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Winging it to glory

Wing Bowl 15 brings the world's top chicken chompers to Philadelphia.

By Patrick Lester Of The Morning Call

UPDATE: 2006 champion Joey Chesnut successfully defended his title, eating a record 182 wings to win Wing Bowl 15 this morning at the Wachovia Center in Philadelphia. The top finisher from Philadelphia was Gentleman Jerry, who ate 167 wings and finished in fourth place. Both won new cars.

Recalling his greatest professional accomplishments, Bob Shoudt's thoughts immediately turn to shoo-fly pie.

It was a memorable day in June 2006 when he plowed through 25 slices, or 91/4 pounds, of the molasses-filled dessert in eight minutes, taking in roughly as many calories as most men ingest in five days.

Not only did he show the Lancaster folks how far he'd come on the professional eating circuit, he chomped his way to a world record and walked away \$2,000 richer.

"That was a big one for me," said Shoudt, also known as "Humble Bob," 40, of Royersford, Montgomery County. "I was able to do that in front of a lot of my family."

It was a feat rivaled only by the 10 pounds of meatballs the 285-pound Shoudt, considered one of the world's top professional eaters, downed in 12 minutes several months later in Atlantic City. And who could forget that eight-minute run in October 2006 in Chattanooga, Tenn., when he ate a personal best 65 burgers.

Today, there's another chance at making history when Shoudt

digs in at Wing Bowl, the annual pre-Super Bowl event in South Philadelphia, where he hopes to break the record of 173 chicken wings consumed in one sitting, about 30 minutes.

In Shoudt's world of professional eating, there's little time to reflect on your last act of gluttony when dozens are lining up to battle indigestion and nausea to unseat you in the rankings.

All in the name of pride and money. Lots of money.

Last year, Shoudt shared in a pot of about \$350,000 doled out by the International Federation of Competitive Eating, an organization that supervises and regulates eating events across the country. Much of that payout was divvied up among seven of the best eaters in the world. Shoudt, who's ranked fifth, would only describe his earnings as "significant."

Winners can earn anywhere from \$1,000 to \$15,000 per event, but typically take home about \$5,000.

For some, including world-renowned hot dog-eating king Takeru Kobayashi, it's become a way to make a comfortable living. His eating and endorsement deals reportedly earn the Japanese native hundreds of thousands of dollars annually.

And fans can't seem to get enough. Tickets for this year's Wing Bowl, held at the 20,000-plus seat Wachovia Center, sold out in a day. The event, in its 15th year, is the creation of WIP-610 AM sports radio hosts Al Morganti and Angelo

Cataldi.

The winner gets a new car.

The competitors say Wing Bowl and the dozens of other contests on the eating circuit are all about fun, camaraderie and a little bit of showmanship.

Milton Stokes calls it downright dangerous. "I don't want to be the guy who pooh-poohs competitive eating, but I can't help but be the voice of reason," said Stokes, a registered dietitian and spokesman for the American Dietetic Association.

"There are a tremendous amount of side effects," he said. "Some of the more tolerable ones are vomiting, heartburn and diarrhea. People end up being bloated and gassy. There's the risk of choking or having a bone go down your esophagus. It's really very serious.

"Honestly, I find it a little disturbing, even though I do laugh at it. In a world where so many people are overweight and obese and so many people are without adequate food to eat ... why don't we have a contest to see who could eat the most vegetables?"

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 30 percent of U.S. adults over 20 — that's 60 million people — are obese. An estimated 65 percent of adults in that age group are either obese or overweight — a less extreme condition.

David C. Metz, spokesman for the American Gastroenterological Association and a University of Pennsylvania professor, has been studying speed eaters in hopes his research will help lead to better treatments for digestion problems.

"You shouldn't try this at home because you watched some dude at the Wing Bowl," Metz said. "The amazing thing about these people is that they do have an incredible ability to expand and relax the muscles in the stomach to make it become a flaccid bag that accepts whatever you put into it."

"There is a danger in doing it. You can overextend the stomach and tear the wall of the stomach. In truth, that has not happened in any of these speed-eating contests."

George Shea, who along with his brother Richard created the International Federation of Competitive Eating in 1998, said the organization handles an estimated 100 eating events each year "in a safe way."

A medical technician is always on hand. Eaters are discouraged from "training" by regularly overeating.

"When you think about it, we truly have nothing to do with obesity and/or food issues and hunger," said Shea, who runs a public relations firm. "We're a sport that happens to use food. Has NASCAR been criticized for environmental issues? I would think their impact on the environment would be much more than the impact we would have on food-eating habits.

"We try to raise money for food-related charities."

Die-hard competitors, who typically enter about 30 to 40 events each year, say they're some of the healthiest eaters when there are no timers or crowds in front of them.

Chip "Burger" Simpson, 25, who is studying to become a physical therapist in Alabama, is ranked sixth by the competitive eating federation. A typical day of eating when he's not competing would be an egg-white omelet and oatmeal for breakfast, a protein bar snack, grilled chicken salad for lunch, steamed fish for dinner and "a lot of water."

"We realize we can't eat like [we do in competitions] all of the time or it would be unhealthy," said Simpson, one of 25 contestants at Wing Bowl today. "The rest of the time, we eat better than 95 percent of the public."

On a weekend, Patrick Bertoletti, a 21-year-old Chicago cooking school student listed as a 2-to-1 favorite to win Wing Bowl, might competitively eat 76 hamburgers in eight minutes. On weekdays, his menu features salads, chick peas, tofu, tuna and plenty of fruit.

"I'm not too worried," said Bertoletti, who says he's made about \$50,000 eating during the past two years.

Shoudt, an information technology manager who considers eating his full-time job, says he's a strict vegetarian when he's not eating for money.

He spends at least an hour a day doing physical fitness training or riding his bike with his three children. He's even hired a sports psychologist and has a seat at Wing Bowl reserved for his family doctor.

"My wife, she totally supports me as long as I'm having fun with it," he said.

Shea says competitive eating dates back to cavemen. It's the drama and spectacle that spectators crave. "It's a mix between sports, social commentary and Coney Island hucksterism," he said. "It's an over-the-top thing that really hits home."

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