

CHEW ON THIS

Millions of people are starving around the world. Legendary competitive eater Takeru Kobayashi is not one of them

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Just by looking at him, it would be hard to pin down what Takeru Kobayashi does to keep body and soul together. Given his slender 5ft 8in, 128-pound build, it seems fairly obvious that he does not move pianos for a living. But guess again if you said he was a jockey. He is too big for that on the American circuit. Guess window washer, movie usher or hotel clerk and you would be wrong, wrong and wrong again. In fact, chances are you could guess forever and still not come up with the correct answer: that Takeru Kobayashi is a champion competitive eater.

While he is so small that he does not appear as if he has eaten for weeks, Kobayashi (or 'Kobi' for short) can scoff down immense quantities of food, including hot dogs, hamburgers, Twinkies, bratwurst sausages, lobster rolls, chicken wings, tacos and – ah yes – cow brains. In competitive eating circles, there is a reason he is called 'The Tsunami'. Not only does he out-eat his opponents, he overwhelms them with a force that wipes away any trace of them. Records are shattered whenever he sits down at a table. In a preview of coming attractions, he burst on to the scene on 4 July 2001 at the Nathan's Hot Dog Eating Contest in Coney Island and downed 50 in a mere 12 minutes – or an average of one every 114 seconds. The previous record had been 25.

Americans have embraced Kobi – or, shall I say, Americans who find his particular activity amusing. Personally, I can think of no spectacle less appealing than watching someone stuff his face with cow brains and then purging it

in a projectile across the room. That it borders on the unseemly goes without saying, especially in a world where there are children who are starving. But people love it, and they crowd into sporting arenas to cheer Kobi and his challengers on, just as they did one early morning at the Wells Fargo Center in Philadelphia for Wing Bowl 20. Not only were there trays upon trays of barbecued chicken wings to be had, they were served up to the contestants by strippers from every club in the city. All I can say is, you had to be there to believe it.

Ah, what could be better than a greasy chicken wing served up by a stripper covered with tattoos? On the drive over to the Wells Fargo Center at 6am that February day, I wondered if I should not have had some precautionary shots of some kind. I had been around chicken wings before, and I had been around strippers before, but not both in the same setting. It seemed ... well, yuck! But in service to this essay, which you have to rely on for an expert view into the decline of the American sporting scene, I passed up whatever immunisation there was to be had and walked inside the arena, where I clipped on a press credential and came eye to eye with Ron Jeremy.

Unless you have lived a sheltered life – and bless you, if you have – you are aware that Jeremy is a former porn star. He was called 'The Hedgehog' – and he looks like one. In fact, he looks more like a customer that one of his films would attract than an actor. But while he is squat, overweight and balding, it would

appear that he has an undeniable appeal – including a 9.75 inch penis, which he has displayed in such screen gems as *Inside Seka*, *Super Hornio Brothers* and *Tales from the Crapper*. The Hedgehog was on hand to publicise the event, which he did so with the help of the cluster of X-rated stars that paraded behind him – including Jenna Jameson, 'The Queen of Porn', and Mary Carey, who appeared to have been squeezed into her dress by the Army Corps of Engineers. Shutterbugs asked the three to pose for snapshots, during which Jeremy opined: 'Wing Bowl outsells Guns & Roses and Poison concerts. This is Philadelphia.'

Wing Bowl is sponsored each year by a Philadelphia sports radio station, 610-WIP. It began innocently enough as a way to liven up the gray days of winter, in somewhat the same way that *Sports Illustrated* came up with the idea of the annual swimsuit issue. A larger-than-expected crowd showed up that first year, so it was held again the following year. Even more people showed up. It was held at various venues across the city until Mayor Ed Rendell recommended that it be held at The Spectrum to accommodate an even larger turnout. From there, the ►

Takeru Kobayashi ploughs through chicken wings on his way to winning Wing Bowl 20



94WIP
Sports Radio

Wing Bowl evolved into something akin to Mardi Gras. Big eaters from across the Delaware vied for a berth in the field. To add some spice to the event, the station held on-air auditions for 'Wingettes'. In case you are wondering, a 'Wingette' is not necessarily a stripper by profession, yet along with the ability to balance a tray of chicken while walking in high heels, the job does entail some degree of ease when it comes to exposing yourself in public.

Given his credentials on the world stage of competitive eating, the 33-year-old Kobi was an invited guest this year to Wing Bowl. Everyone who was not a former champion had to prove themselves worthy by auditioning on air. To give you some idea of what that involved: 'Kenso' Kevin Richmond downed six peanut butter sandwiches and a half-gallon of milk in three minutes; 'Boring John' Barnett ate five one-foot long meatball subs in three and a half minutes; 'Gentleman Jerry' Coughlan consumed a one-pound ham sandwich in two minutes; and Richard 'Not Rich' Razzi polished off five pounds of pineapple in three minutes and 40 seconds. Of the 26 contestants in the field, Kobi was the co-favourite with 6-4, 215-pound Jonathan Squibb at 2-1 odds. 'Super Squibb' had won the event the previous year.

