Horsemen of the Esophagus

By Jason Fagone May 2006

Among the super-gluttons, on the front lines of competitive eating

Nader sounded the alarm about four "signs of societal decay": three involved corporate greed and congressional gerrymandering, and the fourth was competitive eating. George Shea responded to Nader by talking up the federation's "Turducken" contest, which he called "the first real advancement in Thanksgiving since the Indians sat down with the Pilgrims." Shea's counterattacks tend to mix deadpan charm and gentle mockery. "A lot of people have had trouble," he told me when I asked if it was wise to promote gluttony in one of the fatter nations on earth, "separating this superficial visual of people stuffing their faces with large quantities of food with the stereotype of the Ugly American. That is not where I am. I see beauty. I see physical poetry."

Poetry, exactly. Shea's eating contests are poetic in their blatancy, their brazen mixture of every American trait that seems to terrify the rest of the planet: our hunger for natural resources that may melt the ice caps and flood Europe, our hunger for cheap thrills that turns Muslim swing voters into car bombers. If anti-American zealots anywhere in the world wanted to perform a minstrel show of our culture, this is what they'd come up with. Competitive eating is a symbolic hair ball coughed up by the American id. It is meaningful like a tumor is meaningful. It seems to have a purpose, a message, and its message is this: Look upon our gurgitators, ye Mighty, and despair. Behold these new super-gluttons, these ambassadors of the American appetite, these Horsemen of the Esophagus.

One by one the grilled-cheese eaters take their places at a long table. The top eaters merit a sobriquet or a simple recitation of their feats: Carlene LeFevre becomes "the Martha Stewart of mastication"; the Spam record of husband Rich is heralded, to oohs and aahs; Jed "Jalapeño" Donahue is announced as having eaten 152 of his namesake peppers. The great Sonya Thomas is described as "a cross between Anna Kournikova, Billie Jean King, and a jackal wild on the Serengeti." Other accomplished eaters include Long Island's Don "Moses" Lerman, the Zen master of raw butter, matzo balls, and baked beans; and Frank Wach, a Chicagoan and "a rookie out of the toasted-ravioli circuit." The best introductions accompany the least- accomplished eaters, because they are blank slates, allowing Shea to concoct mythic pasts. To the strains of "Gangsta's Paradise," Shea tells the story of a fresh-faced guy named Matt Simpson, who recently ate two rolls of unleavened bread. "It raised in his stomach," Shea says, "and created an enormous amount of pressure. And he fell to the ground writhing in what appeared to be pain. But when his family came to his side and knelt over him, they realized it was ecstasy: *I feel good, for the first time in my life.* And his father … said, 'Go, my son, and join the IFOCE. Join the eaters.' And so he did, ladies and gentlemen. Twenty-eight years of age, Maaaaatt Simpsonnnnnnnnn!!!"

The swelling crowd—maybe 200 to 250 people now—applauds and cheers. They're primed. So are the eaters. Minutes ago the GoldenPalace.com guy unloaded a giant tray of sandwiches from his truck. The eaters gathered around, inspecting the material.

"I hope they're greasy," Carlene LeFevre said. "They'll just slide right down."

Eating contests weren't invented by the Shea brothers or their mentors, or even by Americans. Anthropological studies and old copies of scurrilous newspapers suggest that the will to gorge is universal. Speed and volume competitions pop up in Greek myth, in Norse epics, and even in what may be the first novel, *The Golden Ass*, written in Latin in the second century A.D.: "Last night at supper I was challenged to an eating race by some people at my table and tried to swallow too large a mouthful of polenta cheese." (Choking ensued.) Ethnographies show that eating contests were regular events at lavish Native American potlatch feasts, and there's historical evidence of rice contests in Japan, beefsteak contests in Britain, mango contests in India. Even today the French still gorge themselves on cheese at seasonal festivals.

But we're different. We do it bigger. We have more contests, in more places, and we make no apologies. We unabashedly marry the public-gorging impulse to our most sacred American rituals: the catching of the greased pig followed by the pie-eating contest followed by the reading of the Declaration of Independence on the Fourth of July.

