



# FIT FOR LIFE

*Peter Nielsen whips West Bloomfield into shape*

By Karen Buscemi Photos by Daniel Lippitt



*This page: Peter Nielsen in his West Bloomfield personal training club. Opposite page: Ida Menzin, who lost 140 pounds, works out at the West Bloomfield club six days a week.*

Peter Nielsen has motivation to stay in shape. After being close to death twice – the last time only five years ago – he knows that proper nutrition and exercise have kept him alive far longer than his childhood doctors could have predicted.

As a personal trainer, TV personality and entrepreneur, Nielsen has built himself a small empire, all based on fitness and diet. And the bubbly fitness guru is

having the time of his life keeping that empire growing.

“One needs to love, with a passion, what they do,” Nielsen explains. “When you love, truly, what you do, and you know definitively why you’re here, it’s easy. I ask my maker every day, ‘Just give me my health so that I can do what you want me to do, and enjoy my family and friends and help people.’ ”

The headquarters for his endeavors is on Orchard Lake Road in West Bloomfield – the same location as his Peter Nielsen’s Personal Training Club. It’s also where Nielsen is about to take on his next venture: adding space to his club to partner with the Rehabilitation Institute of Michigan, part of Detroit Medical Center (DMC).

“I’m geeked on it!” says Nielsen,

who is certified in exercise science from the International Sports Sciences Association. “I’ve really wanted to do this. I’m not a doctor – my background is in exercise science and nutrition, and I do it well – and to be able to partner with people who are experts in their field makes the synergy fantastic.”

“He walks the walk and talks the talk, so to partner with someone so committed to health and wellness, which is also our cause, was a natural fit,” says Cheryl Angelelli, director of marketing and public relations for the Rehabilitation Institute of Michigan.

The Rehabilitation Institute of Michigan has partnered with 22 other health clubs across southeast Michigan that offer similar rehabilitation services. Starting in May, patients can get their rehabilitation closer to home through certified, registered physical therapists at this 1,200-square-foot rehab center. It also gives them a chance to experience the benefits of personal training.

When Ida Menzin, 52, of West Bloomfield, started at Nielsen’s club in May 2005, she was able to complete only five minutes on a treadmill. Weighing 320 pounds, Menzin decided to get bariatric surgery – a gastrointestinal operation that seals off part of the stomach to reduce the amount of food that can be eaten. First, though, she had to increase her oxygen level, so she wouldn’t have to use a respirator after the surgery.

“I started with five minutes, and by August, I was doing a half hour on the treadmill,” Menzin says. “I had the surgery on Thursday, came home on Saturday and was back here on Monday. I started with three days

a week, and now I go six days a week. I love it.”

Menzin now weighs 180 pounds, and her goal is to reach 140. She points out that she’s reduced her waist by 23 inches. More importantly, she no longer has high blood pressure or high cholesterol, and her diabetes is under control.

“Nielsen’s taught me that exercise is not only a way of life, it’s a form of medicine,” she says. “I was on 10 pills a day, and now I’m only on Flintstone’s vitamins.”

She calls it a copout when people use a lack of money as an excuse for not getting a personal trainer.

“We find ways to waste our money in other places,” Menzin explains. “All the money I spent on my prescriptions is now going toward a trainer. I always wanted to change my eating habits and never could. With the help of the

surgery and learning from Peter Nielsen’s, I’ve succeeded.”

#### SIXTY-EIGHT-POUND WEAKLING

Long before Nielsen could help others succeed, he first had to help himself. At the age of 15, while living in Brooklyn, N.Y., he was diagnosed with Crohn’s disease – a chronic disorder that causes inflammation of the digestive or gastrointestinal tract. The disease caused Nielsen to drop from 128 pounds to 86 pounds. He missed a year and a half of school and lost a foot of his intestines. His medication made his hair fall out, “and I’m pretty proud of my hair,” he says. His doctors gave him a few years to live.

“I went on a pity party and I really didn’t like myself. I felt like a pink, polka-dotted leprechaun,” he says of the alienation he felt.



"I manifested this negative energy, and started seeing the glass as half empty."

