

## They're big and doughy, and power eaters can down a pound a minute

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Of all the competitive eating contests, none is closer to a Jewish mother's heart than New York's Matzo Ball Eating Contest. They may be big and doughy, but it beats stuffing sticks of butter down your throat.

Most of us are familiar with the tradition of the Jewish mother who forces family members to eat dish after dish of home-cooked delights. It goes something like this:

"You're too skinny!"

"One more wouldn't hurt!"

"Would it kill you to have seconds?"

Thus, Jewish families have gathered around the dinner table for centuries and engaged in a type of competitive eating contest. The winner is the family member who can stuff down the most food and can make the mother the happiest. It's eating out of ritual, comfort, love and guilt.

But a recent competitive eating contest at the Friar's Club in New York may have taken the tradition a bit too far. On the eve of Passover, Eric "Badlands" Booker, a 36-year-old subway train conductor who lives in Long Island, gobbled down 30 tennis-ball-size matzo balls weighing nearly three ounces each in five minutes, 25 seconds. That's a little over one pound a minute.

The International Federation of Competitive Eating (IFOCE) sanctioned the event; they host most of the competitive eating contests in the world, and last year they put on 75 events, including the Fourth of July Nathan's Hot Dog Eating Contest in Coney Island. This year they are planning 100 events with more than \$100,000 in prizes.

But the battle to eat the most of Ruthie and Gussie's "kvetch-proof" matzo balls was new this year; the company joined with Empire Kosher to sponsor the contest and offer a \$1,000 cash prize.

Freddie Roman, the famous Borscht Belt comedian and longtime dean of the Friar's Club, was there to oversee the festivities, and to gawk. "I sincerely hope all of the contestants are Jewish," Roman said. "Of course if you are Christian you are at a severe disadvantage—Jews have had their bodies trained for this for many, many years."

He went on: "I sincerely hope these matzo balls are softer than my bubbe's." Ba-da-bump. "Because you ate one of my bubbe's you were out for the first three Seders." Ba-da-dump. (Bubbe is a Yiddish term for a Jewish grandmother.)

Booker was the overwhelming favorite for this contest because he is the reigning champ of eating matzo balls and hamantaschen, a Jewish pastry. "I love kosher

delights,” said Booker. “Every time there is a kosher title I got to get in it.”

The gustatory gulp-down played out like rush hour at the Carnegie Deli, albeit with an audience comprised mainly of media types and cheap-thrill seekers. The “eat-thletes” assembled in the foyer of the contest area while George Shea, the ringleader, master of ceremonies and IFOCE chairman, pumped up the crowd. Shea gave a rousing wrestling-style introduction for each player, at which point all 10 competitors were assembled and the matzo ball cart was wheeled in.

The cart was piled high with glass bowls containing 25 matzo balls. Most bubbes have their own recipe for matzo balls, and not only is that recipe in their heads, it is also a closely guarded secret--a culinary launch code, if you will. Matzo balls contain eggs, salt, soda water and matzo meal, bathed in a stream of chicken broth (not schmaltz!). The best balls are considered floaters, not sinkers, and should be fluffy and light. Each player got a bowl, chicken broth and two cups of water. Water is critical because “eat-thletes” commonly suffer from jaw-jam.

Then the devouring began. Timothy Holden, the reigning champ of mozzarella and tomato salad eating, popped the first ball in his mouth--whole. “Beautiful” Brian Seiken, the title holder for pickle eating (2.7 pounds in six minutes), mashed his matzo balls into his broth before shoveling them into his mouth. Donald “Moses” Lerman, famous for the fastest hands in competitive eating as well as the butter-eating world record (seven sticks in five minutes), uses one hand to cut the matzo ball and then propels the half-ball in.

Make no mistake, this is a sport. At the end of the contest, the playing field--a wooden table about 25 feet long--was splattered with matzo bits, water and broth. Players clutched their guts and called for more water. Although the sport is not about cuisine, or taste, the reviews of Ruthie and Gussie’s “kvetch-proof” matzo balls were not kind. The competitors were kvetching, if not retching.

“They were bad, they were practically dry in the middle and very dense,” said Holden, who ate 15.

“They were tough, they were tough,” said Booker, the weary-eyed winner. “These are definitely sinkers.”

Calling a matzo ball a sinker is definitely an insult, but Steve Gold, the president of Ruthie and Gussie’s, was on hand to defend his family recipe and talk about its origins. He started the company to give his mother and aunt, both Holocaust survivors, a legacy. “I can’t write, so I can’t write a book about them,” Gold said. “I’m not a moviemaker, so I can’t make a film. With them it’s about the food.”

And, it seems, it was also about the food with Booker. At the end of the contest, after the media cleared out and the cleaning crew moved in, Booker stood with his trophy and signed autographs for kids. Ever the diplomat, Booker later took back his sinker comment. “I’ll probably have another matzo ball,” Booker said. “Why not?”

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