

# **Competitive Eating**

**For Food Issues Encyclopedia by Leena Trivedi-Grenier**

Competitive eating started off as a friendly game at local American fairs, typically a pie-eating contest that was more fun than competition. Today, it is an official sport in the United States and Japan where competitors (often called gurgitators) speed-eat food in a timed setting, often for cash prizes. The sport has two governing bodies, the International Federation of Competitive Eating and the Association of Independent Competitive Eaters. The sport rose to fame during the 1990s and 2000s, and since then has been a source of controversy, from questions of its safety and unknown long term consequences for competitors, to the display of excessive eating in a country where not everyone has food to eat. This entry focuses on the history, development and criticisms of competitive eating.

## **Competitive Eating Throughout History**

Americans have always had an obsession with eating. This can be seen in our Puritan ancestors' fascination with fasting and puking and in early American mythologies of epic eaters such as Paul Bunyan and Davy Crockett, possibly inspired by the abundance of the new continent. Pie eating contests were a regular occurrence by the beginning of the twentieth century, with the army utilizing them during World War I to encourage patriotism and boost morale. Nathan's Famous, a hot dog stand owned by Nathan Handwerker, held their first ever hot dog eating contest on July 4, 1916 as a promotion. It was held at noon for twelve minutes, and has run off and on throughout the years, appearing more regularly from the 1970s. In the late 1980s, George Shea, whose PR firm handled Nathan's Famous 4 of July contest, started focusing on growing the contest by instituting qualifying events during the year. His idea paid off, and from

the late 1990s through the present, the event has drawn tens of thousands of spectators every year. The first winner in 1916 consumed 10 hot dogs and buns in twelve minutes, while the most recent winner in 2012 devoured 68 hot dogs and buns in ten minutes winning \$10,000, (the current world record). In 2001, a skinny, unassuming Japanese man named Takeru Kobayashi won the contest by breaking the current record by over 20 hot dogs and buns, which was the start of a rise in media attention for the sport.

Competitive eating contests have expanded to include a wide range of foods, from buffalo wings to butter, pierogis to cupcakes. The competitors are known by their nicknames and occasionally larger than life characters. There is Joey “Jaws” Chestnut, Takeru “the Tsunami” Kobayashi, and Sonia “the Black Widow” Thomas. Eric “Badlands” Booker has put out several competitive eating rap albums, and Bayou Boyd Bulot’s trick is to finish a competitive eating contest, and then order more food to prove he is not full.

### **International Federation of Competitive Eaters (IFOCE)**

George Shea went on to found the International Federation of Competitive Eaters along with his brother, Richard Shea, in 1997. The IFOCE is the largest governing body of sanctioned competitive eating events in the United States. It sanctions the annual Nathan’s Famous hot dog eating contest along with approximately 80 other events a year. They coined the term “Major League Eaters” as a brand name for the competitions and competitors that IFOCE sanctions. Competitors must sign a contract requiring them to only compete for IFOCE-sanctioned events, a rule that caused many players to leave and start their own league. They have the most established safety regulations on the circuit, requiring an EMT on hand at all times and a minimum age of 18 years to participate.

## **Association of Independent Competitive Eaters (AICE)**

In 2004, due to disputes with their contracts with the IFOCE, former competitor Arnie “Chowhound” Chapman created an independent league from the IFOCE- the Association of Independent Competitive Eaters, or AICE. AICE is a democratic organization that allows major decision and profits to be enjoyed by all of its members. In 2008, they implemented the title All Pro Eating Promotions, and their main difference from the IFOCE is their competitors are encouraged to not train, and their adherence to “picnic style” competitive eating, which means competitors are not allowed to use “Pre-Masticated Performance Enhancing Techniques” (PPET). This prohibits the use of water or condiments to help competitors eat the food quicker (dunking food in water is a common eating method in the IFOCE).

## **Competitive Eating Contests**

### **Rules**

Every contest has a food focus (hot dogs, dumplings, etc.), an emcee that introduces competitors and engages the audience, and a time limit, typically between 8 and 15 minutes long. The emcee’s job is more that of a carnival barker, trying to make an event that is not very dramatic enjoyable to watch. Some contests also hire judges that are required to make sure the rules are followed, and to weigh the food leftover at the end to determine a winner.

There are several rules that all competitive eating contests follow, and some that are only followed by individual leagues, either the IFOCE or AICE. For instance, if a competitor has to vomit during any point of any competition, they will be automatically disqualified in all contests (known as a reversal of fortune). Another rule followed by all contests is the rule of debris, which deducts points for excessive debris left around each competitor’s plate at the end of a

contest. Some contests allow competitors to chipmunk, or to stuff as much food as possible into their cheeks before the timer runs out. Most competitors are given a short amount of time to finish the food in their mouth or have points deducted. Dunking is probably the most controversial rule. Some competitors believe that dunking their food in water or a condiment will help them eat faster, so many IFOCE contests allow it. At the Nathan's Famous hot dog eating contest every year, people have created eating methods around dunking their buns in water. However, all AICE competitions prohibit dunking, believing it compromises the integrity of the food and the contest by giving people an unfair advantage.