I began phoning competitive eaters in September 2004, starting with veterans like Charles Hardy and Ed Jarvis and Don Lerman. They all said they were amazed by eating's trajectory, its quick-rising legitimacy.

"We did all the footwork years ago," Hardy told me. "Traveling here, traveling there. We didn't really make no kinda money. We pretty much took it to where it is today." But because of the uptick in prize pots, he said, "the life has been a lot better, eating on the circuit."

Jarvis said, “Let’s face it: we’re on ESPN. If that’s not professional sports, I don’t know what is.”

Lerman said, “I think in three years it’ll be as big as PGA golf. In five years it may be in the Olympics.”

There were definite hints of pride and obsession in those early calls. Ed told me he maintained a trophy room. “It’s like a shrine,” he said. “I mean, people look in and they’re like: ‘*God*.”

Don has a trophy room too. And a weight problem. “Since I’m thirty I’ve been fighting obesity,” he said.

Ed, pushing 400 pounds, was also trying to lose weight. The day I talked to him, he was pondering an upcoming cannoli contest. He was the cannoli champ but was thinking about not defending his title. “It’s rough on the body,” he said. “One, you’re eating eleven thousand calories. Two, there’s no money. Three, all that said, the bottom line is: What am I doing this for? I’m basically putting eleven thousand calories into my body with the chance I could get hurt. What for? There’s gotta be a cause.”

Insecurity, rivalry, hubris, recklessness—that was half of the story, the exact half you’d expect to find in a group of pro gluttons. But the more eaters I called, and the more I pushed past their immediate need to impress upon me that they weren’t a bunch of freaks, the more I saw that, with a few conspicuous exceptions, they weren’t lifelong publicity hounds or career eccentrics. They had wives (or husbands) and kids. They had jobs as construction workers, social workers, bankers, engineers, lawyers. I would come to know them as genuinely sweet and generous, most of them. Except for their collective waist size, they were as averagely American as the Americans in campaign commercials. They had to know that competitive eating was a marketing ploy, and yet—out of some psychic contortion I could only guess at—they rarely spoke of it that way. Eating wasn’t a ploy to them. It was fun. It was a chance to compete, to travel the country and make a little money, or at least break even. It was a chance to be on ESPN.

How many people get to be on ESPN?

Here on the gluttony circuit, atop the same cultural terrain that made me feel, in my bitterest moments, ashamed to be an American, the eaters were planting their dearest desires—for fair and honest competition, for a pat on the back, for a chance to get noticed, to prove themselves, to make their kids and spouses proud.

The grilled-cheese eaters all stand at the long table. Each one has been given two plates of five grilled-cheese sandwiches, along with at least two cups of water: one for drinking, one for dunking. All of the top eaters pre-moisten their food by dunking, which eases the food’s journey down the esophagus and kick-starts digestion.

Their hands are not allowed to touch the food until Shea gives the word. He counts down from ten: “Two … one … go! Oh my good gracious, we have begun! But it is not simply a contest, it is a journey, my friends, a journey down the alimentary canal, a journey to self-discovery, self-realization … The big men, the two pillars of competitive eating, the two Horsemen of the Esophagus, ‘Hungry’ Charles Hardy and Edward ‘Cookie’ Jarvis, here at this portion of the table … ”

The eaters rip in, dunking the sandwiches in the water cups and cramming them mouthward with no regard for manners or decorum. As performers, they are very Dizzy Gillespie: dimples blowfished, eyes laser-locked on the chow. “Violent” is a word that comes to mind. “Assault” is another. It’s scary, the suddenness with which the mood of the contest has morphed from chipper to an insectoid creepiness. Rich “The Locust” LeFevre, who looks like somebody’s geeky uncle with his big plastic glasses and gray comb-over, is particularly fearsome. He rotates the sandwiches once they reach his lips, twirls them like they’re corn on the cob, and mashes them inward, toward his pinker parts, the force spraying bits in a scatter pattern around his swampy water cup. A gluttonous metronome, he never alters his food- shoveling rhythm. This is not normal.

“Remember, ladies and gentlemen,” Shea says, “competitive eating is the battleground upon which God and Lucifer battle for men’s souls!”

