Cut me, Mick!

Right about when I purchased new 36-inch-waist pants and my self-loathing reached a peak, the new Sylvester Stallone film, “Rocky Balboa” opened.

As I shaved the morning after seeing the movie, I wore my towel up high to cover my Dunlop’s disease — when your belly done lops over your belt. With a half-lathered face, I wondered how the 61-year-old Stallone keeps a physique that looks like a Michelangelo creation.

I mulled it over. Perhaps going through a reverse version of Morgan Spurlock’s “Supersize Me” was just what I needed. Instead of eating McDonald’s every meal as Spurlock did in a documentary on obesity, maybe I should turn myself over to the Rock.

Searching the 'Net for tidbits about Stallone’s workouts, I found his 2005 fitness book, Sly Moves. To my surprise, it’s not a grueling workout tome for Navy Seals or Iron-Man Triathletes. It’s basically a readable and humorous book for fat guys in their mid-40s and 50s.

While his characters are known mostly for their vowel movements, the real Sly is very accomplished. He’s written and directed most of his films and was nominated for an Academy Award for the script for “Rocky,” which won Best Picture in 1976.

For Stallone, physical fitness is both vocation and avocation. Molding himself into the ultimate man of action has generated much of his personal wealth.

According to Web site Box Office Mojo, the “Rocky” and “Rambo” films have generated more than $566 million and $251 million respectively at the box office. And most of that was in dollars from the 1970s and 1980s. By mid-March, “Rocky Balboa” had generated $147 million in box office sales alone, on a budget of $24 million.

In the book, he admits to devoting way too much of his life working out. But I’m sure that, as he reviewed the daily grosses for the Rocky and Rambo franchises, it didn’t seem like THAT bad an idea. He talks about pumping free weights for Rockys I and II and having an all-yogurt diet under the tutelage of Mr. Olympia, Franco Columbu. A resulting torn chest muscle led to a plot change in “Rocky II.”

A bulging beltline coincided with the release of “Rocky Balboa.” The result: a health plan the busiest business people can use.
A word of caution. Never, I mean, never, watch a Will Farrell movie, “Borat” or “Jackass” or “Jackass II” while lifting.

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Stallone’s left arm was basically unusable, hence the plot change of Rocky switching from southpaw to right-handed hitter to throw off champ Apollo Creed.

He moves on to the rapid weight loss and muscle reconstruction for “Rocky III” and the first three Rambo films. For this, he ate only tuna, burnt toast and gallons of espresso. He works out three and four times a day — sometimes returning from a party in the evening and hitting the gym.

For the role of Freddy Heflin, the beleaguered sheriff in “Copland,” Stallone had to gain 40 pounds. He held his own against co-star Robert DeNiro, who did the same thing for his Academy-Award-winning turn in “Raging Bull.” However, Stallone’s health suffered with the weight gain, including acid-reflux, insomnia, heart palpitations and sore feet due to the weight on his fallen arches.

Sly reviews everything from Atkins to Weight Watchers. For him, the most sensible is the Mediterranean diet featuring a lot of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, fish and rice. His rule is one-third fruits and vegetables, one-third whole grains, fish and rice. His rule is one-third fruits and vegetables, one-third whole grains and one-third protein.

Finally, he shows how you can fit a good diet and workout into a business schedule. His workout week includes everything from walking 18 holes of golf to playing with his kids to a heavy weight-training session at the gym. In short, he shows how he maintains his health without going crazy.

It all seemed so doable. As Sly said, a modest weight and cardio fitness program coupled with a sensible diet can yield tremendous results. Four hours a week of lifting and getting back on a Weight Watchers-like diet should be manageable. The words “modest” and “sensible” sparked my interest because I had lost a lot of weight in 2000 using what I believe is the best program — Weight Watchers. In 2000, the stress of running a public company led my weight to skyrocket to 208 pounds — a lot for someone who’s 5’8”. I lost almost 50 pounds on Weight Watchers and got down to 160 pounds. But the pounds and bad habits — a lot of bread — started to creep back, and I was tipping the scales around 180.

I wanted to know if this program would work for me and whether it would work for the average business executive.

So on Dec. 28, I started. And because I’m not the sharpest knife in the drawer, I thought the easiest way to follow the program was to follow the program.

I had done a lot of cardio work but had never seriously lifted, despite having dumbbells, a weight bench and a bar. My method had been to throw a bunch of heavy weights on the bars and try to remember what I did in high school. Sure enough, I’d pull a muscle and look like Fred Sanford for two weeks as my wife shook her head at my testosterone-laden stupidity.

