeling you get when you have been a big man your whole life, and you are finally not so big anymore, that I do not have a good word for. The closest I can come is light. I felt light. I felt like I took up less space in the world. And after spending most of my life feeling like the biggest thing in any room I walked into, that feeling was, I am not ashamed to tell you, intoxicating, and honestly a little weird for me.

I want to start this chapter inside that feeling, because this is the chapter where the feeling turned out to be lying to me. But it was not lying at the start. At the start, it was the most honest, hard-earned, beautiful thing I had felt in thirty years, and I want to give it its due before I tell you what was hiding underneath it.

It was the recreation center. The same rec center I told you about in the last chapter - the one the hurricane drove me into, the one with the indoor track that circled the gym floor. At this point, I was there every morning at six. It had become my place. And the way I tracked my workouts

back then wasn't with a clock or an app. I had a counter. A little metal clicker, the kind a baseball umpire uses to count balls and strikes. I still have it. Every lap I walked around that track, I pushed the button. Click-another lap. Click. I was not counting minutes. I was counting laps. Sixty laps were my morning. I would walk until the counter said sixty, and then I would go home. Some mornings, I was quicker than others, and it would take me only 45 minutes or so. On other mornings I was a bit slower, and it took closer to 60 minutes. I always allowed an hour in my schedule, so if I hit my 60 lap mark and still had time before I hit the 60 minute mark, I'd either keep going and walk more laps or, occasionally, I'd join in with the bootcamp class that was on the gym floor inside the track. Just me, 38 female boot campers, and their trainer, Ryan. I'd jump in for some wall sits or a bunch of burpees, whatever they were doing. They loved it; I got a little more exercise, and it was different from my usual routine, so it was fun. I'd hit my time and head home to get ready for my day.

And one morning, a guy caught me coming around the corner of the track. A basketball guy - the rec center ran leagues in the mornings, and the same men were always there, playing full-court at six-thirty in the morning while I walked my laps around the outside of them and around my wife and her workout group in the middle. This one fellow,

I had seen him most mornings. He stopped me as I came around the bend, and he said five words I have never forgotten.

You're moving faster.

Now, I had not been trying to move faster. I was not in it for speed. I was in it for laps, for distance, for the click of the counter. But when he said that - you're moving faster - I realized he was right. I was moving faster. And the reason I was moving faster was that I was lighter. I was carrying a hundred pounds less of myself around that track than I had been carrying a year before, and a body that is a hundred pounds lighter moves through space more quickly, and you can feel it. You can feel the air going past your ears. You can feel it moving over your skin and through what was left of my hair, for a short time I'd grown my hair out for a charity donation to "wigs for kids", an organization that provides wigs for kids with cancer and other nasty diseases. The ponytail was down to my waist when I had it sheared off and sent to the organization, and now I was sporting a short, typical men's cut, so I had only a little hair left.

I felt smaller, lighter, faster, and I began to love that feeling more than almost anything.

The Chase for Speed

Once I knew I could move faster, the eight-year-old boy in me - the one I told you about in the chapter about the wager, the one who wanted to win - took over. If I could move faster, could I move faster still? And if I moved faster, would it make me smaller more quickly? As it turned out, the answer to both was yes. And so the laps stopped being just laps. They became a project inside the project.

I learned about a style of walking called Fartlek - it is a real word, a high-intensity training technique, and yes, I had to look up how to spell it, too. Fartlek (Swedish for "speed play") is a continuous running workout that blends endurance and speed training by alternating between fast and slow intervals. The idea is simple. You alternate. The gym track was broken into quarters, and a full lap was all the way around. So I would walk half a lap at my regular speed, then push the next half lap as fast as I could without breaking into a run, then drop back down to regular speed, then push again. Fast, slow, fast, slow, sixty laps of it, every morning. And it worked. I started timing myself. I had been walking at 18-20 minutes per mile indoors. I set myself a goal: a twelve-minute mile. Five miles an hour. For a man who, two years earlier, could not bend over to tie his own shoes, a twelve-minute mile was the moon. But I

had a goal, and I am a man who, once he has a number, will chase it. So, I chased it.

And here is one of the small, strange ways I knew it was working. I still own the sweatpants I wore in those days. I wore them this morning, as a matter of fact. They are the elastic-waist kind, the kind you do not have to tie, the kind that holds itself up. When I first started going to that track, those sweatpants were tight. They left a ring around my waist - you know the ring, the red mark you get when something has been digging into you all day, the ring you find when you take off a belt you cinched too tight. Those sweatpants left that ring on me every single morning.

And then one morning, a few months into the Fartlek method, into the speed, into the chase, the ring was not as deep. The waistband did not dig in the way it used to. It did not pinch. I could breathe more easily inside my own pants. I could feel the difference in my own waist by the mark of my own clothing left on my skin. I was not even measuring my waist with a tape measure yet - I was measuring it by the pants I had to buy. I had started this whole thing in a pair of jeans with a fifty-inch waist. I still have those jeans. I will never get rid of them. By this point, I was buying pants with a 38- to 39-inch waist. I had taken ten, eleven inches off my waistband. I was still five foot five - I kept trying to get taller, and it just wasn't working - but I was

getting smaller, and everything fit better, and the world felt good.

