

special report

Are TV shows
focused on
fat helping
or hurting?

HOLLYWOOD'S **BIG** NEW OBSESSION

*From weight-loss competitions and reality shows to
scripted sitcoms, it seems fat has become the new thin*



Howard Stern verbally attacked Oscar nominee Gabourey Sidibe, saying, "She's enormous and will never be in another movie," but the *Precious* star just landed a role on Showtime's *The C Word*.

ASHLEY

PREVIOUS WEIGHT

374

CURRENT WEIGHT

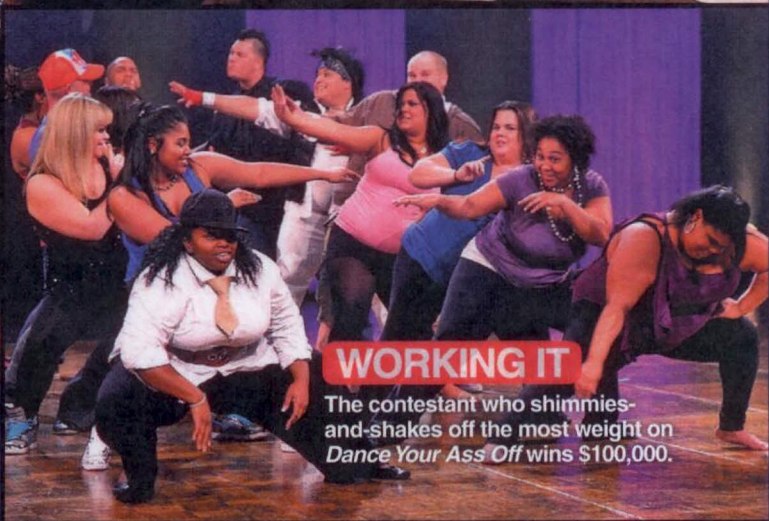
353

DIFFERENCE

-21

WINNING BIG

Contestants on *The Biggest Loser* make about \$750 a week during filming. At the end, runners-up get about \$50,000, while winners receive \$250,000.



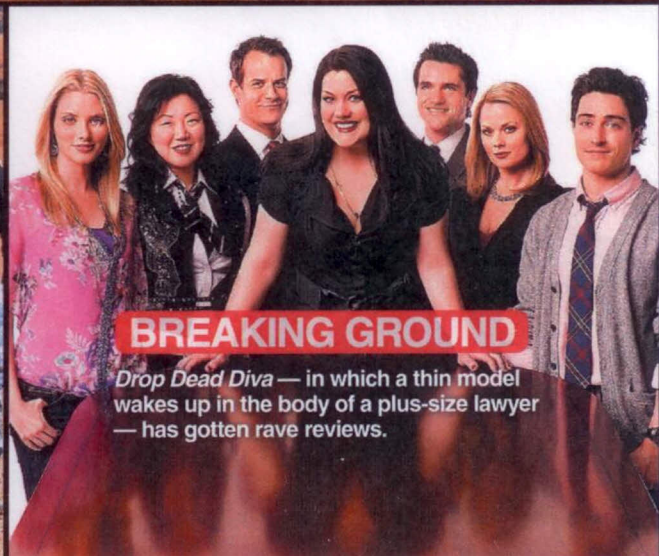
WORKING IT

The contestant who shimmies-and-shakes off the most weight on *Dance Your Ass Off* wins \$100,000.



STARS DIET, TOO

Famous faces — like Kevin Federline and ex Shar Jackson — can rake in \$200,000 for competing on shows like *Celebrity Fit Club: Boot Camp*.



BREAKING GROUND

Drop Dead Diva — in which a thin model wakes up in the body of a plus-size lawyer — has gotten rave reviews.

A FAMILY AFFAIR

Son Shayne Cole, here with mom Tameka, sister Amber and dad Norris, tells *In Touch*, "I knew I was fat, but I didn't care what people think — and I still don't."



"These shows are reflecting the makeup of America. We can relate."

— Dan Manu, Television Without Pity

Saygbay, "People love to see other people in embarrassing situations."

And as Dan Manu, site director of televisionwithoutpity

.com adds, "There's an audience out there that sympathizes and empathizes with the stars of all of these shows, but there are also people who look down on them and think, 'Thank God that's not me.'"

Bigger has become better

Last summer's plus-size dating show, *More to Love*, was also slammed for painting its overweight cast in a negative light. "These shows put bigger people on display in a way

Has Hollywood really changed its tune from "You can never be too thin" to "You can never be too fat"? From shows like *The Biggest Loser* and *Dance Your Ass Off* to *One Big Happy Family* and *Drop Dead Diva*, there are more overweight people on television than ever before. It's a trend that's been met with cheers — from some — and great ratings. But now, some critics question whether this trend is promoting diversity or exploiting the plus-sized for ratings.

The newest show to come under fire for "fatsploitation" — a term used to describe the trend of exploiting larger people for monetary gain — is TLC's *One Big Happy Family*. The reality show — which follows the overweight Cole family as they

struggle to slim down without the help of trainers or nutritionists — has drawn some criticism for capitalizing on the brood's weight-loss trials and tribulations. "The goal of any show is first and foremost to entertain," explains Jerry L. Barrow, senior editor of *The Urban Daily*. "Audiences do like to see people win and overcome obstacles, but we also love to ogle the spectacle, too."