Sonya Thomas is thirty-seven years old, but you believe it only if you get very, very close. If you don’t, she looks eighteen. She speaks in clipped English punctuated by an immigrant’s tics—quick laughs and question marks to make sure she’s being understood. Movie-watching is one of her hobbies. Her other hobby is driving. She takes long drives to nowhere in particular. She owns a red Pontiac Grand Am, and she drives it very, very fast.

The luxury of a long drive in a red Grand Am was not available to Sonya in South Korea, where she was born and lived until she was in her twenties. Much has been made of the fact that her childhood home had no refrigerator, that her parents were poor (mother a maid, father a carpenter), and that she had to share food with her siblings. At least as crucial to her hunger, however, was her stifling professional life in South Korea. She worked as a typist for a shipping company. “In that time I was a little bit heavier,” she said. “Forty pounds heavier. I don’t eat any meals. I just eat all junk food … typist, sitting

down, answer the phone, sometimes get sleepy. I don't like that job, so I change it." After she put herself through restaurant school and looked for new work, men told her, "Oh, you are a woman, you cannot do this."

So she moved to America.

Sonya worked at an Air Force base in Maryland, managing a Burger King. She pulled long shifts and saved her money. In 2002 she watched the Nathan's contest on TV and got curious. Over the next few months she experimented at home, then entered a Nathan's qualifier in 2003 and earned a spot in the finals, where she broke the women's record, with twenty-five dogs consumed. In August 2003, she took third in the U.S. Chicken Wing Eating Championship, in Buffalo. In October, despite never having eaten a pulled-pork sandwich in her life, she ate twenty-three in ten minutes, winning $1,250 and the world title.

But Sonya attracted little national attention until late 2003, when her friend David "Coondog" O'Karma—the tag-team bratwurst champion of Canton, Ohio—told her about Wing Bowl, a Philadelphia chicken-wing-eating contest.

In the simplest terms, Wing Bowl is a radio promotion. It may be the largest pure radio promotion in the country. It is owned, trademarked, and produced by 610 WIP-AM, a sports talk-radio station in Philadelphia. WIP is itself owned by Infinity Broadcasting, a division of the CBS media empire—CBS, UPN, Paramount Television, Simon & Schuster, etc., etc. In 1993 two of WIP's deejays created Wing Bowl as a stunt to boost ratings for *The Morning Show*, which airs from 5:30 to 10:00 a.m., Monday through Friday. Its deejays talk about Wing Bowl every single day for two and a half months, starting in November and ending on the day of the event. The date changes from year to year. Like Easter.

In a mischievous mood, Coondog e-mailed one of the show's deejays, Angelo Cataldi, and said he knew a 99-pound girl who could beat the legendary Bill "El Wingador" Simmons. Simmons, a 322-pound truck driver from south Jersey, stood alone in the history of the previous eleven Wing Bowls, having been crowned champion no fewer than four times. Cataldi knew a great story line when he saw one, and gave Sonya a bye into Wing Bowl XII. Stunningly, she proceeded to beat Simmons. He accused her of dropping her chicken on the floor. The *New York Post*s Gersh Kuntzman, the original competitive-eating beat reporter, thought Simmons was guilty of not cleaning his wings. "I could have an entire meal off the meat that Bill left on his bones," he said.

A few months later Sonya beat Simmons in a hot-dog contest, and she won other contests too. Brian "Yellowcake" Subich, a top-twenty eater, tells a story about a baked-bean contest from the summer of 2004. The field included Sonya, Subich, and Cookie Jarvis. After just two and a half minutes, George Shea announced that Sonya was almost done with her 8.4 pounds of beans. "I said, 'You have to be freaking kidding me,'" Subich told me. "What does she do? Pour 'em down her shirt? Put 'em into a plastic bag?" At Shea's announcement, Jarvis lifted his head, glanced at Sonya, registered what Subich calls "the most crestfallen look you could ever imagine," and vomited beans through his nostrils.

Sonya was forcing a realignment in American eating. When asked for the secret to her success, she would just wink and describe her love for her adoptive country, as if that explained everything.

"In America," she told me, "if you have desire you can do anything. Is big. *Big*." She holds her hands out wide. "Big country!"

