

H-E-B and Cooper team up to give employees challenge of their lives



H-E-B
H-E-B dietitian Lorena Kaplen (right) helps contestant Veronica Diaz and her husband, Edward, shop at Central Market in Dallas.



Cheryl Hall/Dallas Morning News

Published: 28 January 2012

Robert Arnold recently finished a 5K — that's a tad over 3 miles — in an hour and 27 minutes. He was thrilled that he shaved two minutes off his time from his first race a few weekends ago.

Every minute is a milestone when you're moving more than 500 pounds around a track.

"Big Rob" is one of 12 contestants in Slim Down Showdown, a 12-week fitness and health competition designed by Cooper Aerobics Center in Dallas for San Antonio-based H-E-B Grocery Co.

Arnold, 44, a customer service representative at H-E-B headquarters, is determined to set his life on a fresh course. Eventually, he'd like to weigh 185 pounds. He knows that will take years.

"It was such an honor to be picked," Arnold says of being selected from 300-plus applicants who work at an H-E-B, Central Market, Joe V's Smart Shop or Mi Tienda in Texas. "The light bulb went off in my head that said, 'Robert, this is your time.'"

Three Sundays ago, Arnold, 11 other contestants and their handpicked support buddies showed up at Cooper Center, "the Disneyland of fitness," to kick off H-E-B's contest. The six-day Fit Camp included a baseline health assessment, nutritional lectures, cooking classes and field trips to learn how to grocery shop and eat out wisely. They moved their bodies in ways they never thought they could.

The winning team, which will be announced March 30, gets \$10,000 — \$7,000 to the contestant and \$3,000 to the buddy, who must also be an H-E-B employee.

H-E-B, with sales of more than \$18 billion last year, employs 76,000 people at its 335 stores, including four (soon to be five) Central Markets and a half-dozen H-E-Bs in the North Texas market.

Amanda Daw, who works in the pharmacy of an H-E-B store in Cleburne, is the only contestant from North Texas.

The grocery company will spend \$200,000 on the showdown, but it's just one component of H-E-B's health-conscious culture that is having a substantial impact on its health care costs.

Like most companies, H-E-B faces enormous challenges in health care, especially since it self-insures 81,000 employees and dependents and its primary footprint is in South Texas, where [diabetes](#) and obesity are rampant.

But for the past two years, H-E-B has contained cost increases to less than 1 percent while actually improving benefits, says Craig Boyan, H-E-B president and chief operating officer. “We’ve almost totally eliminated the increase in costs of our health care, but I would call that a side benefit. We want to be retailing’s leading advocate for having health care plans focused on making people healthier before they get sick rather than after they get sick.”

550 pounds lost in '11

Last year, H-E-B held its first Slim Down Showdown, loosely patterned after NBC’s hit series *The Biggest Loser*. H-E-B’s “Fantastic 15” collectively lost more than 550 pounds. Although the contest created companywide buzz, Boyan didn’t think it was doing enough to encourage healthier lifestyles overall.

“We didn’t want a plan that encouraged crash diets and dramatic loss of weight to win a substantial monetary prize and do disservice to people’s health,” he says. “We worked hard to build balance, where people would learn to be healthier while losing weight. The dramatic weight loss is just what captures people’s imagination.”

Todd Whitthorne, a senior executive at the Cooper Aerobics Center who redesigned this year’s Slim Down, is not a fan of *The Biggest Loser*.

“It makes for phenomenal television and appeals to a large number of people,” he says. “But rapid weight loss is not by any means medically safe or proven. Most people who lose weight in a hurry will gain it back in a hurry, and they’ll gain more back than they lost.”

H-E-B’s Fit Camp is a customized version of the six-day Cooper Wellness Program offered to the public for \$2,200 plus lodging, Whitthorne says.

“We encourage people not to define success by the number on the scale but rather: ‘What is it that you’re trying to achieve? How do you envision what you want your life to be?’ Until you get a handle on that, it will be difficult to attain permanent change.”

Isaac Diaz, 37, an H-E-B store director in [Austin](#), wants to drop 40 pounds, reverse his Type II diabetes, lower his cholesterol, improve his treadmill score and extend his life expectancy.

“My big takeaway,” Diaz says, “is that it just takes a moderate change in your physical activity to make a huge difference” He enlisted his older brother, Delfino “Del” Diaz, as his buddy.

Since leaving Cooper, contestants are posting blogs and vlogs about their progress each week on the company’s Intranet site.

Part of the contest is to draw “followers” who register online and show their support by wearing colored bracelets at work for their favorite contestants.

Last year, 15,000 employees registered as followers of a favorite contestant. This year, the goal is to double the number of followers.

Eating out wisely

On the first day, participants were handed [Olive Garden](#) menus and asked what they would order. Those who thought they were eating wisely by ordering the signature unlimited soup, salad and breadsticks lunch discovered that each bowl of soup has 100 to 250 calories; salad with dressing, 290; and the breadstick, 150.

Four days later, everyone boarded a bus and headed to the Olive Garden in [Addison](#) armed with nutritional information.

“The menu is just a window into the kitchen,” Whitthorne says. “Once you know what’s in a kitchen, you can build your own meal. The vast majority of restaurants are willing to accommodate you.”

More than 50 percent of a person’s calories are typically consumed outside the home, Whitthorne says. “If you let restaurants figure out your nutrition, you’re going to be in trouble. You have to be in charge.”

Before Cooper, Diaz would have ordered a cup of Zuppa Toscana, Chicken & Shrimp Carbonara and three bread sticks — for a total of 2,060 calories. Instead, he ordered a lunch portion of linguini marinara, substituting whole-wheat noodles with a grilled chicken breast on top, a salad without dressing and nixed the breadsticks. His new dinner weighed in at 600 calories.

Whitthorne believes H-E-B is creating a blueprint that other companies should follow.

“We have 26 million diabetics in the United States and 79 million pre-diabetics heading into this devastating disease,” he says. “The tsunami is coming. When it hits, no one’s going to be able to write a check big enough to cover it. Craig and H-E-B totally get that.”