

The Long Game

Maintenance is the real skill, and nobody writes about it honestly.

Almost every weight-loss story you have ever heard ends at the same place: the day the weight is gone. The before-and-after photo. The big reveal. Roll the credits. And then the camera shuts off, and nobody films what happens next, which is a shame because that's the whole ballgame. Anybody can lose weight for a while. I have done it, you have probably done it, and half the country does it every January. The trick - the real, hard, unglamorous trick - is keeping it off for the rest of your life. That is the chapter most books never write. So that is the chapter I am going to write.

I have kept the bulk of it off for the better part of a decade now. Not perfectly - I will tell you about the seventy pounds I let creep back, because that story matters more than any of my victories. But mostly, and stubbornly, for years. And when people ask me how, they expect me to talk about food and exercise, and we will. But the honest answer is that maintenance is won by the things you cannot see - the quiet machinery running in the background while

you are not even paying attention. The logs nobody reads. The habits nobody claps for. And, more than any single thing, the hours you spend unconscious.

Because here is something that took me half my life to understand: you do not lose weight at the dinner table, and you do not build muscle in the gym. You do both while you are asleep. Sleep is when the repair happens, when the fat burns, when the muscle knits back together stronger than it was. It is the most powerful tool I have; it is free, and almost nobody treats it like it matters. Sleep is a superpower - and it is only one of several hiding in plain sight inside a maintained life. Let me show you the whole set.

The Day I Decided to Keep It

On July 4th, 2018, I hit 154 pounds. It had taken me 18 months of work to get there from where I had been, and I was sitting on the patio at my friends' place up in Gloucester, surrounded by people who had not seen me in a year and could not believe their eyes. My wife says that in the photo from that day I look like I just got out of drug treatment, I was so thin and frail. She is right. But I was so proud of that picture I still show it to everybody, because of what happened in my head while I sat in that chair.

I said to myself, and out loud to all my friends, I did it. I

made my goal. Here I am. And then, in the very same breath, before the first sentence had even finished echoing, I said the thing that I believe is the whole secret: but you are not going back. Right there. That was the turning point. Not the weight - the promise that came two seconds after the weight. I mark the date in my calendar, and every July 4th, I take a snapshot in the same shirt, the same kind of chair, the same backdrop, so I can see the difference and stay honest.

Most people never take that second step. They get to the finish line; they celebrate - and they should celebrate. You worked hard; go have some fun; recognize the achievement - but then they think the game is over. They think they can go home now. And that is exactly where they lose it. You are not playing basketball. You do not go home after the game. The game is your life. You do not get to stop playing. The moment you treat "I made it" as the end rather than the beginning, the weight starts walking back through the door, and it brings friends.

The most dangerous moment in this whole journey is the moment you succeed. The instant you think "I've arrived" is the instant you stop doing the things that got you there. So, celebrate for one day, then make the promise almost nobody makes: I am not going to keep it off for long. I am going to keep it off forever.

My doctors had told me that if the TIA - the little stroke I had that following September - had hit me at the weight I used to carry, I would not have survived it as myself. I would have probably ended up being a vegetable, living my last years as an invalid or unaware of my surroundings, certainly not living a full life. So, when it came months after I had already made my July 4th promise, it did not start my determination. It poured concrete around it. Now I knew. This was not a project with an end date. This was the rest of my life, and it had just gotten a lot more precious.

The Relaxed-Fit Trap

Let me show you exactly how people lose it, because it is so quiet you can do it without ever deciding to. It is not a binge. It is not a collapse. It is a pair of pants.

Here is the old me, and probably the old you. You get down to a size that fits, maybe a touch snug. A few months later, it is a little tight, so you retire those pants and buy the next size up. Or you buy relaxed-fit jeans - same number on the label, but stretchy, forgiving, no pressure. Or the shirt stops buttoning right across the chest, so you grab the next size. Or you punch one more hole in the belt. None of it feels like failure. Each move is tiny and reasonable. But every one of them is a slip you refuse to recognize, and string enough of them together, and one morning you are right

back where you started, and you have no idea how you got there.