At the two-and-a-half-minute mark in Venice Beach, Sonya has ten grilled-cheese sandwiches down the hatch.

"Nostradamus, born in the early sixteenth century, actually mentioned the Grilled Cheese Championship in his poetic yet cryptic quatrains," George Shea says. "He said, 'And at one point under the bright sky they shall gather to eat, they shall gather to eat the cheese that has been pouched in bread and grilled!"

Sonya eats with no recognizable style. She knows that style bleeds speed. She's a machine. Efficient. Just flat *fast*.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Shea says, "the universe has no edge and no center, and like Sonya Thomas's stomach it is ever-expanding … Is she the best eater in the world? No. That is Kobayashi." Shea means Japan's Takeru Kobayashi. "Is she the best eater in America? Yes. Without any question. Will I phrase everything heretoforward in the form of a question? No."

Three minutes and thirty seconds left, and Sonya has a small but solid lead. The LeFevres, Badlands Booker, and Jed Donahue are still eating at full tilt, but the rest have started to fall off. "They face," Shea says, "a mission similar to that of Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan—namely, to balance the forces of inflation and deflation."

The outcome is certain, but there's still drama in watching Sonya's tally rise and rise. With a minute-thirty left, Shea loses it. "OH! MY! GOD! LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!" he screams. "Here under the sun, the clouds have parted to allow us here

today to demonstrate our commitment to the Virgin Mary and to victory in the world of competitive eating. I am absolutely OVERWHELMED by emotion! I have not felt this much emotion since the birth of my first child, a son!"

Shea's voice cracks with emotion.

"I am feeling the spirit overcome me, ladies and gentlemen! TWENTY-THREE GRILLED-CHEESE SANDWICHES, SONYA THOMAS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!"

He starts speaking in tongues.

A few seconds later, when it's time to begin the final countdown, Shea snaps back into English.

"Ten, nine, eight … "

A flurry of last-minute face-stuffing, then Shea ends it.

An IFOCE official goes from plate to plate, tallying sandwiches. In a slight upset, Carlene LeFevre has beaten the big boys from New York to take third place, with just shy of twenty-one grilled cheeses. She giggles, raises her hand in acknowledgement of the crowd, then leans over and wipes her mouth on her husband's shirt.

Jed Donahue and Rich LeFevre have tied for second, with twenty-three sandwiches.

Sonya Thomas takes first, with twenty-five. "That's the fifth time I've come in second to Sonya," Rich LeFevre says. "It's getting boring."

Shea presents Sonya with a championship belt that says WORLD GRILLED CHEESE EATING CHAMPION in gold letters. She holds it up high above her head and grins for the cameras. Then she grabs her twenty-sixth grilled cheese, takes a ponderous bite, and laughs.

The key benchmark of greatness in competitive eating, akin to rolling a 300 game in bowling or scoring under par in golf, is to eat twenty Nathan's hot dogs in twelve minutes. This is called "doing the deuce." By the time an eater has done the deuce, he or she has consumed 4.4 pounds of solid food and a few pounds of water, has taken in 6,180 calories, 403 grams of fat, and almost 14 grams of sodium, and is ready to lie down someplace air-conditioned, close to a toilet.

Until 2001 the world record in the Nathan's Famous hot-dog contest had hovered in the low to mid-twenties. On July 3, the day before the 2001 contest, the champs of the American gurgitator corps—Charles Hardy, Ed Jarvis, Coondog O'Karma—preened outside New York's City Hall, waiting for the contest's traditional weigh-in ceremony to begin. Suddenly there was a hubbub, heads whipsawing, TV cameras twirling. Some people assumed it was the mayor and his entourage.

Nope. The Japanese.

The Japanese had won the contest for three of the past four years. They emerged from an unseen vehicle and walked toward the Americans. There were two Japanese eaters this year. The first was Kazutoyo Arai, who had won last year's contest with twenty-five and one-eighth hot dogs, a new world record. Arai—nicknamed the Rabbit for the way he took mincing bites and bobbed his head while eating—was a short, gentle man with shiny jet-black hair parted down the exact middle. He weighed a hundred pounds exactly. The press swarmed him.