In one episode from the show's second season, the Cole family — who began season one each weighing more than 300 pounds and have since lost upward of 300 pounds among them — is turned away from rides at an amusement park. Says Dallas radio personality Papy

that viewers just eat up," explains Samhita Mukhopadhyay, executive editor of *feministing.com*. "But they're not portraying overweight people in a way that helps them be seen as socially accepted."

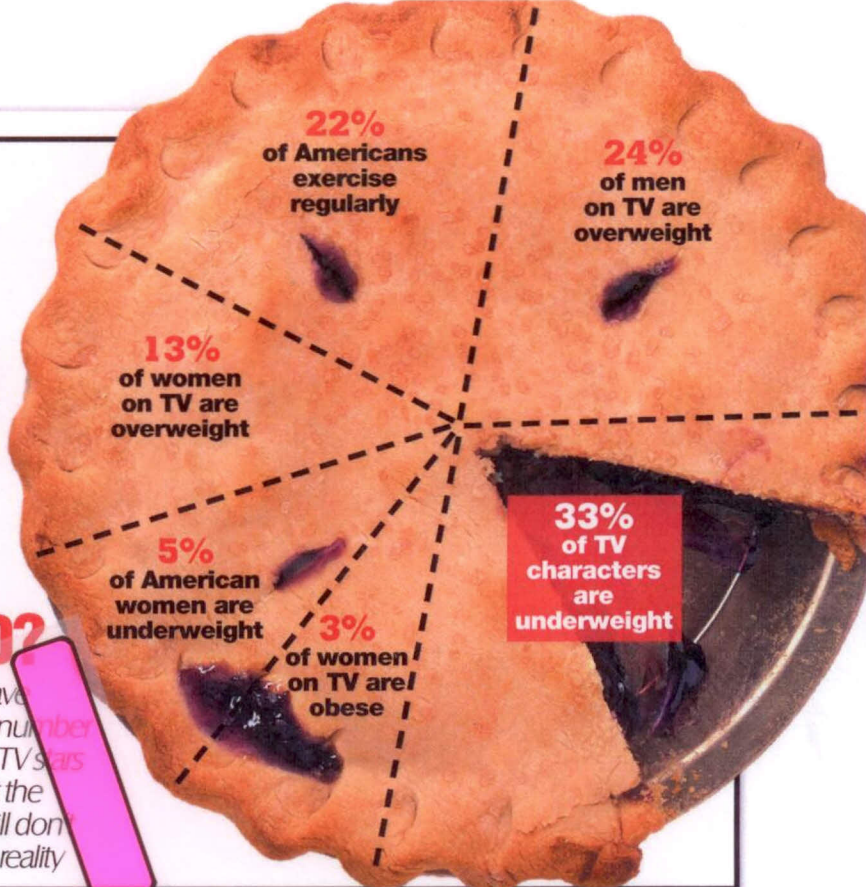
Competition-based shows like *The Biggest Loser* and *Dance Your Ass Off* reward contestants for losing weight and teaching healthier ways of living. "It's about helping the contestants, but let's not get confused," says radio star Saygbay. "Ultimately, they want ratings."

While some social commenters are worried about exploitation, it's not unheard of for overweight people to gain more weight to get a slot on a popular show like *The Biggest Loser*. "I've met a lot of people on my travels who have said, 'I want to be on the show so bad, but I'm not heavy enough, so I need to gain weight,'" Ali Vincent, winner of season five and the face of Exercise TV, tells *In Touch*. "The show offers a lot of great opportunities, and I think people want that, but that's not the way to go about it." Adds season eight winner Danny Cahill, "There was talk about one contestant who may have gained weight just to get on the show. That's sad. If they're thinking of it, I would really urge them not to."

Sending a positive message
When it comes to creating a more

HOW DOES TV STACK UP TO THE REAL WORLD?

Researchers have found that the number of overweight TV stars has grown, but the percentages still don't match up with reality



accepting society for people who struggle with weight and obesity issues, some experts argue that TV is not the right platform. "It's bad," says Jackie Keller, nutrition expert and the founding director of NutriFit, "and here's why: Obesity is unhealthy."

Counting diabetes and heart disease among the dangers of excess weight, Keller believes *The Biggest Loser* "sets an unrealistic picture of weight loss for the average person." But it's easy to understand why there are so many weight-loss series out there. The shows are relatively easy to produce, and they are big

money-makers for weight-related merchandising, such as weight-loss cookbooks, exercise videos and sports equipment.

Still, Melanie "Mel B" Brown, the new host of *Dance Your Ass Off*, tells *In Touch* that shows like *DYAO* serve as inspiration, not exploitation. "This is a great show, and the contestants love every single minute of it," she says. "We are definitely sending a positive message to anyone who wants to change their life. We are showing them that they can lose weight in a healthy way."

WHEN FAT GOES TOO FAR

New Jersey mom Donna Simpson, who weighs nearly 600 pounds, made headlines for her controversial quest to gain 400 more pounds, become the world's heaviest woman and get a reality show. "I contacted her and offered her money to stop the madness and let me help her; she said no," weight loss/obesity expert Dr. Sanford Siegal (of Dr. Siegal's Cookie Diet) tells *In Touch*. "It scares me to think there might be a movement saying, 'Let's see how fat we can get!'"



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