## **Training Sessions**

Many competitors chose to train their bodies in various ways for competitive eating events. AICE competitions do not allow training, but all IFOCE competitions do and even encourage it (winners of qualifying events for Nathan's Famous annual contest get Nathan's Famous hotdogs to train). Some competitors chose to focus on speed, so they train by timing their eating sessions. Many competitors prefer to exercise stretching their stomachs larger, and do so by eating foods that help stretch the stomach, such as cabbage, or drinking large amounts of water (known as capacity training). Some will have training meals, where they go to buffets and ethnic restaurants where they can get a large amount of food for a small amount of money. Eric "Badlands" Booker likes to meditate about the food he is competing with before each competition, be it hot dogs or tamales. Sonia "the Black Widow" Thomas prefers not to train at all, relying on her larger than life appetite to win competitions, but she does work out several times a week to stay in shape.

A recent phenomenon in the world of competitive eating has been the body type of top competitors. In the 1990s, the most successful competitors were large, overweight men. But starting slowly in the mid-90s through today, a smaller, toned breed of competitor has been rising through the ranks. The top five eaters in the IFOCE in the beginning of 2013 were at a healthy weight, almost skinny, and one of them was a female. Former competitor Ed Kratchie, who now works as a licensed engineer, created a theory behind this shift to smaller competitors being more successful that he calls the “belt of fat”. After being beaten twice by a small Japanese man named Hirofumi Nakajima, Kratchie started reading medical journals and consulting with doctors. What he discovered was the adipose tissues that make up the belly (known as the belt of fat) lie between the abdomen and the skin, and it pushes against the stomach, especially when it is distended from excessive eating. Kratchie hypothesized that a large gut could hinder a stomach’s capacity, and was eventually able to get his theory published in a 2003 issue of *Popular Science* magazine. Some of the best eaters on the circuit now include regular exercise as part of their training routine, both to minimize their belt of fat and also to stave off any issues from consuming so many calories and sodium.

### **Logistics of Competitive Eating**

When food first enters a competitor’s mouth, its first hurdle is to get an unusually large amount of food down the esophagus. Many competitive eaters have reported that they have learned to relax the esophagus to allow food to move easily towards their stomach. The food then arrives in the lower esophageal sphincter, or LES, whose job is to open and close to allow food in, but also to keep acid out. Some competitors use capacity training (drinking at least a gallon of water a day) to train their LES to relax, causing it to go into paralysis. The food’s last task is to

remain in the stomach as long as possible without causing a Roman incident (puking), because the stomach typically only holds enough food to fit into an average person's loosely cupped hands. Some competitors try to make more room for food during a contest by "catching a burp" or jumping up and down to help move the food through. After a competition, what happens to the body depends on the competitor and the food eaten. Many complain of gas, nausea, cramping, diarrhea and heartburn. Large stools or diarrhea commences as soon as 30 minutes after a competition and can last up to twenty four hours. The liver, pancreas and gallbladder work overtime to try and process a week's work of food eaten in a short time span.

### **Media Exposure**

The coverage of competitive eating by the media started occurring in the mid-1990s, and has ranged from print media to internet coverage, documentaries and television news reports and shows. Competitive eating has been featured in the *Wall Street Journal* and on *Discovery Channel*, and when Eric "Badlands" Booker broke the matzo ball record by eating 21 baseball-sized ones in 5 minutes and 25 seconds in 2003, it made the CNN news crawl. In fact, that same year, ESPN bought the rights to the Nathan's Famous Fourth of July hot dog eating contest, first airing it live in 2004. There have been several documentaries about competitive eating competitors, including *Red White and Yellow* (1998, about Ed Kratchie) and *Crazy Legs Conti: Zen and the Art of Competitive Eating* (2004). In February 2006, MTV's popular show *True Life* topic was "I'm a competitive eater", and it followed superstar Takeru Kobayashi around as he trained and competed, doubling the network's primetime average. That same year, two different books were published about the sport: *Eat This Book: A Year of Gorging and Glory on the Competitive Eating Circuit* by Ryan Nerz and *Horsemen of the Esophagus: Competitive*

*Eating and the Big Fat American Dream* by Jason Fagone. For ninety-nine cents, you can download the game Major League Eating from iTunes, officially licensed by the IFOCE. Pick from a range of famous competitive eaters like Eater X or Crazy Legs Conti, pick your food of choice, and earn extra power by burping.

## **Criticisms and Dangers**

### **Reported Injuries and Deaths**

There have been five reported deaths in the world from competitive eating, mostly from choking. In 2007, a woman in California passed away from water intoxication during a water drinking contest to win a video game system. The only reported injury from competitive eating was by Japanese competitor Takeru Kobayashi, who suffered from an arthritic jaw after years of competitive eating. The biggest fear critics of competitive eating have is the unknown effects of long term competitive eating, which has yet to be found.

### **The Eating Disorder Connection**

In order to deal with the painful side effects of consuming large quantities of food in a short period of time, some competitors go to extreme measures to get the food out of their body, namely forced vomiting or laxatives. This behavior is the same exhibited by people suffering from various eating disorders, from binge eating to bulimia, which has led doctors to hypothesize that some competitive eaters may also suffer from an eating disorder, or at least have a similar psychological makeup. Additionally, binge eaters have been tested to show that their extreme eating habits have actually stretched the capacity of their stomach. This is very similar to the training method employed by many competitive eaters known as capacity training, and is considered a dangerous practice.

**See also:** *Buffets/All You Can Eat; Cardiac Disease and Diet; Diet, Quality of; Food in Popular Media; Sport Nutrition.*

### Further Readings

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### Websites

The International Federation of Competitive Eating's website:

<http://www.IFOCE.com>