Nielsen says he was the goalie on his hockey team, but no one wanted him on the team because he was always sick. The girl on whom he had a "puppy love crush" found a new boyfriend. And his parents began to blame each other for his disease.

"Fear channeled wrong turns into anger," Nielsen says. "They were arguing because they didn't know how to do anything for me. They were out of control."

As he watched his family and friends returning to their normal lifestyles, Nielsen noticed he was wasting energy feeling sorry for himself. "I realized, I have this one body from cradle to grave, and it's up to me to take knowledge and implement it correctly, and turn it into powerful things."

He began documenting the foods he ate – which ones made him feel good, and which ones made him sick. Though doctors told Nielsen he could eat anything, he knew better.

"Certain foods act as foreign objects, and my body wants to kill itself," he explains. "If I have dairy products or if I have skins of an apple, my body looks at it and can't

digest it, and starts rejecting it. It wants to kill the lining of my intestines until it bleeds and ulcerates. Eventually the lining dies and I have to have a piece of it cut out."

Nielsen discovered many triggers that let Crohn's Disease affect him, including too much sunlight, stress, and any alcohol or caffeine. But proper nutrition and recognizing triggers were only part of the equation for changing Nielsen's life. Exercise did the rest.

#### MR. UNIVERSE

Nielsen began his journey with bodybuilding in 1977, when he was 15. It took him only two and a half years to build a body that won him the Mr. Teenage American title.

"I was on a mission," Nielsen says. "My dad wanted me to get a regular job. I was the only person who didn't have a car, and he was like, 'Man, you're 10 cents short of

a quarter.' But I had my goals. I never worked for anyone in my life. It's very important to stay focused and stay driven.

"Exercise was like my glass of red wine," Nielsen explains.

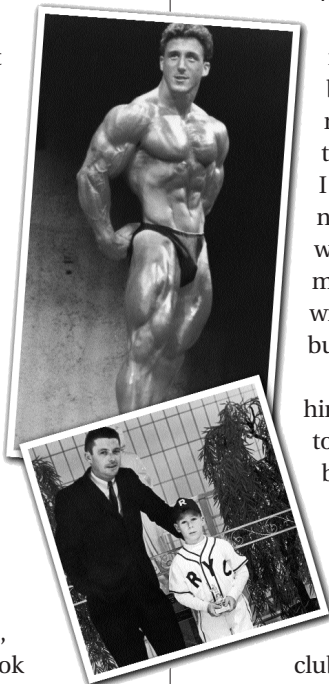
"It was my stress reliever. I built this body and got all these muscles, and I wanted to learn – not because I wanted to be a nutritionist, but I wanted to learn to make me feel good. I ended up winning over 70 bodybuilding titles."

His drive has taken him from Mr. Universe, to Peter's Principles, a brand that includes Nielsen's half-hour, syndicated television fitness show (seen locally on WDIV Local 4), a health club in Southfield (rated

by *Self* magazine one of the nation's best fitness centers), several books, radio shows, newspaper columns, nutritional supplements and salad dressings. In addition, he visits schools to educate kids about fitness, in partnership with Medical Weight Loss Clinics. He's also the national spokesperson for the Crohn's & Colitis Foundation of America. Nielsen says it's all part of his purpose in life.

"I want to be the national authority," he says. "I want to earn this country's trust with Peter's Principles. Nothing has ever been given to me, nor do I expect to be given anyone's trust. Being in more than 200 markets now, I know my [TV] show is bigger than me. I've been given the platform, and it's a blessing."

Terri Turpin-Amato, promotion manager at WDIV, says Nielsen's fitness advice hits home for many people. "A lot of our viewers have



This page, from top: Peter Nielsen during his body building days; Nielsen, at age 8, with dad, Pete Nielsen, during a Pee Wee Championship award ceremony in Brooklyn, N.Y.; Checking a taped segment of his half-hour fitness show. Opposite page: At home with daughters Erica (left) and Dana, and their bull mastiff, Thunder.

## FITNESS QUICK START

Peter Nielsen recommends splitting a fitness program into two areas of training, focusing on cardiovascular and resistance. "The best way to start is with a pair of legs," Nielsen says. "Anyone who can walk can exercise, by getting into a walking program." (Before starting any fitness program, it is always a good idea to check with your doctor.)