So, I quit playing that game with myself. When a pair of pants gets snug now, I do not go buy bigger pants. I go back to my roots. I go back to what I did for the eighteen months that took the weight off in the first place, I find what drifted, and I put it back. The pants are not the problem; the pants are the gauge. And the best gauge I own is a belt.

It is a plain web belt - a Boy Scout-style belt, no holes, just a buckle with a slide that grips it anywhere. I cut it to length the year I hit my goal, so it is permanently set to the size I want. Every morning, I put it on, and it is a tape measure with no numbers. If the tail tucks neatly under the loop on my pants, I am good. If it will not reach the loop, I am bigger today than I should be, and I feel it all day, and that discomfort is a gift - it is my body ringing a bell before the scale ever could. I trust how my clothes fit more than anything else, because they are the first thing I put on every single day. The numbers can explain it later. The belt tells me first.

A Lifestyle, Not a Diet

People assume that maintaining feels different from losing - that you finally get to relax, ease off, coast. For me, there is

no difference at all, and that is the point. The underlying mindset is identical whether the number is going down or holding steady: eat slowly; eat until you are satisfied, not a bite more; put the fork down between bites; have a sip of water; and stop when you are done - done, not when the plate is empty. That is how I eat at 141 pounds today, and that is how I ate on the way down. Nothing changed.

When I do want to take a few pounds off, I do it glacially slowly, and I mean glacially - a pound every two or two-and-a-half weeks, on purpose. I am perfectly capable of losing five pounds in a week; I did it for eighteen months straight. But fast loss is the only time I ever brush up against that word I hate, deprivation, and deprivation is a miserable way to live, so I almost never do it. Slowness is not a limitation; it is a strategy. Your body has set points scattered all through it, and they do not move just because the scale did. Lose weight slowly, and those set points will come with you. Lose it fast, and your body spends the next year trying to drag you back up to where it thinks you belong.

And this is the heart of it, the thing I cannot say enough times: this is a lifestyle, not a diet. A diet is a thing you do until it works, and then you stop. That is the definition of a diet, and it is also the reason diets fail - the stopping is built right in. I did not change what I ate for a while. I changed

the way I live. I changed how I eat, how I move, how I sleep, all of it woven into one thing, which is simply that I follow the rules I set for myself, every day, for the rest of my life.

This is not something I do. It is who I am. There is a difference, and the difference is everything. A thing you do, you can quit. A person you are, you carry everywhere. I am not a man on a diet. I am a man who lives this way - and you cannot fail at being who you are. So decide to be the person, not to do the thing, and the failing becomes impossible.

Watch the Dashboard

If maintenance has an engine, it is the log, and I have kept the same one since the very first day I started losing weight. Nothing has dropped off; I have only added to it. Every morning, the second thing I do at work after I open the store is sit down and log my numbers. Weight. Calories, meal by meal, the actual foods. Grams of fat, protein, and carbohydrates, and when I count carbohydrates, I always count net carbohydrates, the total minus the fiber, so I am watching my fiber at the same time. I am always aware of my intake of fat, sugar, and salt. And on the body side: muscle percentage and both kinds of fat - the subcutaneous fat under the skin and the visceral fat around the organs -

which, as you will see in a minute, turned out to be the number that mattered most.

Why all of it? Because you cannot fix what you cannot see, and you cannot see what you do not pay attention to.

People will tell you not to weigh yourself every day, that it will drive you crazy. They are right that it can - and I tell you to do it anyway, because so much - really, all of this - is just awareness. I am watching the dashboard on a machine. I need to know what the gauges are telling me, and the only way is to read them every single day.

But here is the part people get wrong: the number doesn't matter. The trend matters. I have said it since the early chapters, and it is even truer in maintenance. When you are losing, you are looking for a slope - a line angling down over weeks. When you are maintaining it, you are looking for a flat line, more or less, with gentle undulation, because a perfectly flat line means you are dead. My weight, my water, my muscle, and my fat all bounce around a little day-to-day - I had a potato last night; I am holding water this morning; it will be gone tomorrow. That is normal. That is life. I do not want big jumps; I want tiny ripples on top of a trend that is pointed where I want it pointed.

The trend is my early-warning system. If my weight ticks up a pound and stays up for more than three days, a little

red light goes off. That is not supposed to happen, so something is causing it, and drift never happens on its own. I go to the log. How is the food? How is sleep? How is exercise? The answer is always in there because I wrote it down. A small bump I can live with. But a bump that holds, then climbs the next day again, and again the day after - that is no longer a lapse. A lapse is a pound or two. A relapse is three, four, five, or an upward trend with momentum. If I let a lapse become a trend, it stops being a lapse and becomes a relapse, and I know exactly where a relapse can lead because I have been there. If everything I tracked got taken away from me tomorrow and I could keep only one thing, I would keep the log. A pencil and a piece of paper. Because without it, I am blind, and a blind man cannot steer.

Sleep Is a Superpower

Now we come to the thing this chapter is named for, and the thing I am worst at, which is probably why I have had to learn it so well. When that little red warning light goes off, and I go hunting through the log for the cause, the first place I look is not my plate. It is my pillow. Sleep is a giant for me - and for everybody, whether they know it or not.

Understand what is actually happening while you are unconscious. Your body does its repair work at night. It

burns fat at night. It builds and rebuilds muscle at night. Not while you are awake, running around, is how the machinery works. You need real sleep, and not just light sleep, but the deep sleep and the REM sleep where the important things actually happen, especially the deep sleep. That part is hard for me, so I have had to engineer it, and anyone can do that.

The first enemy is light - specifically, the blue light pouring from your television, phone, and laptop. Blue light is artificial daylight. Stare into a screen at eleven at night, and your brain reads it as high noon and refuses to release the chemistry that makes you sleepy. Add the work email you were answering, with tomorrow's problems still rattling around your skull, and you climb into bed with a brain running nine thousand miles an hour that genuinely believes it is the middle of the day. Then you wonder why you cannot sleep. I lived like that for years. I was a terrible sleeper, and that was the main reason.

So here is what I do now, and what I would tell anyone to do. Start by scheduling it backward. Decide what time you must be up, count back the eight or nine hours -the amount of sleep an adult actually needs nightly -and that is your bedtime - a real one, not a someday-ideal one. Then protect the runway. At sundown, I put on a pair of blue-blocker glasses - ten-dollar ones, no special brand; I have a pair that

fits right over my regular glasses - and I wear them until I head for the bedroom. Half an hour before bed, I go into a dark room: no television, no phone, no screen of any kind. A reading lamp, and that is it. I read, or I write in a journal, or I color in a book - whatever quiets the mind - and I just let myself get drowsy. Reading is the best sleeping pill ever made; when I notice I have read the same paragraph three times, I am done. I keep the room cool, around sixty-five or sixty-six degrees, dark, and quiet except for a sound machine running ocean waves. And because my watch tracks it, I can tell you the result: I am asleep within about fifteen minutes, every single night. Nine thirty, down, five-thirty up. Eight, nine hours, banked.

You do not lose weight at the table, and you do not build muscle in the gym. You do both in the dark, while you sleep. Treat your sleep like the appointment it is - schedule it, dim the lights, kill the screens, cool the room - and you give every other thing you are doing a place to actually take hold. Skip it, and you are paddling a boat with a hole in it.

Sleep is also where I catch one of the sneakiest causes of drift: stress and the hormone behind it. If I work out the wrong way - if a walk that was supposed to be a slow, easy three miles turns into a hard, heart-pounding push - I spike my cortisol, and cortisol is the stress hormone and a fat-storing hormone. Do the wrong cardio, sleep too little,

let the pressure build, and you can gain weight while doing everything you think is right. Good sleep is how the body clears that out. It is not a luxury you earn after real work. It is the real work, happening where you cannot watch it.

When the Scale Lied: Skinny Fat and the Scan

For about seven years, the scale told me I was winning, and the scale was lying. I was holding my weight, eating well, exercising every day, and I felt good. I thought I looked good. And underneath it all, quietly, I was losing muscle and gaining fat at the same time.

PREVIEW ENDS HERE

This free preview covers the first 12 pages of the chapter. The rest is in the book. To order Volume II - From 310 to Thriving, email metabojoe@gmail.com.