And despite having run the Pittsburgh Marathon in 1987 and 1988 — less than four hours both times, thank you very much — I’d stopped road running a long time ago because my knees couldn’t take it.

Now, I do my normal daily cardio work, but I’ve become a Stairmaster and elliptical guy — no pounding with those machines. Every other day, I open Sly Moves and do every upper-body exercise in the book, page by page. I lift three days a week and do 29 exercises. For each, I complete two to four sets depending on what Sly says.

I started using one of those Moleskine journals collecting dust in my desk. I record everything I eat, as well as a brief workout overview including calories burned. Keeping the journal, which Sly recommends, seemed like a good idea especially because of my positive experience with Weight Watchers. I had kept track of what I was eating using its point system.

The higher the fat and calories, the more points assigned to food. Veggies and fruit are either free or low in points. High fiber drops the points. An apple is one point. A Big Mac is double digits. A skinless chicken breast is three. You used to get 20-24 points a day in WW.

In other words, WW snookers you into eating more fruits, vegetables and lean meats because the points are low.

For my new regimen, I would limit my daily caloric intake to 25 Weight Watcher points and Sly’s recommended foods. I also paid attention to my favorite of his diet recommendations — the free day. Be strict six days a week, but on the seventh, you don’t rest. You eat whatever the hell you want. For me, that meant pizza from Luigi’s in Bellevue.

I committed to working out six days a week. I make sure I burn at least 400-800 cardio calories every day. On “weights” days, my goal is burning about 400 calories. That takes about 30 minutes on the stepper. I know I’m burning a lot of calories lifting, but since I can’t measure that, I don’t count it. I try to reach muscle failure on my last few repetitions of each weight set. You feel tight and a little sore the next day, but for muscle growth, you need to tear them down and let them grow.

On “cardio days,” I work out 60 minutes and burn 800 calories, usually doing 30 minutes on the Stepper and 35 minutes on the elliptical.

Motivation. How would I keep going on days I wasn’t quite up for a workout? Stallone likes the vibe and energy of working out at a gym, and he recommends a trainer. But my schedule is busy, so I like to work out at home rather than burning the to and fro of the ride to the gym.

My answer was Comcast On-Demand and a healthy batch of Stallone and Schwarzenegger flicks. During this noble experiment, Amazon.com has gotten a lot of my business. I now own more than 28 Stallone movies and am adding to my Arnold collection, which of course started with the mid-70s cult documentary “Pumping Iron” that launched his film career.

A word of caution. Never, I mean, never, watch a Will Farrell movie, “Borat” or “Jackass” or “Jackass II” while lifting. I’ve pulled muscles doing that. Adam Sandler movies are OK.

Sly also believes good workout attire will motivate you. So, of course, I picked up a few Rocky T-shirts. One says “Cut Me, >>>
Mick.” One says “Rocky,” and a couple say “I Must Break You.”

But that wasn’t the biggest expenditure. After I got into it, I spent about $3,000 on added equipment, including extra dumbbells, a dip bar and a souped-up “Smith” machine, which allows you to do bench and standing presses without dropping a bar on yourself and crushing your windpipe. Want to avoid that.

Despite being technically “retired,” I still keep pretty busy with teaching, pro bono management consulting and private equity investments. I figure I’m working out about 12 hours a week now, taking one day off a week. (Admittedly, I am getting a little wacky about this because I had a point to prove to myself)

Sly says you can do it in only four hours a week, which is very doable for a business person. But it takes commitment. There are workout facilities near most office buildings. And for travelers, most hotels now have workout rooms. If you like to run, every front desk has maps of trails.

My wife and I like to have dinner out most nights. Every restaurant — including McDonald’s — has healthy food. Eat fish and very lean meats and stay away from the sauces. Eliminate cheese and mayo on sandwiches. Use olive oil, not salad dressing. Go for the whole grains. And watch anything white unless it’s fish.

So far this year, my wife and I have traveled three times, and I’ve kept up my workout schedule in hotels as well as with runs through local parks. Every day on vacation, we eat breakfast, then work out. We were even able to eat healthy in Walt Disney World!

And after three months and more than 20 Stallone flicks, the Sly Moves have paid off. My weight has dropped from 180 to 168. I now wear pants with a 31-inch waist rather than a 36.

Of course, my wife thinks I’m crazy, but she has for 15 years now, tolerating and supporting my obsessive behavior.

Yo, Adrian! We did it!

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