



As Americans get fatter, military prospects get leaner

By Melissa Heckscher, Staff Writer

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Carson resident Favian Rodriguez lost 100 pounds just so he can enlist in the Army Reserve. (Sean Hiller/Staff Photographer)

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FEWER GOOD MEN

Only about 25 percent of the 31 million Americans age 17 to 24 are currently eligible to serve in the military. Here's what makes most ineligible:

About 35 percent are medically disqualified, with obesity a large factor in this.

18 percent have problems with drugs or alcohol.

9 percent are in the lowest aptitude category.

6 percent have other dependents and can't be accommodated.

Another 10 percent are unqualified, but are attending college.

5 percent have some level of minimal behavior.

Source: Dr. Curtis Troy, director for accession policy, office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel & Readiness

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Favian Rodriguez always wanted to be in the FBI.

The 21-year-old Carson resident even had a plan:

First, he'd join the Army, where a scholarship would help him get a degree in criminal justice and the military training would give him a leg up when applying for the police department.

Then, after about 10 years as a police officer and Army reservist, he'd have the perfect resume for the FBI.

The only problem? His weight.

"I wanted to join (the Army) when I was 18, but I knew I wasn't going to get accepted," said Rodriguez, who at 19 tipped the scale at weighed 280 pounds. "I knew I had to lose the weight."

And that he did. Two years after he began a strict diet and exercise plan that included restricting himself to 1,200 to 1,500 calories daily plus 90 minutes a day of jogging and weight-lifting sessions, the the 6-foot-tall Rodriguez looks slim – lanky, almost – at 185 pounds. His self-made-diet plan included lots of fruits, vegetables and proteins, and minimal carbohydrates.

Rodriguez's reward wasn't just a smaller pant size; it was a career.

In May, he signed a six-year contract to with the U.S. Army Reserves. He is scheduled to begin the 10 weeks of basic training in September, after

which he plans on applying with the Los Angeles or Long Beach police departments. (As an Army reservist, he will be obligated to serve one weekend a month.)

"I can't sit back and do nothing," said Rodriguez, who currently works as a FedEx handler. "I have to go out there and do something to help the community."

Rodriguez said he has battled weight issues since middle school, but it was only a few years ago – when a doctor told him he needed to lose weight or suffer risk serious health consequences – that he decided to change.

"I'm glad my doctor told me I had to lose weight," he said. "I I didn't tell the doctor this, but I also had tingling in my fingers, which is a sign of diabetes."

Army recruiter Sgt. Delvin L. Garmon calls Rodriguez's weight loss an exception to the rule. In recent years, Garmon said, he's has seen more and more overweight people coming into the Army recruiting office, and most of them never lose the weight needed to enlist.

"We tell people they should come back when they've lost the weight," said Garmon, 30, who didn't work directly with Rodriguez during his diet plan. "I've never seen anyone come back."

It's no secret that America is getting fatter. According to studies, one in five Americans ages 18 to 34 – the prime recruiting age – are obese.

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Garmon said he worries that America's obesity problem won't just affect America's waists; it will affect its national security, too.

"The fatter America gets, the more lenient the military is going to get with their regulations," he said.

It could happen. According to a joint study conducted by Johns Hopkins University and the University of Buffalo, about one in six young Americans are heavy enough to fail the weight requirements for all four military services.

"We're not physically fit to defend ourselves," Dr. Carlos Crespo, a University of Buffalo professor. Dr. Carlos Crespo, who co-authored the study, said in a report. "As a society, we need to be physically prepared to respond to natural disasters, acts of terrorism, or any other emergency."

In a March 3 hearing before the House Armed Services Committee's military personnel subcommittee, the Pentagon's accessions chief, Curtis Gilroy, cited physical fitness deficiencies and a lack of a high school diploma as the two leading factors in disqualifying nearly three-quarters of the majority of 17- to 24-year-olds being ineligible to serve in the military.

"We have a crisis in this country," Gilroy said. "When we add up all these disqualifiers, we find that only 25 percent of our young people today ages 17 to 24 are qualified for military service."

To join the Army, recruits can't be over 28 percent body fat. Garmon said recruiters will work with potential soldiers who are battling a "borderline" weight problems.

"We don't expect everybody to be a stud when they join the Army," Garmon said. "We'll train them."

As for Rodriguez, Garmon said he'll be fine.

"Rodriguez will be better than the people he's going in with," he said, "which is going to help him become the iron man of his platoon."

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