### THREE STEPS TO A SUCCESSFUL WALKING PROGRAM:

**Intensity.** Make sure you're working your muscles and getting your heart beating so you reach at least 75 percent

of your maximum heart rate. How to determine your heart rate: Take 220, minus your age, times 75 percent. That's how many beats your heart should be beating in a minute.

**Frequency.** Walk five to seven days, every week.

**Duration.** Your goal for each session should be 45-60 minutes. Nielsen says it's you against you, so work your way into fitness, starting with as little as five minutes per session and working toward a goal of 45-60 minutes.

### RESISTANCE TRAINING

"We lose a half percent of muscle every

year after 30," Nielsen notes. "Muscle burns twice as many calories as fat, and resistance training will turn back the hands of time, better than any plastic surgeon."

**Plan to weight-train three times a week.**

Your muscles need 48 hours between each workout, for cellular repair.

Each workout should include a warm up, and be followed by a cooldown.

Each resistance-training workout should consist of two exercises per body part – two sets of 10 repetitions each.

**Always do your cardiovascular work after weight training.** Do abdominal work at the end of your program, if you want to lose excess body fat.

told us that he has changed their lives for the better," Turpin-Amato says. "He's very passionate about what he does. He's all-consumed with it – you don't run into people like that every day. It's refreshing."

### FAMILY FITNESS

Nielsen lives on Commerce Lake in Commerce Township with his daughters Erica, 12, and Dana, 9. The family includes a bull mastiff and four Chihuahuas. Naturally, fitness and good eating habits are expected in the Nielsen household.

"This generation of our kids is the only generation so far, statistically, that won't outlive their parents," he says, citing information based on studies by the Mayo Clinic. "We as parents ... need to be mirrors for our children. My kids have never had yellow eggs; they have egg whites. They've never had pork hot dogs; they have turkey dogs or soy dogs," Nielsen says.

Still, he insists they are not neurotic about food. The kids do get fast food once in a while, and they're allowed to splurge with soft drinks, but Nielsen says they don't live on junk.

The Nielsen children have also incorporated fitness into their lives, and don't think of it as exercise, but as time to hang out with Dad.

"They'll spend 45 minutes on a stair climber, thinking it's cool to watch TV with me," he says. "They

don't realize they're getting a great heart workout. I play tennis, Jet Ski and ride horses with my girls. It brings you together while, at the same time, you're taking care of the most important thing in your body – your heart. If you say that exercise is great, but you're a remote control freak, it's not going to make an impact. But when [your kids] see you working out, and you pick something that's fun, they will also want to do it."



### INTO THE FUTURE

Nielsen never stops working, and is already looking forward to adding more items to his Peter's Principles brands. Though he says a number of products are being developed, he's particularly excited about teaming up with the Detroit-based Aunt Mid's produce company to create healthy salad dressings.

"Someone can be starving himself all day, get an innocent salad, and open up a little container of ranch dressing that has 450 calories and 19 grams of artery-clogging fat,"

he explains.

Nielsen chose healthy oils and other ingredients for his dressings, which are low in fat and calories, and are bursting with flavors appealing to kids. His picture and logo are on two of the Aunt Mid's line of salad dressings, a raspberry vinaigrette and a tropical poppy mango, and they can be purchased in most grocery stores. Nielsen is also working on an Eat Right Eat Light Peter's Principle salad, which will be available in the coming months.

"When I put my picture on something, I am very involved," he says. "I take what I do very seriously. I worked on [the dressings] from the logos to the bottles to the ingredients."

Whether building his body, fighting Crohn's Disease with good nutrition and exercise, or being inspirational through his TV show, Web site and public appearances, Nielsen is a force of energy. He will have to battle his disease for the rest of his life, but he's ready for it.

"I've been close to death twice, and when you have the fear of God in you and realize you can be taken out in a heartbeat, it becomes a valuable gift to have my life back," he says. "It made me childlike. I enjoy the moment in slow motion. I feel comfortable in my skin to be a goofball. I don't want this to be the end." ♦