Nobody paid any attention to the second Japanese contestant, a cute little Japanese kid with short, spiky blond hair and a white T-shirt and maroon running shorts. This was Kobayashi, who would become known on the circuit simply as Koby. Twenty-three years old. A kid, really. At least one of the American eaters thought Koby was the Rabbit's son. Koby's name hadn't been mentioned in the City of New York's press release. The only thing the American eaters knew for sure was that Koby had beaten the Rabbit in Japan, and that his nickname was the Prince. The Americans had heard rumors, though. Don Lerman had heard that Koby had eaten seventy-five hot dogs, but he imagined the dogs were little cocktail franks.

The next day, the Fourth of July, in a slight rain, about 500 people gathered for the contest at Surf and Stillwell avenues, on Coney Island, in front of the original Nathan's Famous stand. A stage had been erected with a long table and a tarp-like backdrop, decorated with blue-and-yellow Nathan's signage and balloons. The crowd was a patchwork of umbrellas. The dozens of cameramen on the scene, including a guy from CNN, had wrapped their equipment with trash bags. Some spectators held signs that had been passed out by IFOCE officials to give the appearance of actual eating fandom.

The contest had come a long way in a very short time. Just eight years earlier, it was so small that the Nathan's CEO, Wayne Norbitz, had had to solicit passersby on contest day to be contestants. But under George Shea the contest had become a highly choreographed affair. There was a production script. There were informal run-throughs the morning of the contest. "Everything is kind of rehearsed," I was told by Mike "The Scholar" DeVito, the 1990, 1993, and 1994 Nathan's champion and the federation's then-commissioner. In 2001, DeVito was fulfilling his commissioner's duty to act as the "head judge," the one who relays hot-dog totals from the judges, who squat in front of the tables, to the card girls ("Bunnettes"),

who display the totals on flippable blue cards they hold high above their heads, so audience members can keep track of the leaders.

Mike DeVito and George Shea already knew approximately how many hot dogs the eaters would eat that day. The top Americans—Booker, Lerman, Hardy, and Jarvis—would all come in at around twenty. The Rabbit would eat twenty-five. Maybe, if it was a really rare and special day, someone would make it to thirty.

At noon Shea kicked off the show by introducing the eaters one by one. Ed Jarvis wore an American flag, Hungry Charles pumped his fists, Coondog ripped his shirt and glared at the audience with a mean grin. Then the Japanese: Koby walked out first, wearing a white headband that read TV TOKYO and made his ears stick out. The Rabbit, as the reigning champ, came out last and hoisted the championship Mustard Yellow Belt—a cheap prop glued with rhinestones—high above his head.

In the seconds before the countdown, Arai closed his eyes like he was meditating. Koby arranged his five large yellow cups of water. The crowd chanted. IFOCE officials brought each eater two paper plates of five hot dogs each. Arai slapped both of his cheeks, hard.

"Join me please," Shea announced. "Ten! Nine! Eight! Seven! Six! Five! Four! Three! Two! One! Ohhhhhh! … We're here to see who's going to take home this bout … "

In a twelve-minute eating contest you don't get a feel for the front-runners until near the end. Everybody knows that it's in the final minutes that the outcome is determined.

But not on this historic day. After only three minutes and twenty-four seconds, the little Japanese kid with the jutting ears and cute spiky hair had finished *twenty-two* hot dogs. He had almost broken the world record—and he still had close to nine minutes left to go.

Don Lerman was one of the first to realize something was amiss. "All of a sudden," he recalled, "I've got eight and the Japanese guy's got fifteen. And when you hear that you say to yourself, in your mind, *Should I put my body through this trauma, you know, this workout, if I can't* catch *him?*"

Perhaps the next eater to notice was Steve "The Appetite" Addicks, a locomotive mechanic from Baltimore. Addicks was stationed directly to Koby's left. In photos from that day Addicks is pictured with his mouth open, spilling half-chewed dog meat, head cranked toward Kobayashi with a look of pure confusion. Koby was eating his hot dogs with an inhuman ease. While the Rabbit kept the dog and bun together as an intact unit, dunking the whole thing and stuffing it, Koby was separating the dog from the bun. What's more, he was breaking each dog in half, then eating both halves at the same time, after which he dunked and ate the bun. Koby's judge was Gersh Kuntzman, the *New York Post* reporter. He and other reporters would later dub Koby's eating style the Solomon Method.

