

WHEN EAST MARRIES WEST

## Eating more than your heart out

By THOMAS DILLON

If the old saw is correct and, "You are what you eat," then Takeru Kobayashi is a hot dog. In more ways than one.

First, he is the brightest star in one of the world's fastest growing "sports" -- competitive eating. And what he is most renowned for is his dominance of the "sports' " marquee event, Nathan's annual Fourth of July hot dog chow down, which he has won for six years running and where he once devoured 53 plus dogs in 12 minutes.

That's right. Twelve minutes. And that other phrasing is right, too. Competitive eating is catching on.

There is, for example, a professional eater's association -- the International Federation of Competitive Eating or the IFOCE. True, the acronym doesn't have the same zip as say, the "NBA" or "FIFA," but it still carries a respectable ring -- not unlike a dinner bell.

The IFOCE supervises dozens and dozens of eating events around the world, in foods ranging from candy bars to cannoli to ice cream to onions and many more. Prize money can reach into the thousands of dollars and some contests even draw TV time from ESPN.

Where announcers salt and pepper competitors with comments like -- "These guys are major league eaters!" Or, in considering who might win -- "It's all a question of jaw power!" Or, during the final minutes -- "[Now] they've got to ignore the pain, ignore the feeling of fullness!"

The hype and coverage has created a fat menu of eating heroes, like Joey Chestnut of California, expert in chicken wings and grilled cheese sandwiches. Or 48-kg Sonya Thomas of Virginia, nicknamed the "Black Widow" for the way she can eat her way past men much larger than her size. Little Sonya, originally

from South Korea, once gulped down 5 kg of cheesecake in 9 minutes and 65 hard-boiled eggs in 6 minutes.

Or Crazy Legs Conti, a window-washer from New York, who is billed as the "Houdini of Cuisini" for once eating his way out of a 244-cm-long popcorn box. Conti also has a video entitled, "Zen and the Art of Competitive Eating." Question: What is the sound of one lip smacking?

Which brings us back to Kobayashi, who because of his status as the greatest eater of all time, helps cast an Oriental mystique over all this ingestion.

Nicknamed "The Tsunami" for the way he wipes out both plates of food and rows of rivals, 27-year-old Kobayashi was once a 50-kg-hot-dog-gorging miracle who has since transformed himself into 73 kg of muscle, thanks to a weight-lifting regimen that keeps him a few bites ahead of his competition.

He is also blessed with a downwardly distended stomach and a knack for innovation, including his development of the "Solomon Method" of hot-dog consumption. The dogs are snapped in two, dipped in water and then shoved in, both halves at once. He is also known for the "Kobayashi Shake," a kind of "I gotta go pee" wiggle that helps him jiggle the hot dogs down his throat.

Of course, hot dogs aren't everything. Kobayashi also dominates in brats, Krystal hamburgers, rice balls and cow brains. Like his wannabe competitors, he takes eating seriously and stays in tip-top shape. After all, more than food, there is money on the table.

With that in mind, Kobayashi and his fellows can't be blamed. So I will just blame our consumer society.

Obesity runs rampant. Fast-food ruins our diet. And if you just peek a bit beyond our over-stocked kitchens to the rest of our global-village community, you can spy hunger stalking like a wolf, with children its chief prey.

And with this, we have eating competitions? Oodles of them? Something about this gives me heartburn. And what's next? Will we see how many packs of Marlboros a person can suck away? Or how many shots of Johnny Walker they can guzzle? Or discover some further way in which we can both assault our

health and promote greater purchasing?

To its credit, the IFOCE has strict safety guidelines and a stern, "Kids, don't try this at home," approach. Yet, how can some impressionable viewers not be tempted?

Global warming? Sometimes I think the earth's greatest danger is common-sense warming, in which the human consciousness has become too soft and sappy. We just ignore the pain, ignore the fullness of our own foolhardiness.

The eating bouts I have seen on TV all have had a cheery mood with the competitors seemingly earnest and positive. I hate to throw a towel on good, clean fun.

Yet, in competitive eating, the one sure way to lose is to upchuck the goodies. You throw up and you're out.

In my case, I'm getting sick just watching. So it's time, I can tell, to turn the channel.

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