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Secrets of a Competitive Eating Champion



Most of the time, Yasir Salem is a mild-mannered marketing director. But on weekends, he regularly pulls off incredible gastrointestinal feats as a championship-winning competitive eater. And it all started as a joke. “I was watching the Nathan’s contest in 2008, and I thought, ‘Wow, all I have to do is eat a bunch of hot dogs and I can be on ESPN?’" he says with a laugh. "I soon learned that it's not that easy.”

But Salem stuck to it, and these days, he's a seasoned competitive eater, ranked #10 in the world. We couldn’t resist asking him for a few tricks of the trade.

1. THERE’S NO MANUAL ...

When Salem wanted to get started, he didn’t hire a trainer. First, he turned to the internet, and then, as he began to compete, got advice from other competitive eaters. “If you enter enough contests, you get friendly with them, and they’ll share tidbits of how they make things happen,” he says.

2. ... BUT THERE IS A SEASON—AND A PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION.

Major League Eating puts on some 70 contests every year, including July 4th’s Nathan’s Famous Hot Dog Eating Contest. Most contests take place during the warm months—exactly the opposite time from when most people want to be eating pounds and pounds of food. “It does sound counterintuitive, but these eating contests are shows for people to come and watch,” Salem says. “They're generally outside.” Which means that the eaters are susceptible to the weather and, if they can’t keep cool, will eat less than normal. “Last year, Nathan’s was brutal,” Salem says. The women, who competed first, let the men know that it was very, very hot on the stage, so “we iced ourselves down. That’s why the numbers didn’t go so low for the men’s last year. If you look at the tapes, you’ll notice a lot of us had wet shirts because we were trying to stay cool.”

3. WATER IS A COMPETITIVE EATER’S MOST IMPORTANT TRAINING TOOL.

It’s probably not a surprise that the typical human stomach can’t hold the 30 or more hot dogs that competitive eaters routinely wolf down. After watching that first Nathan’s competition, Salem decided he was going to try, right then, to eat 20 hot dogs and buns. “I did three or four and I was like, ‘I’m done,’” he says. “I couldn’t continue.” He needed to increase his stomach capacity, which he did by drinking large amounts of water. Salem worked his way up to a gallon, which he can now drink in under a minute—and does so almost daily when he’s preparing for a competition.

4. THEY WORK OUT THEIR JAW MUSCLES.

When you're in an eating contest, you don't want your jaw to get tired. Some competitive eaters will chew up to six pieces of gum at a time to strengthen their jaw muscles, Salem says, but he has another method: He chews on silicone tubes that doctors recommend for patients who've had jaw surgery or for kids with autism who need to chew on things. "I bought three of these things in different strengths and I chew on them two or three times a week or so," he says.

5. GETTING IT ON VIDEO HELPS, TOO.

Salem videotapes both his practice sessions and his competitions to analyze his hand speed and technique. "When you videotape yourself, you reveal what's actually happening. Am I chewing too long? Am I messing with the hot dog too long? Should I be breaking [the food] faster? It's a lot of analysis and just tweaking." He'll often put his video side-by-side with another competitive eater to see how he can improve. Mastering hand speed and efficiency is a huge part of being successful. "If your hand speed is too fast, you're not swallowing fast enough, then you're just creating a traffic jam in your mouth," he says.

6. THEY GET HELP FROM HYPNOTHERAPISTS

A couple of years ago, Salem found that he was having a mental block in competitions that was preventing him from being the best he could be. So he went to a hypnotherapist, and discovered that part of the reason he was getting hung up was because he was afraid of vomiting. "I had to get over that fear," Salem says. "My hypnotherapist put lots of positive things in my head to help me figure it out."

There are other methods that competitive eaters use, too, including meditation. "Just like in sports—you can be top of your game physically, but if you get anxious, and your heart races out of control, then you're a mess. Same thing happens here."

7. THE BEST COMPETITIVE EATERS ARE IN SHAPE.

You'll notice that most competitive eaters are very fit—and that's because they have to be. "If you look at the top eaters—like the top 15 or 20—they're all in shape, with very rare exceptions," Salem says. "The fittest eaters have low body fat percentage and work out a lot. I've continually worked out and decreased my body fat over the past years and I've seen my performance increase from 20 to 25, and now I'm at 30 hot dogs."

8. COMFORTABLE CLOTHES ARE A MUST.

"You know when you go to Thanksgiving and everything feels tight? You don't want that," Salem says. "I wore spandex two years ago and all the guys made fun of me, so I don't do that anymore. I wear shorts that have an elastic waistband. I usually wear a size medium shirt, but in competition, I might wear like a large. You just wanna be as loose as possible. You don't want to think about the constriction of your clothes."

9. THEY DO EAT ON COMPETITION DAYS...

Even competitive eaters have something in their stomachs before they go into a competition. "When you wake up in the morning, you haven't eaten for 7 or 8 hours," Salem says. "You're tired. More than anything, you want the energy to go into the contest. You have to think of it like a sport. You can't go into a

marathon without having some food in your stomach because you need the energy to go through it."

To prepare, Salem cuts down on solid foods two days before the contest; instead, he eats shakes, vegetables blended into soups, and soft fruits like bananas and oranges. "It's not just about your stomach; it's about your intestines," he says. "You want to empty out your entire space as much as possible." The morning of a contest, he'll drink a strong cup of coffee—"to make sure I'm clear"—then go on an hour-long run. After a shower, he'll drink one last gallon of water, which he'll pee out completely before the contest, and have a piece of fruit. "That's enough to get my body in the mode," he says. "Caffeine starts me up and clears me out; the water hydrates me; and that piece of fruit or a smoothie is enough to carry me through 5 or 6 hours before." He'll also pre-game some fiber gummies to help him digest later.

10. ...BUT THEY NEVER SIT DOWN.

"When you're sitting, you're half-way compressed," Salem says. "It's the worst situation to be in. Standing up helps open up the space and you can move around. You don't wanna squander all the training that you've done over the past few months by limiting your space by being leaned over."

11. LIQUIDS ARE LUBRICANTS, NOT THIRST-QUENCHERS.

"It's just a way to get things down into your stomach, and quickly," Salem says. "You don't wanna overdo it. Liquid takes up space and it weighs quite a bit." If dunking is allowed—as it is at Nathan's—he'll dunk the whole hot dog bun before eating it. But dunking isn't always permitted.

Depending on what the food in a contest is, competitors will have different liquid options: Whole fat milk, which quells the effects of capsaicin, for spicy food; sugar-free flavored drinks or water for salty foods; and coffee or tea for sweet foods (Salem prefers decaf tea). Alcohol isn't permitted, and soda is a bad choice. "You don't want anything with carbonation because that's going to start bubbling up in your stomach," Salem says. "You'll have to deal with burping every few minutes."

Temperature is also really important. "When you drink cold water, your throat tends to tense up," Salem says. "You don't want to introduce any kind of stress. So we'll use warm water, around body temperature."

12. CONDIMENTS ARE A NO-NO.

They all take up space that might otherwise be occupied by whatever you're eating. Salem specifically says that wannabe competitive eaters should avoid mustard, which, when combined with warm water, can lead to some … unpleasant results. "I was in a contest with this guy—a total amateur. There was Nathan's Spicy Mustard and Ketchup sitting up front for branding purposes, and he was putting it all over his hot dogs. All the sudden he spit it up. It hit the back of my head, which is shaved, and it started burning! It was a mess."