"I was in awe," Steve Addicks said. "It was amazing. I was standing next to something that—it's like, ah, I don't know—it was almost a religious experience, you know? Something that I was so close to see, that very few people will ever be able to witness, as far as the magnitude of what it meant to me as an eater. It was just like"—he made a *whoosh* sound—"whoa … I'm sitting there watching a miracle."

"Oh my God, ladies and gentlemen!" George Shea shouted. "TWENTY-TWO hot dogs and buns!"

Koby wasn't flagging. The Rabbit was a distant second, with fourteen hot dogs, and the rest of the eaters were in single digits.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Shea said, "Kobayashi, Takeru Kobayashi of Japan, has broken the American record—"

"And the world record!" someone else added.

"—in under five minutes."

On the right end of the table, Coondog was well on his way to twenty hot dogs. He thought all the cheering was for *him*. Then his counter told him, "The little Japanese kid just finished twenty-seven."

"No fuckin' way," Coondog said.

"Way," the counter said.

Coondog looked over at Koby. He watched him for a few seconds, then threw one of his hot dogs into the crowd and put down his buns. So did Steve Addicks.

A Japanese TV host narrating the contest screamed:

"KOOOBAYYYAAASHIIIIIII!!!!!!!"

Koby reached twenty-nine.

Shea's face had gone slack. A carny barker as cynical and wised-up as they come, Shea looked at Kobayashi and just faintly shook his head. The man who could spray great loquacious jets of ballyhoo at audiences for twenty minutes at a time without breaking a sweat or dangling a participle was speechless.

Shea turned away from Koby and looked into the crowd.

"One away," he said.

One away from the magic number.

A Bunnette, having run out of flippable cards, held up a yellow sheet bearing the number 30.

There was a roar.

In the pit, Gersh Kuntzman ran out of numbers. He started furiously writing Koby's totals on the backs of yellow sheets with a ball-point pen. Thirty-four. Thirty-six.

The crowd chanted, "For-ty! For-ty! For-ty!"

Koby kept going, and Kuntzman kept scribbling. Forty-six. Forty-seven.

"KOOOBAYYYAAASHIIIIIII!!!!!!!"

"Ladies and gentlemen, count down with me if you will! Ten! Nine! Eight! Seven! Six!"

"KOOOBAYYYAAASHIIIIIII!!!!!!!"

"Five! Four! Three! Two!"

"KOOOBAYYYAAASHIIIIIII!!!!!!!"

"One!"

On the back of a yellow piece of paper, held high above the head of the victorious Takeru Kobayashi, was a scrawled number representing his final total.

50.

"Yo sha!" Koby yelled. ("All right!")

The deejay put on an upbeat song, and Shea announced the winners.

In third place, with twenty-three hot dogs, was Charles Hardy, who, as the top American, draped himself with the Stars and Stripes. He was bent over the table, in obvious pain. In second was the Rabbit, with thirty-one hot dogs—six more than his prior world record, and on any other day an astounding total.

But it was Koby who now held aloft a giant gold trophy and the Mustard Yellow Belt. He grinned and grinned. He appeared energetic, bouncy, like he could run a marathon. His countrymen surrounded him, congratulating him in Japanese.

"You're a beast!" the Rabbit said.

"Aren't you happy?" the Japanese TV host asked.

"Oh," Koby said, "I'm happy."

"You had fifty. But how do you feel?"

"I can keep going."

Gersh Kuntzman rushed to the phone to call in the results to the *New York Post* city desk. Before placing the call, he brainstormed analogies that might impress his editors. This was maybe like Secretariat's winning the Belmont by thirty-one lengths. Or a rookie shortstop's breaking Barry Bonds's home-run record by a hundred.

Gersh dialed and demanded space on the front page. Koby's victory, he said, was not only a watershed moment in competitive eating. It was a singular achievement in all of sports history.

The *Post* desk put him on hold.