

Hitting that Ninety Percent on the PT Test

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We all generally agree on what it takes to score well on the PT test, but not everyone exceeds the minimum standards, while some fail to meet the minimums. As someone who struggled in the past just to pass, I want to share a few tips that helped me succeed in my physical fitness goals.

A few years ago I was borderline obese. I didn't look it, but according to weight charts from the National Institute for Health (NIH), I was literally just a couple of pounds away from being considered obese. When the Air Force announced changes to the fitness standards in 2010; that there would be cut-offs for each category, and Airmen could fail if they didn't meet minimum standards in just one part of the test, I knew it was time for a change.

While I had been an active member of a gym since leaving the active Army in late 1995, I never really concerned myself with failing a PT test. I was never overweight and I was one of those naturals who, as long as I worked out a few times a week, could almost max the PT test. But my lifestyle changed in the mid-2000s when I had children and my job went from beating the pavement to spending a majority of time traveling abroad or sitting behind a desk. The first thing I had to do was a self-inflicted reality check. I had to be brutally honest with myself and accept the fact that my problem had more to do with my eating habits than the number of times I visited the gym each week. After all, my biggest challenge on the PT test was meeting the waist measurement standards. Before 2010 I often exceeded 39 inches, something that would fail me under the new standards.

After discussions with nutritionists, a doctor, and doing my own research online, I learned I needed to make one major change; I needed to cut the carbs. This is a common problem among Americans, and I wasn't immune to the issue. I learned that carbohydrates enter the body and if not burned within 15 minutes of consumption will start being stored as fat. And if you're not burning enough calories throughout the day, those deposits of fat will begin to add up. It was like a light switched on in my head after learning this. One evening I looked back over what I had eaten that day and I was disgusted. My day started with a bagel and cream cheese followed by a coke to wash it down. For lunch I had eaten a BBQ turkey sandwich with fries, baked beans, and a 32oz sweet tea (with refills). Finally, for dinner, I filled up with spaghetti, garlic bread, a salad, and a few glasses of juice. While spaghetti certainly has its share of nutrients, eating 2 or 3 servings worth can have the opposite affect. And of course, I failed to mention an evening snack. In the end, I realized I took in well over 400 grams of carbs that day, and this was probably the norm. They stack up really quick when you're not watching, and while it may not show in your early 20s, it'll certainly creep up on you a few years down the road.

I bring up diet, nutrition, and carbs for a reason. It is because the biggest lesson learned through all of this was that for me, my level of health and fitness had nothing to do with me going to the gym. My problem was 80% diet. We hear this, we read it, and we usually agree with it, but rarely do we do anything about it. As battlefield airmen, we've experienced physical fitness in basic training and tech school, and sometimes during drill weekends. But our civilian lives are often not conducive to keeping ourselves fit to fight, let alone showing up to take the PT test without fear of failure. For me, my answer was cutting carbs so I could slim down to around a 35 inch waist. Keep in mind that I cut carbs; I didn't cut them out completely. I went from consuming more than 400 grams a day to allowing 25 grams per meal. This brought about a healthy reduction in my weight over a period of time. I began this lifestyle change in January 2010 and by July that same year I had lost almost 30 pounds and was able to achieve a 95 on the PT test. Today, more than 2 years later, I still watch what I eat, but have allowed myself a

cap of 100 grams of carbs throughout each day. What's great, now, is that I'm at a level where I can splurge occasionally. I can enjoy myself at Cici's Pizza with my kids or I can gorge myself during one of our barbeques at drill. The key to success here is maintaining consistency.

Now, about that fitness routine, the one that'll help prepare you to not just excel on the PT test, but that will keep you slim and trim, and more importantly, fit to fight. If you fall into the category of worrying about making the waist measurement, then you'll need to concentrate on burning calories. The best way to do this is by focusing on cardio exercises such as running or using an elliptical. Before I saw the light, I used to think that 20 minutes of running was enough, but I soon learned that I was probably wasting my time if I spent any fewer than 30 minutes working a cardio routine. A lot of people hate running, and I'm no different. So mix it up a little as there are more ways to burn calories than running. If you're an average built guy like me, my suggestion would be to set your goal at burning at least 500 calories during your cardio portion of your workout. Although in the beginning I often spent enough time on a cardio machine to burn 1,000 calories at least twice a week. As an example, for me to burn 500 calories, I have to run 25 minutes at an 8:00 minute pace. Your caloric burn will vary depending on your weight. Women will have a tougher time reaching that 500 calorie goal as running at the same pace for the same period will burn significantly fewer calories; mainly because most women are smaller (weigh less) than men. The good news is the smaller you are, the fewer calories you have to burn. Don't forget to mix in some muscle building exercises as well. I mostly use my own body weight when I workout. Exercises such as push-ups, sit-ups, dips, and pull-ups, or a version of these, are often part of my daily routine. One of my signature workouts includes 30 minutes on a cardio machine followed by 4 sets of push-ups, flutter kicks, box jumps, and curls with a weight bar. What's cool about losing weight is that by default, you'll find yourself running faster and doing more push-ups and sit-ups. Why? Because as you begin to lose weight there is less of you to push up, pull up, or haul around that track.

About one month out from your scheduled PT test begin focusing on the specific PT test events. I usually use 2 days a week to workout solely on the push-ups, sit-ups and a 1 ½ mile run as fast as I can on the treadmill. A lot of people question my use of a treadmill, but I have proven time and time again, for more than 10 years, that I consistently shave a minute off of my PT test run after training exclusively on the treadmill. As an example, the fastest I have run on the treadmill was a little over 10 minutes. But come test day, I ran a 9:06. How? Well, I believe it's mostly psychological. Unlike out on the pavement, I can see what my pace is on the machine, so I naturally speed up during the PT test because I feel like I'm running too slowly. Like I said, it's purely psychological. One caveat to my training on a treadmill that I often fail to mention is how I always set the incline to 0.5, just to make up changes in grade out on the road that are not mimicked on the machine.

So that's it. That's how I stay in shape, keep the weight off, and achieve a score on the PT test in the nineties every time, most recently a 99.3%. You can read books, order P90X, or watch Dr. Oz, but if what you do only has temporary results, then it's not successful. While passing the PT test is good, the more important thing is long term health. And as I learned, simply working out isn't the answer, it truly is an 80/20 equation; 80% nutrition and 20% fitness.