



by S. Indra Sathibalan

LOOK out for *The Biggest Loser Asia*, which premieres next Tuesday on the Hallmark Channel. The 14 weekly reality show is packed with interesting contestants, drama and excitement, with all the highs and lows, promises its executive producer, Riaz Mehta.

Helmed by the bubbly Sarimah Ibrahim, the series will see 30 Asian contestants being holed up in an undisclosed location somewhere in Malaysia and whipped into shape by no-nonsense personal trainers Dave Nuku from New Zealand and Kristy Curtis from Australia.

The Biggest Loser Asia, sponsored by Fitness First and Malacca-based A'Formosa, is the Asian version of the hugely-successful US reality show which is now well into its eighth season.

Aired in over 90 countries worldwide, *The Biggest Loser* has spawned local versions in Australia, Britain, Hungary, New Zealand, Brazil and Germany.

It is understood that the taping of *The Biggest Loser Asia* started about six weeks ago but the producers are keeping mum over the contestants' details and the exact venue where all the action is taking place.

"You'll know everything when

On challenge to lose

THE CONTESTANTS FOR THE FIRST ASIAN EDITION OF THE BIGGEST LOSER ARE REVEALED AS THE REALITY SHOW GOES ON AIR NEXT TUESDAY



(above) Hopeful contestants at an audition in Kuala Lumpur.

(top, right) Trainers Curtis and Nuku with host Sarimah (right).



the show premieres," says Riaz.

Will the Asian edition be just as exciting and inspirational as its other counterparts? "Even more I think," says Riaz. "Given what I have seen over the past few weeks, we have more drama on our show. Viewers can expect more from this show because of the Asian element."

But aren't Asians more restrained and reserved about expressing their feelings and emotions openly?

Riaz, however, feels otherwise. "We are becoming as outgoing and open about things as westerners. I think we're heavily influenced by American TV as well."

The executive producer (below) pointed out that during the auditions, some of the contestants broke down while talking about why they wanted to be on the show. Some got so carried away that they started singing!

The good news is viewers will get to see footage of these auditions when *The Biggest Loser Asia* debuts next week.

As with the American version, the contestants are divided into two teams and each week will see one of them being eliminated from the show based on votes cast by their team mates.

The person who loses the highest percentage of weight wins the grand prize



of US\$100,000 (RM356,251) and a Renault car.

Asked if trainers Nuku and Curtis will turn out to be as iconic as America's Bob Harper and Jillian Michaels, Riaz said enthusiastically: "Absolutely! Without a shadow of a doubt."

He added that the two share similar traits with their US counterparts.

He guaranteed that the Asian version was worth watching. "You ain't seen nothing yet. Every moment is worth waiting for!"

Asked if Nuku and Curtis were selected because they worked for sponsor Fitness First, he clarified that there was no clause which stipulated that the trainer's job had to be given to someone from the sponsoring company.

"We just cast the net wide looking for trainers in Asia and Australia. It just happened that the best were attached to Fitness First."

He also said that whether or not Malaysia would be chosen as the host country for the next season of *The Biggest Loser Asia* depended on the availability of sponsors.

When Hallmark announced a few months ago that contestants were being sought for the very first Asian edition of *The Biggest Loser*, over 2,000 people from across Asia showed up for auditions that took place in cities like Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and Bangkok.

The *Biggest Loser Asia* premieres on Hallmark (Astro Channel 702) on Nov 24 at 9pm and will air every Tuesday at 9pm.

On your marks

Catch Asia's biggest losers in action.

By S. INDRAMALAR

AFTER months of promotions, *The Biggest Loser Asia* – the Asian edition of the phenomenally successful reality TV series is set to air on Nov 24 on the Hallmark channel.

In the United States, the show (which is into its eighth season now) has spawned top-selling DVD, fitness equipment, health supplements, diet plans and books and even – can you believe it – a resort! Don't believe me? Check out biggestloserreboot.com. There is also a Biggest Loser Club which offers support and help for those who want to shed weight and don't know where to start or what to do.

The series is aired in 90 countries worldwide (there are about 190 countries in the world – that's almost half) and is franchised in 25 countries.

There is no doubt about it, the series is huge. And finally, after five years (the show first aired in 2004 in the United States) we now have the Asian version, for our increasingly overweight population.

Globally, World Health Organisation estimates that more than 1 million adults are overweight and at least 300 million of them are clinically obese. In the United States – dubbed the fat capital of the world – an annual report on obesity released by the Trust for America's Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation revealed that about 2/3 of American adults are obese or overweight.

