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The Biggest Loser's toughest trainer wants to whip you into shape.

Step One: Put yourself first

BY SERENA KIM

Get Fit: Jillian



In a grim dressing room with mauve carpeting and anemic fluorescent lighting Jillian Michaels is getting ready for another day on the set of the hit NBC reality series, *The Biggest Loser*.

On the show, Michaels and her fellow trainer Bob Harper mentor competing teams as the contestants shed scores of pounds and battle to stay on the show. Season 6 pitted families against families. With its primal themes of love and self-acceptance, the show fills a primetime Tuesday night slot with tearjerker testimonials and suspenseful weigh-ins.

A hair-stylist twirls a thick strand of Michaels' glossy chestnut hair under a blow dryer as a makeup artist strategically paints concealer around the hollows of her face. A pair of colorful sneakers lies nearby; a tattoo of her deceased grandmother as a guardian angel covers the top of her foot.

When Ruby, her 1-year-old white and brown pit bull terrier, jumps on a visitor, Michaels bellows "No!" in that thundering, drill sergeant voice that her fans and teams know all too well. Michaels uses her signature brand of tough love to nurture and coach—even if that means standing on the contestants and threatening them with physical violence or reminding them of their weight loss goals at their very lowest points.

Michaels has been blown away by the progress of her lone remaining contestant, Michelle, a 26-year-old woman who has lost more than 70 pounds as she reckons with her mother's abandonment. "Whether she wins or loses, Michelle is by far one of the most incredible transformations psychologically that I have ever seen," Michaels says. "She found her voice and began to assert

herself and embrace life, handle her emotions and her fears and move through them with a confidence that she'll survive it."

Michaels pauses to remind her dog to stay down for an entire 2 minutes. The pit bull finally submits, resting her square head on one of her forepaws. Ruby knows who's boss.

Though Michaels is only 5 feet 3 inches tall and 120 pounds, she's a larger-than-life phenomenon. As the trainer with the most wins on the show, Michaels has undergone a transformation herself—from a formerly overweight child into a one-woman fitness empire. Her name, image and ideas power the sales of books, DVDs and video games that promote her mix of weight loss motivation and maintenance as well as psychological self-help.

Health isn't just big business for Michaels, it's her life's mission. She leverages her rising fame to advocate for cancer awareness. The disease has taken the lives of three of her grandparents and an uncle. She's a proud ambassador for the American Cancer Society and is involved with the Pink Channel, a satellite radio station that broadcasts cancer awareness news as well as pop hits from the '70s, '80s and '90s.

Despite appearances, Michaels wasn't always a perfectly pulled together, midriff-baring health diva. She says she was raised with bad eating habits learned from her parents: Douglas McKarus, her overweight lawyer dad whom she bonded with over pizza and popcorn, and JoAnn McKarus, a working mom who used junk food as a reward.

"I had learned that food was comfort, food was steady, food was stable," Michaels says. "And I just went from being a chubby toddler to being a chubby 10-year-old to being a downright fat pre-teen." As a pre-teen she weighed 175 pounds and was relentlessly teased at school. Michaels remembers eating lunch in her teacher's classroom to escape the horse and cow sounds her classmates used to taunt her in the hallways.

"Jillian as a child is exactly as now: stubborn, relentless," says her mother, who is now a practicing psychotherapist in Los Angeles. She adds that Jillian "had a real depth of heart and soul as a little girl."

Always the advocate, "she was for the under-

Style

dog. She wasn't one of these kids that would get into a clique and exclude somebody. I would see her with other kids where she would immediately be the protector of the underdog. That was always touching to me."

When she was 13, her parents went through a painful divorce. "I became so unruly," Michaels says. "We went through a bunch of hard things in a matter of a few years. I was in therapy and my mom got me into martial arts as well so I would have an outlet. And that really is what turned my life around."

Michaels' mixed martial arts class was taught by Robert David Margolin, who proceeded to kick Michaels' butt into shape, just as she would her contestants years later on *The Biggest Loser*. The classes helped Michaels lose weight and recover her self-esteem.

"At one of my blue belt tests, I had to break two boards with a side kick," Michaels says. "The next day in school, my attitude was like, 'Screw you! I just broke two boards with my left foot.' And it changed me. When you respect yourself and you have the healthy ego strength, other people are going to respect you."

Before Michaels landed *The Biggest Loser*, she owned and operated a sports medicine facility called Sky Sport and Spa in Beverly Hills. One of her clients, a Hollywood agent, set her up with an audition for the show. Initially, Michaels was against it. "I didn't want to go," she says with her characteristically opinionated brashness. "I don't watch TV. And I hate reality TV with a passion. I've never even seen one episode of *American Idol*. Barf. And I didn't get the title, *The Biggest Loser*, either."

But the producers described a dream job to Michaels: complete control in transforming the contestants' bodies and minds. Once she got to work, she was amazed at the effectiveness of her training methods.

"Up until then, it was all theoretical. But in the first week of the first season, when the contestants were losing 20 pounds, Bob Harper and I were looking at each other like we were golden gods," Michaels says. "Then the next week, when they lost only 3



Michaels owns 4 motorcycles. "There is a carefree feeling when you are riding that I have become addicted to...and then there is the speed of course," she says.

pounds, we were like, 'Oh shoot!'"

One of her theories is the awesome power of working out to foster the contestants' self-esteem. "They're like, 'Oh I'm just the funny guy, the pathetic guy, the weak, fat guy, to being the guy that just ran a mile. I'm the person that can do 10 pull-ups.' It redefines their self-image."

Julie Hadden, a soft-spoken and devoutly religious stay-at-home mom from Jacksonville, FL, was a runner-up in season 4 and now considers Michaels a dear friend. "When I showed up at the ranch, I was this little mousy mom. I was self-defeated," says Hadden, 36. **"Jillian gets to the inner root of why you are what you are.**" She didn't make me strong. She showed me how strong I was already." Hadden now weighs 120 pounds, can easily run 14 miles and says she has recovered her sense of self-worth.

With the final layers of mascara applied to

her eyelashes, Michaels is camera ready. But before she heads to the kitchen to check on her teams, she offers us a parting thought, "The one message that American women still aren't getting about their health is that it's a priority and it needs to come first." But what if women just don't have the time to work out? "Buy fitness DVDs and do them at home. Get a workout buddy at the office and go for a walk on your lunch hour. Buy a treadmill for your house. Use it while you are watching *Deal or No Deal*. Because when you are strong and healthy, you can support your family and your children and excel at work; because if you are running ragged, then you can't give 100%. Women tend to want to say 'yes' to everyone, but it's really time to put yourselves first." All too often, that's the toughest obstacle of all. **HFV**

SERENA KIM is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles.