



## My Favorite Success Story: A Sedentary Surgeon who Transformed his Life

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September 08 2014

When asked to consider writing a piece on a patient success story, I immediately began to mentally sort through the countless experiences I've been so privileged to share over my many years in practice. Numerous stories came to mind, but one in particular — actually, he's a colleague, not a patient — is my personal favorite.

Years ago, I met a young physician in the midst of his residency. He worked 80 to 120 stressful hours per week. His diet was composed primarily of cafeteria grub: foods like subs, burgers, fries, pizza, and mystery meats. Physical activity was limited to the confines of the hospital walls — a call to the ER might lead to an occasional sprint ... to the elevator. His hours outside the hospital were dedicated solely to sleep. This was not an ideal lifestyle for promoting health and wellness.

Over the years, this physician steadily gained weight and maintained a sedentary lifestyle. His sleep cycles became interrupted with periods of loud snoring and abrupt awakenings, a consequence of excess girth. Sleep apnea was diagnosed, and he was prescribed a CPAP machine, an unpleasant contraption that is placed over the mouth and nose to help prevent those periods of breathlessness. This gentleman was now significantly overweight and approaching obesity.

In late 2008 came a turning point. At age 40, he was hospitalized for nearly two weeks for a serious hand infection that could easily have led to amputation if not treated promptly. His recovery from this ordeal was slow and difficult. He had lost much of the function and form of the index finger on his dominant hand, an extraordinary challenge for a physician and surgeon.

This near-catastrophic event served as the motivation to finally make a change. It wasn't just a trigger to start making better incremental choices, maybe eating an apple or going for a walk. "I am going to complete an Ironman triathlon," he declared, shortly after his close brush with the career-ending hand infection.

For those unfamiliar with this gargantuan venture, it is a race that begins with a 2.4-mile swim, followed by a 112-mile bike ride, and then a full marathon (26.2-mile run). I advised him to consider training for a 5K instead,

but he was intent on pursuing his dream.

Over the next 18 months he dramatically changed his diet, incorporating voluminous amounts of vegetation, whole grains, and legumes, and swapping out meats, cheeses, and processed foods. He began a meticulous training regimen that was strict, relentless, and disciplined.

I witnessed his physique sharpen and strengthen over this period. He no longer required a breathing machine, because his sleep apnea had resolved. His energy levels skyrocketed as the pounds came off. By the end of the 18-month journey, a 30-pound weight loss had left behind a lean and fit triathlete who was ready to take on the challenging hills of Lake Placid, New York.

In July of 2010, just as he had envisioned a year and half earlier, my colleague crossed the finish line at Ironman Lake Placid, one of the more challenging courses of the Ironman circuit. This extraordinary feat by this heroic man was admirably witnessed by his wife and two children. His level of fitness and dedication to wellness continues to this day.

July 27<sup>th</sup> 2014 marked Ironman #5 for my husband Dr. Ralph Pellecchia. For a fifth consecutive year, I waited at the finish line with our children Nicholas and Emily, in awe of his continued courage and commitment to wellness.

My husband's fearless success story is most definitely my personal favorite. I do hope it is one you enjoyed.