

Lighter & faster in four weeks

Acutely aware that his weight is holding him back, *Steve Shrubsall* commits to a bespoke diet plan. Will it work?

After thousands of miles, hundreds of hill sprints and a handful of head-to-head clashes with the older brother, I had to face up to the truth: my improvement on the bike had hit a stubborn plateau, and my stomach was to blame. I'd made many half-baked pacts with myself to cut back on calorific indulgences, but time and again failed to honour them. Despite sustaining a decent training volume of around 150 miles per week, my weight had crept up and my average speeds were beginning to suffer. It was time to draft in some help — I needed some structure and a plan.

I decided to call on the know-how and wisdom of a professional: experienced nutritionist Anita Bean. We met in person and I confessed all, showing her a three-day excerpt from my normal diet. It wasn't the worst she'd ever seen, she said, sympathetically. This worried me. Was it the second-worst?

Regardless, a couple of tweaks, Anita reassured me, would get my eating back on track, help me lose some weight and, crucially, increase my speed. Over the next four weeks, I would follow her personalised diet plan. The scales would not be my only judge — I'd ride a 10-mile time trial at the beginning and repeat at the end; the proof of the pudding-avoidance would be in the pedalling.

Drawing up the plan
Nutritionist *Anita Bean*
(anitabean.co.uk) explains how

she created a diet plan for Steve Shrubsall that was designed to be sustainable and give him the best possible chance of hitting his weight-loss target.

Steve's main goal was to lose weight. He wasn't overweight by everyday standards but felt the surplus pounds around his midsection were slowing him down on the bike — he knew from past experience that dropping a few pounds would help him get

up the hills a little quicker. Based on his weight, build and training programme, we set a weight-loss target of 7lb in four weeks.

The first thing I asked Steve to do was keep a three-day food diary. This would give me a picture of his current eating habits. Crucially, for a diet plan to be successful, it needs to take account of a person's lifestyle, food preferences and budget. I subscribe to the view that a person is more likely to change their eating habits and achieve their health and fitness goals if they apply the principle of minimal disruption. Healthy eating habits are most likely to last when they are least disruptive. This means the diet Steve was most likely to stick to was the one he was already

following — but with small step-wise modifications.

My job was, firstly, to ensure Steve's diet provided a moderate (15 per cent) energy deficit to enable him to lose weight while still providing enough nutrients to meet his body's needs, and secondly, to improve upon the overall nutritional quality of his diet. I made a rough estimation of his calorie and macronutrient intake using dietary analysis software — it's important to know your starting point and benchmark your progress — and then calculated his 'ideal' intakes using standard formulae.

Next, I discussed with Steve whether he would prefer to follow a tailored diet plan or to use a 'flexible dieting' approach in which he would be free to eat whatever he wanted provided it fitted his daily calorie and macronutrient targets. The advantage of a personalised diet plan, I explained, is that it gives you an eating structure so you're less likely to fall off the dieting wagon. It takes the guesswork out of meal planning and takes account of your likes, dislikes and your lifestyle. On the other hand, flexible dieting (i.e. not following a plan) allows you to set your

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Eat this not this

Diet in a day: post-plan

Breakfast: Porridge cup, apple, half punnet blueberries
Lunch: Wholemeal wrap with 100g of chicken, leafy salad, teaspoon mayo, half an avocado, blueberries
Dinner: Stir-fry, including 200g prawns, egg noodles, lots of veg
Snacks: Fruit, nuts, bread sticks
Before/during rides: Bananas, 9bars, dried fruit
Treats: One packet crisps per week, beer on occasion

Diet in a day: pre-plan

Breakfast: Porridge, banana, apple, coffee
Morning snacks: Occasional piece of cake, biscuit or bar
Lunch: Two sweet potatoes, third of a wheel of Brie, salad, avocado, crisps, Diet Coke
Afternoon snack: Biscuits, cake on occasion
Dinner: Sausage and mash with peas and onion gravy
Snacks: Becks lager or two, crisps, chocolate
Full disclosure: Typically included larger lunches, several more sweet snacks, and 'winding down' treats such as a kebab, chips and a few more beers.

own rules — though you do need to track your food intake (using an app or online tracker such as MyFitnessPal, My Macros or Fitocracy Macros). In reality, the more flexible option can be more time-consuming and trickier to put into effect.

Steve wanted a tailored diet plan. So, I asked him lots of questions about his current eating habits and then suggested specific ways to make them better, applying the principle of minimal disruption. Behind the scenes, I adjusted his calories from 2,600 per day to 2,100 and calculated his protein, carbohydrate and fat requirements (158g, 264g and 53g respectively). His plan resembled his current diet but with a few changes, including:

- He kept the porridge pot he liked eating for breakfast at his desk but made it healthier by adding blueberries or apple. That meant no more mid-morning cravings for Freddo chocolate bars!

- Steve normally ate sweet potatoes for lunch; now, instead of eating two, he cut down to one, added a portion of tinned salmon or mackerel (for omega-3s) and a bigger salad for greater filling power and antioxidants.

- I suggested he ate a packet of crisps once a week instead of every day. Banning foods only makes you crave them more.

- Previously, Steve's evening meals were a hit-and-miss affair — often Indian takeaways or egg mayo sandwiches if he got home late. I provided three go-to options that he could make in advance or rustle up in 15 minutes (prawn and veg stir-fry; grilled fish with roast veg; chicken and veg curry).

- He replaced his Quality Street snack habit with fruit, almonds, plain yoghurt and seeds.

- Steve had never properly fuelled for his long rides before, but on this diet plan his muscle glycogen stores would be lower, so I knew he would struggle to keep going without snacks. So he included an extra snack before long rides as well as snacks (dried fruit, bars, bananas) during the ride.

Steve Shrubsall's weight-loss diary

Week 1

Start weight: 14st

Saturday morning — pre-diet time trial

I'm snared, trapped in a thick mist of acute pain. My legs, my lungs, my knees, my toes — every single fibre of my being implores me to stop riding this instant. "Just what on Earth do you think you're playing at?" screams my body. "I'm doing a bloody time trial," I rasp in reply. There's no response. Just white noise interspersed with profoundly laboured breaths, until... finally... 10 miles appears on my Garmin. I stop, sweat pouring from my brow, and check the time: 27:50. Semi-respectable for a chap of my current (14st) stature, but there's definitely room for improvement.

Saturday night rolls around, and I'd usually opt for a tray or two of greasy take-away fare and a few beers in front of the TV. But not tonight.

Tonight's menu features egg noodles, 200g of shrimp and a veritable sackful of stir-fried veg. And while it's no king prawn pasanda, it's very tasty and it feels good to be eating genuinely healthy food rather than binging on fat-ridden junk.

Wednesday

My new lunches are taking some getting used to — not the content but the quantity. Today I feasted ravenously on 100g of chicken, half a bag of leafy salad, and a (liberal) dollop of (full-fat) mayo, all encased in a wholewheat wrap. It barely touched the sides. I think I have to learn to eat with less haste if I want to progress with this diet.

Weight: 13st 8lb

10-mile time: 27:50

Week 2

Saturday

Last week, including the initial 10-mile time trial, I rode just shy of 100 miles. I generally ride more — averaging the better part of 150 — but as a result of work and family commitments, I was unable to fit in a full week of commutes or embark on my usual Sunday-afternoon trek deep into the wilds of the Home Counties. Regardless, I

have already lost a surprising six pounds. Much of this rapid reduction will be glycogen and water, but I'm now only a pound away from my target loss of seven pounds. Can I consolidate my progress over the next three weeks?

Tuesday

The path to a slimmer, fitter and ultimately faster me has been hindered by 'the bonk'. Reduced glycogen levels have rendered me totally depleted after as little as five miles on the bike — something that I seldom suffered even during century rides pre-diet. I emailed Anita. Her advice was straightforward: fuel your rides. Of course, this wasn't an alien concept, but having cycled for so long with a surplus supply of carbohydrate, I'd never been made aware of how critical proper fuelling can be. So, by

the end of week two, I'd learnt to go more bananas and less bonkers, packing a gel or two just in case.

Weight: 13st 9lb

Week 3

Saturday

Amid week two's trial and error, I managed to rack up 130 miles in the saddle, most of which came by way of commutes. My usual ride to work is a 28-mile round trip, but there are plenty of variations that allow me to ride further. This satisfactory

tally, combined with abiding religiously by the diet plan, had left me feeling, I don't mind telling you, really rather smug.

Imagine my utter awe and befuddlement, then, when I stepped on to the scales at the end of the second week and was greeted with a figure higher than that of the previous one. I checked and checked again, but the scales were insistent. I stood dumbfounded as the LCD display mocked me: 13st and nine pounds!

This bombshell led to my one and only slip-up of the entire month. But it was a large one. In fact, it was probably less a slip-up, more a 17-storey blooper. My daughters had been invited to a party, you see. And with children's parties usually comes and abundance of unhealthy snacks...

Weight: 13st 8lb

“Saturday night rolls around, and I'd usually opt for a tray or two of greasy take-away fare and a few beers. But not tonight”



Week 4

Saturday

I can't see anything — certainly not with any clarity. I can't really hear anything either. Just a series of muffled groans punctuated with occasional whimpers. Yes, I'm back in the hurt box. Riding 10 miles as fast I can. Suffering, suffering, suffering.

However, the concluding week of my diet has been a good one. After last week's hiccup-cum-catastrophe, I dusted myself off and got straight back on the steed. I was now becoming more accustomed to the idea

of eating specifically for training sessions, my stomach complained ever less of the smaller portions. I was feeling chipper and I'd reached my target weight of 13st 7lb. But would it make me faster on the bike?

I could just about make out the ad hoc finish marker, a humble bramble bush, a few hundred yards up the road. And finally, with my heart racing at 188bpm, I passed that hallowed section of nondescript vegetation and checked my time: 27:18.

Weight: 13st 7lb

10-mile time: 27:18 (32sec improvement)

8 vital diet plan dos & don'ts

Do ■ Fill up with extra veg (ideally five portions each day) — they're especially good if you're trying to lose weight, as they're low in calories, dense in essential nutrients and provide fibre that helps boost gut health.

- Weigh yourself weekly, or measure your waist circumference. Tracking your progress will help keep you focused and boost motivation.

- Plan ahead: plan your meals a day or two in advance and always shop with a list to help avoid impulse purchases.

- Learn to cook: having more control over what you eat means you'll consume fewer calories, less sugar and more nutrients.

Don't ■ Go it alone — friends, family and nutritionists can help you stay on track.

- Try to make too many drastic changes to your diet — you won't be able to stick to them long-term and will revert to old eating habits.

- Eliminate any foods completely, as it'll only make you want them more. You'll end up eating them anyway and feeling guilty.

- Battle with hunger — if you're struggling to complete your rides, eat an extra banana beforehand and take emergency supplies of bars, dried fruit and gels with you.

Nutritionist's verdict

Steve met his weight loss target on the nose: 7lb in four weeks, dropping from 14st to 13st 7lb. The swift initial loss in weight was expected because when calories are reduced, the amount of stored glycogen falls (and 1g of glycogen is stored with about 3g of water). Any faster rate of weight loss may have resulted in power-reducing muscle loss. Better still, Steve improved his time trial performance by 32 seconds, despite the fact he had done less cycling than usual during the four weeks.

The most important factor was that Steve actually stuck to his diet plan, and he plans to carry on with it. Sustainability is key for long-term success — you don't want to go through cycles of piling on weight in the off-season, then struggling to get it off in the spring.