In Asia, the figures aren't so high but they're worrying all the same. In Malaysia, a study conducted by the National Health and Morbidity Survey II in 2006 revealed rather shocking results: that 43.3% of Malaysians are either overweight or obese and about one in six Malaysian adults above 30 years old have diabetes (an estimated 1.4 million in total).

Something needs to be done and though it's "just a TV show", it is perhaps fortuitous that *The Biggest Loser Asia* (TBLA) has come our way.

The format of TBLA closely follows the original series – participants are in isolation, they stay in a remote location with no contact with family or friends; they are divided into two teams (red and blue) and have to work out six hours a day and adhere to healthy meal plans and take part in challenges that may determine if they stay a week longer or not. At the end of each weekly episode, participants have to go for a weigh-in and the two participants with the lowest percentage of weight loss will be up for elimination, and be voted out by their peers. The last one standing – that is, the one who has lost the most weight – walks away with US\$100,000 (RM350,000) and a car sponsored by Renault.

After a series of grueling auditions (about 5,000 people from all over Asia auditioned for TBLA), the series kicks off with 30 contestants from Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Hong Kong, India, Thailand and the Philippines.

For the moment, the identities of the participants are a closely guarded secret. The identity of the two trainers who were cast to whip the contestants into shape, or rather, help them get healthy, is no secret as the teaser ads on TV feature the two – Dave Nuku and Kristy Curtis – introducing themselves and the show to viewers all over Asia.

At a media launch of TBLA recently, members of the press got the chance to grill the two about their experiences at camp so far (though the series only airs next Tuesday, training has been going on for about a month) and their views on weight loss and

intense training programmes such as TBLA.

Whether naturally or a requirement of the producers, the two seem to fit nicely into the mould of tough-as-nails trainer Jillian Michaels (Kristy believes in tough love) and the significantly calmer Bob Harper (Dave's disposition seems almost identical) of the US show.

"Yeah, Dave is definitely the 'good cop'. I call his team the 'tree huggers' because whenever anyone from his team is having a bad day, he talks to them and takes them out to hug a tree! He's all loving and gives them high fives all the time," shared Kristy, the Group Fitness Manager for Fitness First in Australia where she teaches a multitude of classes all over Sydney. She added: "My team is definitely more aggressive. I am quite hard on them... there's more yelling, more screaming. If someone whinges, I make them get back on the treadmill!"

Despite their different approaches to training their overweight wards, both trainers take their jobs on TBLA very seriously.

"We encourage them to train right. When we started, we had to gauge their fitness levels to see what they could do and what they couldn't. Some of them couldn't even do one push-up in the beginning because of their physical make-up. We determine their training based on their fitness and endurance levels," explains Dave, the regional fitness manager at Fitness First. Though a New Zealander, Dave has been based in Malaysia for several years.

The Biggest Loser is about dramatic weight loss and being responsible for enabling the contestants to achieve their weight loss goals is a daunting challenge. But, the progress of the contestants thus far has been very encouraging, shared Dave.

"At first there was a lot of pressure. Not just on me but also on them. But then, we began to see the kilos just shedding. I think that was very important because a lot of them don't believe they can lose that much of weight but when they see it come off, they are inspired. I am inspired too and I think the *Biggest Loser Asia* is going to be just as compelling as any other version," he said.

Apart from the dramatic weight loss so far, the trainers also guarantee a lot of drama – not just for the competitors but for the trainers too.

"Everyday I wake up and I look at Dave and ask him, 'wonder what's going to happen today?' It is tough because we have to deal with different personalities. It's like being in a pressure cooker – all the ups and downs, they're all missing their families and their relationships, their all working six hours a day, six days a week... there's always some drama. I tell Dave, there are three teams: the blue team, the red team and the trainer's team," said Kristy.

Days at *The Biggest Loser Asia* Camp – the location is secret but it's somewhere in Malaysia – usually begin at 6am. The trainers wake up at 5am and the contestants have to be ready at 6am.

Shared Dave: "They have to train for six hours a day but it's not six hours at a stretch. They get breaks and... they get breaks? You give your team breaks?" asked Kristy.

Though they're competitive – "He's Kiwi and I'm Australian – it stresses from there," remarked Kristy – the two confide in each other about the challenges they face day to day.

"I wouldn't be doing my role justice if I didn't want my team to win at the end of it all. I do. But we do support each other, confide in each other and bounce ideas off each other. We miss our families too and we talk to each other about our kids," said Dave adding that they both do it because they hope to change lives.



Ready to lose: *The Biggest Loser Asia* trainers Kristy Curtis and Dave Nuku are hoping to change the lives of the contestants.