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June 2010

## Bear Minimum

### Zoo Resident Loses Weight, Finds Mate

By Meegan Herman

Life isn't easy for an obese Andean bear. Just ask Nikki. He arrived at the National Zoo three years ago after being rejected by his potential mate at his old zoo. Still, he had excellent prospects--if he could lose the 115 pounds of excess fat. The goal was to lose it in six months. 115 pounds. Six months. That's daunting whether you're bear or human. Luckily Nikki had nutritionist Karen Lisi on his team.

The first thing Lisi did was calculate Nikki's total caloric needs. She took his health issues into consideration and used a dog/cat model to determine he needed to lose one percent of his body weight. She designed a meal plan just for him and, to make it easier for the keepers, she made his plan modular. The result: A sort of color-coded, mix-and-match program for bears, with a list of different foods that could be used to fill each slot at any meal. Lisi and the keepers hoped the very sedentary bear would lose his "Super Size Me" personality and exhibit more natural behaviors once he felt better.

Andean (spectacled) bears like Nikki are small bears found in the wild in the Andes Mountain range of South America. They are excellent tree climbers and survive on a diet largely of plants and fruits. They don't hibernate, and they have opposable thumbs that allow them to "hold on to things" after a fashion. Because they're considered a vulnerable species, they're part of a worldwide Species Survival Program, so zoos work to breed these bears and maintain genetic diversity. Nikki's entry in their bear equivalent of Match.com identified Billie Jean, a young bear from the only surviving birth bred in the United States in the last five years, as a suitable mate.

All that stood between Nikki and Billie Jean was those 115 pounds! It took him seven months, but Nikki did his part. With the help of his trainers, he even stayed on track when the scale was out of commission and he couldn't be weighed for nearly three months. As he lost weight, he did become more active, climbing and even turning over rocks and logs to hunt for insects to eat. Yet, once he lost those 115 pounds, Lisi recognized that he still had another 44 to go. Nikki lost 160 pounds in all.

Billie Jean has always been buff--and all Andean bear. She arrived at the zoo in great shape, and with plenty of natural bear behaviors, two years after Nikki. She was such a good and curious climber that keepers had to make modifications to her enclosure to keep her challenged. But they were amazed when she displayed a totally instinctive behavior and built herself a nest in the mulberry tree in her yard. In the wild, Andean bears climb up in a tree and eat the fruit as they make the nest. Billie Jean "was breaking the branches and bending them over to weave them in. Creating a real nest even though she's never seen one. . ." says keeper Tracey Barnes. "It was totally instinctive. . . I have goose bumps just talking about it."

Once she settled in, it was time for an introduction. First, the keepers put Nikki and Billie Jean in adjoining enclosures--indoors and outdoors--so they could grow accustomed to one another. That soon progressed to some time together in the same outdoor enclosure. From the start the two were playful, and from there things took their natural course. To the utter delight of the keepers, Nikki and Billie Jean mated--ahead of schedule. And the mating resulted in a pregnancy with two cubs!

To keep tabs on the cubs in utero, keeper Karen Abbott made use of some natural bear behaviors. When Billie Jean sat on something that was a bit too small, she'd hold on to something else to keep her balance. Knowing how much she loves to climb, Abbott and Barnes modified some designs from other zoos and had a seat made in the metal shop. The seat could be clamped to the barred door to Billie Jean's indoor enclosure. While the bear held the bars to keep her balance, Abbott fed her a snack. This gave the ultrasound technician the opportunity to capture a clear image of the two fetuses, so clear that they could see the spinal development of the cubs.



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At 3 years old, Billie Jean is still technically a cub herself for another year. But she's been a fantastic mom from the start. You can see for yourself on the webcam until the cubs make their public debut in late May/early June.

We can't ask Nikki what he thinks about these big changes in his life but we can observe that he's looking good, hanging out, staying active--a credit to Andean bears around the globe and an inspiration to humans working to change eating habits and get in shape. After all, if a bear can do it, why can't you?

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**Andean Bear Cam:** [nationalzoo.si.edu/Animals/Amazonia/default.cfm#cam](http://nationalzoo.si.edu/Animals/Amazonia/default.cfm#cam)

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