In the beginning, the body gives you back your wins in the language of small things - a waistband that no longer leaves a mark, a stranger on a track who says you're moving faster, a pair of pants two sizes down. Collect those wins. They are real. They are earned. But do not mistake them for the whole story, because the body keeps some of its accounting hidden from you.

The Outline in My Head

People sometimes ask me whether I had a picture in my head in those days of what I would look like when I finished. Whether I could see the finished man in the mirror before he arrived. And the honest answer is no, not the way you would think.

I did not have a photograph in my mind of a specific man I was going to become. What I had was more like an outline. I am going to describe it in a way that is a little morbid, but it is the truest way I can put it. You know how, at a crime scene, they lay the tape down on the ground in the shape of where the body used to be? I had an outline like that in my head, and I was trying to fill it. Not a face. Not a person. A

shape, a silhouette. When I was 310 pounds, my shape was round. I was a bowling ball, a blueberry, a big round thing. By this point in the story, I was not round anymore - I had become more of a rectangle, which was not what I wanted either. The shape I was chasing was something like a triangle: broader at the shoulders, narrower at the hip, a belly that did not hang over my shoes. I wanted to be a 154-pound triangle. That was the goal. That was the outline I was trying to fill.

Please notice what is missing from that goal, because it is the thing this whole chapter is about. My goal was a shape and a number. It was not a condition. I wanted to weigh 154 pounds and be in a particular shape. I did not, anywhere in that goal, say the word healthy. I assumed - as I think most people do - that if I got to the right number and the right shape, the health would come along for free. Thin equals healthy. Small equals well. Get the number, win the prize. That was my understanding, or at least my wish; it's what I thought, what I hoped would happen, and that hope, that wish, was about to cost me more than I knew.

The Word I Hated

The comments started coming in, but they followed a particular pattern, and that pattern is worth explaining

because it is part of how I missed what was happening to me.

The people who saw me every day - Debbie, my kids, the guys at the shop, Denise, Veronica, and Bill - did not comment much because you cannot always see a change in someone you see every day. The change was too slow-half a pound here, a pound there. If you look at me across the showroom every morning, you will never catch it. But the people who saw me only every few weeks - the vendor reps who came through to sell us granite and marble once a month or so - saw it. They would walk in and say, Joe, did you lose more weight? You're looking good. And then, more and more, they started using a particular word.

Skinny.

Geez, Joe, you're getting so skinny.

And I want to tell you, I hated that word. I still hate it. I cannot stand it. I am not skinny. I have never wanted to be skinny. Skinny is not a compliment to me - it is an accusation, it means I've missed the mark somehow, I've failed in some way. Skinny to me meant emaciated, an aunt of mine that hadn't seen me in years used the word "GAUNT" to describe my own appearance to me. That comment, that word choice, that description of what I looked like here is still stuck in my head today, and I never

want to hear that descriptor used to describe my appearance again. A slender person, a fit person, a person in good condition - yes, those I would take. But skinny? I hated it. And every time somebody said it, it aggravated me, and I brushed it off. But every time someone said something like that, it stuck, and it would bother me more.

And here is the part I have to own, because it is the hard part. My wife was saying it too. Debbie. The person who knows my body better than anyone who is alive. She kept telling me, in her quiet way, " Honey, you're getting too thin. You're getting too skinny. Don't go too far. Or sometimes she'd actually say, "you've going too far" And I would say yep, yep, yep, the way as I always did when I had absolutely no intention of listening, and I would keep right on doing what I was doing. She was right. She was completely right. And I ignored her. I have had to make my peace with that, because she saw it before I did, she told me before anyone, and I waved her off because I was the cock of the walk and I had a number to hit and nothing was going to get between me and that number. In truth, today I count on Debbie to be my early warning. I've asked that, should I start down that road again, if I begin to look like an anorexic again, she's agreed to tell me, and I've agreed to LISTEN to her this time and to take action right away. She's my canary in the coal mine, so to speak.

The people who love you and see your body every day are your earliest warning system. When the person who knows you best tells you something is wrong, the correct response is not "yep, yep, yep." The correct response is to stop and listen. I learned that the hard way. You do not have to.

The Plateau and the Little Black Dress

By September of 2017, I was stuck. I was at 210 pounds, and I could not get the number to move. This was my first real plateau, I'd experience a few small "stalls" in my progress before but usually for short periods, maybe a few weeks but this one had been with me for months and I was learning, in real time, what a plateau is: a place where the weight settles and sits, drifting up a pound, down a pound, up two, down two, but never breaking through. Mine had stuck at 210 for a couple of months, maybe longer. I could not get it to go; the scale just would not change. It seemed that no matter what I tried, it just stuck and would not move.

PREVIEW ENDS HERE

This free preview covers the first 10 pages of the chapter. The rest is in the book. To order Volume II - From 310 to Thriving, email metabojoe@gmail.com.

