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Labrada

Bodybuilding Champion's Hefty Challenge: To Slim Down Fattest City

By Maryann Hammers



As a child, Lee Labrada's hero was Hercules. He dreamed that one day he, too, would be the "big guy," admired and feared. But because he was so much smaller than other kids, he was instead pushed around. As a teen, Labrada longed to play high-school football. But again, his size got in the way. He was too light to make the team. So, in an effort to tip the scales in his favor, he began lifting weights.

It turned out that Labrada wasn't destined to be a football jock. He was, however, a darn good bodybuilder. Even though he stood at just 5'6", his muscles began to achieve those Herculean proportions he had strived for. By the time he was 17, he won his first competition. "And that's how I got hooked," he says.

Now retired from competitive bodybuilding and the owner of a thriving sports nutrition business, Labrada is taking on the hefty challenge of slimming down Houston, after a men's magazine ribbed the city as being the nation's fattest for three years running. If anyone can turn Texans' thoughts away from barbecue and toward shapely buns and biceps, Labrada can. After all, he's surmounted greater odds.

Born in Havana, Labrada immigrated to the United States with his grandmother when he was just 2 years old. His parents fled the Cuban communist regime soon after, arriving with nothing. His father, an engineer, had to learn to read, write, and speak English to find a job. "That taught me early on that anything is possible if you're willing to work hard and work smart," Labrada says.

Even after finding his niche in professional bodybuilding, Labrada continued to be a bit of an underdog due to his small stature. "I had my work cut out for me," he admits. "But I was persistent and disciplined." And he reached great heights. At age 25, he won Mr. Universe, and by the time he was 35, he had won 22 major titles. For seven consecutive years, he placed in the top four of the Mr. Olympia competition—the mother of all bodybuilding honors.

That same unswerving focus and dedication that propelled

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him to bodybuilding victory now makes him a successful entrepreneur. In 1995, after retiring from competition, Labrada launched a sports-nutrition business. Labrada Nutrition recently made the Inc. 500 List of America's Fastest-Growing companies, with annual revenues of \$20 million and 35 employees. While his company mostly caters to athletes and bodybuilders, Labrada is now beginning to market his high-protein "Lean Body" bars and meal-replacement shakes to mainstream outlets to take advantage of a public hungry for healthy fast food.

"I saw there was great opportunity in the field of sports nutrition and knew there were things I could improve upon," Labrada says. "I've been in the trenches and have real-world experience training with weights. So I understand the mind of the bodybuilder and athlete." (His stuff must work—today, at age 43 and eight years after his last competition, Labrada carries just 7 percent body fat on his still-impressive 185-pound frame.)



Based on his background and his business—not to mention that near-perfect body—Labrada was the natural choice when Houston Mayor Lee P. Brown, eager to rid the city of its lardy label, began searching for a "fitness czar" to whip his constituents into shape. Brown is not amused by those "Houston, we've got a big fat problem" jokes. And he claims that, despite all appearances, everything really isn't bigger in Houston.

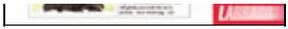
"We've spent some time debating whether or not that [fattest city] designation was fair," Brown said in a prepared statement. "[But] obesity is not one city's problem. It's America's problem. People are overweight because they overeat and do not exercise enough, not because they live in a certain part of the country." In fact, Brown points out that Houston has plenty of offerings for people who want to stay fit: 293 city parks, seven public golf courses, and 41 swimming pools, as well as a variety of sports and recreational programs for adults and children.

Last summer, the city launched a bilingual health-and-fitness campaign called "Get Lean Houston." Labrada, who likes to call himself a "fitness evangelist," was happy to spearhead the initiative. "As a resident of Houston for more than 20 years, I love this city and care about its image," he says. "I am equally passionate about giving people information and access to resources they need to achieve their personal health and fitness goals."

As the city's fitness czar, Labrada leads walks and races, gives press conferences, and makes TV appearances. He posts free diet and exercise tips on the website (www.getleanhouston.com). He encourages restaurant owners to offer lighter meals (already 50 eateries are participating). He's even leading a "fat drive," titled "Meltdown Houston," in which each citizen is asked to pledge from five to 20 pounds of fat. (So far, 20,000 pounds have been pledged—including 8,000 from listeners of a local radio station.)



Even the city government is getting into the svelte spirit: "I have lost over 20 pounds," Brown brags. "And our city council members lost over

 100 pounds, collectively. We're leading by example and showing the nation that we're serious about staying fit."

And Labrada practices what he preaches. Though he no longer competes, he trains as hard as ever and eats carefully (see sidebar). He's converted his entire garage into a gym, and he also set up a fitness facility at his business, where he works out with his employees.

His greatest challenge—in addition to staving off an occasional pecan-pie jones—is lack of time. After all, running a business and slimming down an entire city are demanding jobs. He has a family to tend to, as well—he's been married 18 years to wife Robin. They have three children: Pierce, age 4; Blade, 7; and Hunter, 10.

"It's hard to fit everything into the day," he admits. "But in order to take care of my business and my family, I have to take care of myself. It's an investment. My goal is to be in the best condition I can be."

HOW LEE LABRADA LOOKS SO GOOD

What's his secret? How does Lee Labrada look the way he does? You can do it, too, he claims. "To change, sculpt, and tone your body, you need vitamins, minerals, and essential fats, plus adequate calories to meet your energy demands—but not so much that you are storing it as fat. Add to that rest and resistance training."

Want to look like Lee? Here's the program he follows:

WORKOUT PLAN

Resistance training: Three days on/one day off

- Day one: back and biceps
- Day two: legs and calves
- Day three: Chest, triceps, and shoulders
- (Also fits in ab work on one of the three days)

Cardio: Jogging or biking three times a week.

DIET PLAN

Here's what Labrada eats in a typical day.

- Breakfast: protein shake* and oatmeal
- Mid-morning: muffin with bran and egg whites
- Lunch: broiled chicken or can of tuna, baked potato, salad
- Mid-afternoon: protein bar* and yogurt
- Dinner: broiled fish, steamed rice, steamed vegetables, salad
- Evening snack: oatmeal and protein drink*

"I eat small, frequent meals throughout the day to stimulate my metabolism," he says. "I have a little protein at each meal because protein stimulates metabolism and feeds muscle tissue. I shy away from fatty and red meat, and I use no mayonnaise or butter." Being only human, he admits to a fondness for pecan pie. "But I find that as long as I eat on a regular schedule, I can combat those cravings," he says.

* Of course, Labrada is partial to the Lean-Body brand protein bars and drinks made by Labrada Nutrition.

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