



Photo by Trae Patton/NBC

Michael Ventrella has lost a lot recently – of weight, that is. The 31-year-old Bartlett resident is the newest winner of NBC's *The Biggest Loser: Couples*.

Ventrella's starting weight was 526 pounds – the heaviest contestant in the show's history. But his determination to save his life and finally do something for himself – coupled with intense personal trainers Bob and Jillian – helped him lose 264 pounds, just over 50 percent of his original weight. In addition to the ranch, Ventrella is quick to credit his mom – and fellow contestant – Maria for helping him towards his goal, and he plans to get her a surprise gift with his winnings.

But he's not stopping there. Ventrella is looking to slim down even more to improve his health, which for him is no longer a number on the scale. Keep an eye out and you may see Ventrella biking around the suburbs – one of his favorite activities since losing the weight.

Q} What motivated you to audition for *The Biggest Loser*?

My motivation was to get healthy. So many people want the quick fix, the miracle drug or whatever the case may be. I didn't go to save my life. I said I was going to save my life either way. I was so far down in the dumps and off the deep end if I didn't do something I was going to die. I used the show as a vehicle to get where I needed to be. I told myself I was going to lose the weight. I had no option. It was either move to Italy with my grandparents, where everything is so organic (pulling food out of the garden and getting chicken from backyard). They walk everywhere. My lifestyle would have been changed forcefully. I prayed about it. I have a close connection to God and my Catholic religion. So many times when I tried to lose weight, I lost 80 pounds and put it back on, because family ridiculed me or people made fun of me at school. I did it (lost weight) for all the wrong reasons. It finally hit me to do it for me. Once I got a taste of doing it the right way, or the hard way as Bob (Harper, a trainer on the show) would say, it got addicting. It's a life change; you can't perceive it as a diet. I see a diet as a temporary thing, and this can't be a temporary change.

Q} When you started you were the heaviest contestant in the show's history at 526 pounds. Did that motivate you more to lose the weight? How did you feel being the heaviest the show has ever seen?

Other people saw it as an advantage. Bob put it very clearly: Michael's bigger than everyone else. He has to work harder. I had to be a step ahead of everyone – eat more, rest more, work out more. They can lose 2 pounds and that's 1 percent for them. I lose 2 pounds and that's not even a half-percent. Getting on the ranch and being

the biggest person was another example of how I've lived my life. I was embarrassed. It was that ever-familiar feeling of defeat. I had to work harder for what everyone gets easier. It's a race against life for me. I'm running forward and not looking back. I'm not feeling sorry for myself, not feeling angry. I never feel deterred from my path. There's no option to fail – not this time.

Q} When the show ended, you lost 264 pounds, weighing in at 262, just over 50 percent of your original weight and the most a contestant has ever lost. How did you feel when you saw that final weigh-in number on the scale?

Relieved, and stressed because I do want to get down to 220 or 230. It's so much harder now. My body is so athletically conditioned. Yesterday I burned 1,000 calories from 20-mile bike ride. I remember when 2 miles walking (when I first started) would burn the same. It feels good because I was envious before, and now friends with six packs can't keep up with me.

Q} You started the show with your mom as your partner. How did going in as a team help you both?

It helped in so many different angles because not only did I change, I knew I was going to change with my hard work and determination, but I had this other person beside me that is equal to me, that helps my community understand. She helps me make my environment how I need to live. You look at both of us. You see both of us. If someone sees me measuring cereal, it might look strange. If two people do it, this is common practice and doesn't look strange. My mom and my two sisters, we have a closeness – not just because of our heritage or culture – but we are so tight-knit. Going into the process with my mother brought a whole new level of friendship to the game and to our lives.

Q&A RAPID FIRE

Favorite artist to work out to? Madonna.

Favorite type of exercise? Biking.

Guilty pleasure snack food? Sweet potato fries.

Favorite fellow *Biggest Loser* contestant other than your mom? It's a tie between

Daris and Ashley. They are my brother and sister. I love them so much. Those are my buddies.

Q } What are you most looking forward to doing now that you've lost the weight that you couldn't do or had trouble doing before?

The most apparent thing is riding a bike. I wish I got into running, but my knees are destroyed from being overweight. When I bike ride there's no impact. I'm going fast. I was never able to bring my body to such speeds. It feels so free. I understand that common feeling with people who ride motorcycles. I can travel long distance and feels like I'm leaving pain behind me. The first day at the ranch when we had that first challenge to earn a spot, I was hovering over the bike and in such pain. You can't pull me off it now. I love the bike now.

Q } What's a typical day's menu for you now?

Not to be endorsing stuff, but I have Fiber One first thing in the morning. It's that stuff that looks like cat food and has no flavor, but I love it. That gets me my complex carb, fiber and fills me up. Morning is the only time I allow myself to have any type of carb. By noon to 2, I've had at least three other meals. All my other meals are lean and green, as Bob would say, lean pieces of meat like pork and fish.

Q } You've been an inspiration to many across the nation. Did you ever think you'd have such an impact on people by being on the show?

No, I had no idea. For the first time in my life, I took a moment out to fix me. In reflecting on my heritage and culture, I was programmed to put others first. Then I had no time for me. I caught myself at 526 (pounds) and not being able to do anything else. Going on the show, it was my time to not have any other distractions. I still can't say no to anyone. But I learned that by helping someone else, I have to make time for myself. When I meet people, I don't understand the power behind it (being on the show). It's weird to digest it. Like wow, I finally did something for myself, and I helped other people at the same time.

Q } If you had to pick between Bob and Jillian, who would you rather have as a personal trainer by your side on a daily basis?

That's almost impossible. I learned so much from Jillian. I was out getting my mom some organic milk this morning, and I'm going through the aisle and looking at stuff, thinking Jillian taught us about this and that. I learned from Bob

about staying grounded and where I went wrong from my emotional practices in life and how to process stress. I learned from Jillian about kicking ass in life, and then I can go back to Bob and learn about yoga, staying balanced, learning that this change in life has to change forever. The things I don't like? I can't handle Jillian's screaming and Bob's whole pushing the weights on me.

Q } Any plans for your \$250,000 winnings?

Yes, first and foremost, my mom pushed me this far; she pushed me to this level. I'm gonna surprise her with her new car. I want to take her happiness to another level. When I was a kid, my mom always talked about this lime green/chartreuse convertible mustang she had. She just talked about how ever since she got married, dad put her in big cars. In the mustang, she felt young and sporty even though it was a beat up car. — *Brittany Ashcroft*