Kobi appeared relaxed prior to the event – and why not? No one can come close to him when he is at the top of his game. With food in his hands, he has been an unstoppable force. As a schoolboy in Nagano, Japan, his classmates remembered with vividness how he would casually down 10 bottles of milk. From there, he carried his talents on to the international scene. For an unprecedented six consecutive years beginning in 2001, he won the Nathan's Hot Dog Eating Contest, during which he has consumed 50, 50.5, 44.5, 53.5, 49 and 53.75 hot dogs in 12 minutes. Three second-place finishes followed, at which point he became entangled in a contractual dispute with the competition organisers. But Kobi has not just shown a prowess devouring hot dogs. At the 2006 Krystal Square Off, he set a record by eating 97 hamburgers in one sitting (30 better than his total the previous year). In Hong Kong in 2005, he ate 83 vegetarian jiaozi dumplings in eight minutes. At the Jacksonville World Bratwurst Eating Championship in 2006, he ate 58 of them in 10 minutes – and in doing so topped the world record of 35 set the previous year. On the Wendy Williams Show – as part of a 'Save the Twinkie' campaign –

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Kobi downed 14 Twinkies in one minute for his sixth Guinness World Record.

So can anyone get the better of Kobi?

The legendary Joey Chestnut has.

So did – ahem – a 1 089-pound Kodiak bear.

In a special that aired on the Fox Network in 2003 – a programme called *Man versus Beast* – Kobi consumed 31 hot dogs (sans the bun) while the bear devoured 50 in two minutes 36 seconds.

At the Wells Fargo Center, only the crowd behaved like animals. The place looked like something out of ancient Rome. Intoxicated spectators yelled down from the stands at the strippers on parade: 'Show us your tits!' Sure enough, a woman in a bikini standing beside me did just that. She turned to the crowd, lowered her top to a big roar, snapped it back in place and turned around again. She did this casually, as if she were dropping a coin in a parking meter. At that very instant – and I am not joking – contestant John 'Oink Oink' Bradley rolled up on ►

Kobayashi takes part in the 2011 Nathan's Hot Dog Eating Contest via satellite in New York





The champion is crowned after his record-breaking win at the Wells Fargo Center

his float, upon which two scantily clad women wrestled in a tub of mud. I had half of it on me by the time it passed.

Up on the stage at a long table surrounded by 'Wingettes', the contestants tore into trays of spicy chicken wings. As his opponents worked their way deliberately through their pile, Kobi was a study in precision. He cleaned each chicken as if he were flossing his teeth. Upon swallowing, he performed the 'Kobayashi Shake', which is to say he wiggled his body to force the food down his oesophagus. Midway through round two, he had such a commanding lead that the public address announced: 'He is running away with it.' While it appeared at one point in round two that he would throw up – which would have led to his disqualification under the 'you heave, you leave' rule – Kobi settled down and swept to victory by consuming a record 337 chicken wings. That eclipsed the previous record by an astonishing 83 wings.

Second-place finisher Joey 'Super' Squibb yielded the crown he had worn for three consecutive years with grace. Squibb conceded, 'He was great.'

Kobi grinned from ear to ear as he accepted his \$20 000 prize. He even said with the aid of an interpreter: 'I could probably eat another 100 wings or so. Not really fast. I would have to take my time. But if you brought me 100 more, I could probably eat them.'

As I watched Kobi accept his cheque, I thought back to a late night a few years before. It was at the end of a Phillies game at Citizen Bank Park, only a short walk from the Wells Fargo Center. A van pulled up to a loading dock. Written on the side of it were the words: The Welcome Wagon. Brotherhood Mission Ministries. Hope-4-Men. Cartons of food that had been uneaten by fans during the game were stacked by the driver and helper into the rear of the van, which would ferry the food to the Philadelphia Brotherhood Rescue Mission.

Hunger is everywhere in this land of affluence. While Americans busy themselves by watching men stuff their faces with chicken wings and strippers shed their tops, there are people for whom food is a necessity instead of an amusement. I followed the van to the homeless shelter, where we were greeted upon our arrival by an eager group of occupants. Food from the van was spread out on a table in the kitchen, including hot dogs, hamburgers, kielbasa, sliced turkey, popcorn and barbecued ribs. One of the men speared a cold hot dog from a tray and exclaimed, 'Oh man, there were plenty of days when I would eat out of a garbage can and pray to God: "Please Lord, change this situation."' The former drug addict added, 'Being hungry is a hurting piece.' Another man added, 'When you live on the street, you find food any way you can. Nothing goes to waste.'

Competitive eating has come under criticism before for how it does just that. To his credit, Kobi is sensitive to that. Only a few hours after winning, he showed up at a local restaurant and donated a part of his winnings to Philabundance, a local charity that provides food for the hungry. He gave them a cheque for \$3 370. It would not feed everyone who is hungry. But it would give more than a few people a meal, and gave some purpose to the silliness on display at the Wells Fargo Center. Even the two charming young ladies who splashed mud all over me. ■

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Kram is a celebrated sports writer with the Philadelphia Daily News, a published author and the regular contributor to Business Day Sport Monthly's American Read.