

No Sport Is Safe: How a Squabble Over Money Is Hurting Competitive Eating



Takeru Kobayashi of Nagano, Japan, poses for photos as Nathan's Famous July 4th Hot Dog Eating Contest defending champion Joey Chestnut answers media questions in New York in 2009. Kobayashi won the contest for six years up to 2007. (AP / Richard Drew)

A spoiler for those of you who watch the annual Nathan's Hot Dog Eating Contest for

something other than the grotesque spectacle: Joey Chestnut is going to win. It will not be a close contest.

This is a foregone conclusion. Chestnut has won the last six such events handily, and will cruise to his seventh. The Washington Generals have a better chance of beating the Harlem Globetrotters than any of the second-tier also-rans that will try to take down Chestnut; for an event that gets live coverage on ESPN, there's surprisingly little drama.

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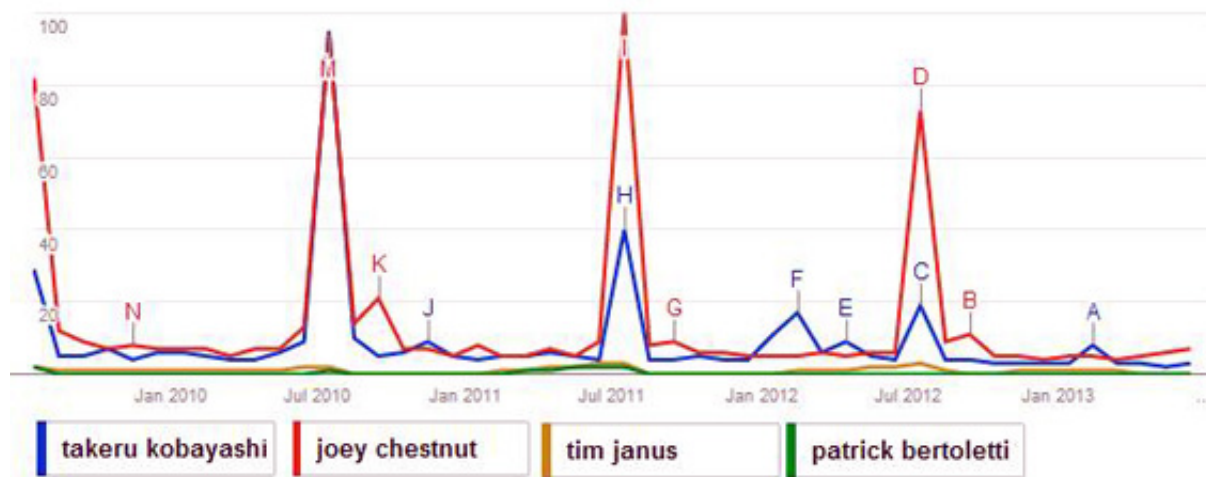
It doesn't have to be this way, of course. There is one other man who can go head-to-head with Chestnut. However, Japan's Takeru Kobayashi—a six-time winner himself, who [unofficially set the hot dog record in 2011](#) until judges corrected the count—will be a no-show for the fourth straight year. In a profession that encourages (gastrointestinal) flexibility, however, Kobayashi is one part of a stubborn standoff where both he and league organizers end up worse off than if they cooperated.

It's not that Kobayashi doesn't *want* to compete—he [was arrested in 2010 after crashing the competition stage](#). Rather, it's that his contract dispute with Major League Eating, the sanctioning body of the "sport," prevents him from participating.

The terms of the dispute are simple. [Competitive eating does not pay particularly well](#)—only the absolute top-tier eaters bring in enough money from competition that they do not need supplemental income. Thus, eaters leverage their limited celebrity into endorsement deals and sponsorships the same way that LeBron James and Kobe Bryant earn money well beyond their player contracts.

Major League Eating, however, wants a cut of any endorsement or sponsorship one of its competitors signs. For Kobayashi, this was too much to ask.

Both sides of the dispute have merit. It's not unfair for Kobayashi to feel like he deserves to keep what he earns in sponsorship money, because he is unquestionably the only male eater other than Chestnut that commands any interest as an individual. The chart below is from Google Trends, mapping the search interest in Kobayashi, Chestnut, and the next two best hot dog eaters, Patrick Bertoletti and Tim Janus.



Two things should jump out immediately from this chart:

1. Kobayashi and Chestnut blow away their competition. Tim Janus and Patrick Bertoletti may be talented eaters, but they command virtually zero interest on their own.
2. The July 4 hot dog eating contest blows away *its* competition. While eaters compete in other events year-round, the Nathan's event commands more interest than all other events combined. People like to call the event the Super Bowl of competitive eating (though, given the disparity in audience, it's closer to the World Cup of competitive eating—while every other event is a children's soccer league).

Without question, Major League Eating would greatly benefit by bringing Kobayashi back into the fold. What leverage does it have on Kobayashi, then?

Simply this: Without a league in which to compete, a competitive eater is just an "eater." Without a league, there's really nothing between the already thin veneer of "an athletic competition" and just "guys doing something really gross like eating two pounds of mayonnaise in eight minutes." The particular idiosyncrasies of competitive eating aside, this is no different from any other professional sports league. LeBron James may be the best basketball player in the world, but without other top-tier players and teams with whom to interact, he'd be no more than an extraordinarily talented man shooting hoops in his backyard. Neither Rafael Nadal nor Roger Federer would command any celebrity whatsoever—or take home much prize money—were they only allowed to compete against non-ATP players.

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Perhaps the best analogue to Kobayashi's situation is that of now-retired baseball slugger Barry Bonds. As a 42-year-old in his final season, Bonds led the league in on-base percentage and hit 28 home runs.

To be sure, he could barely play left field, but his offensive abilities would have made him

a top-tier designated hitter. Instead, he was frozen out of the league by 2008. The controversies surrounding Barry Bonds aside, it's reasonable to state that Bonds suffered financially from the premature end of his career, and that any number of teams paying less-talented DHs suffered from a lack of Bonds.

The difference, though, is that Major League Baseball has a bevy of stars—many of whom did not come with Bonds' baggage—to keep ratings up. As the chart above demonstrates, Major League Eating only has one "star" under contract in Chestnut. The "sport" is *not* mainstream—its website doesn't even get significant enough traffic to show up on any major analytics platform. It cannot afford to turn down publicity from any possible source—and Kobayashi is a significant source. Competitive eating is engaging in an unhealthy practice (well, another unhealthy practice): starving itself of one of its star attractions.

Either Kobayashi *or* Major League Eating would benefit from giving in to the opposite's contract demands. Under contract and reinstated into the league, Kobayashi could compete against a legitimate rival, earn more money, and [no longer need stoop to setting pizza-eating records in what looks like someone's fraternity house](#). Major League Eating would reap significant rewards in audience growth by bringing Kobayashi back into the fold—even were he to keep all his endorsement money. Because neither party is willing to cooperate, however, both get their worst possible outcome. Kobayashi and Major League Eating are engaged in perhaps the most repulsive version of the [Prisoner's Dilemma](#).

Until the situation is resolved, the Nathan's Hot Dog Eating contest will remain as predictable as it has been since the start of the decade. Normative discussions about competitive eating aside, surely a higher degree of competition would benefit the league, the competitors, and the spectators.