

THE MAN

sitting in the greasy spoon wears a T-shirt bearing the slogan: "These aren't guns. They're cannons." Arrows point to his sizeable biceps. In front of him sits a large – some might say obscenely large – platter of fried food. He squashes a fistful of chips in his hands and rams the compact carb-ball between his jaws. In a few rapid chews, it is gone. A swiftly assembled egg-and-bacon sandwich is subsequently dispatched in just three more bites. Stopping briefly for a glug of water, the man contorts his 6ft 5in frame like a snake, as if to rearrange his insides and free up space. A small group of bemused diners murmur their approval.

After just 28 minutes and 20 seconds, the entire food mountain is devoured. This is the first time anyone has surmounted the 4kg feast served up at the Hard Boiled Egg Café in Cavan, Ireland – acknowledged by Guinness World Records as the largest English breakfast on the planet – within the 60-minute limit. His spoils? A commemorative T-shirt, the €19.95 cost of the meal waived by the host, and – one assumes – a hefty bout of indigestion.

Over 1.1million people have watched this episode on YouTube. You will have seen similar feats on television in the form of *Man v. Food* and *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*, of course, but this is somewhat lower in key. There is no film crew, no production trailer, no whooping crowd, no slickidents. Just a camcorder in a half-empty Irish café and a former US construction worker called Randy Santel with a supersized bit between his teeth.

LORD OF THE ONION RINGS

Santel has the physique of a fitness model and the dietary proclivities of a hungry elephant. Since becoming a competitive eater and part-time bodybuilder, he has established himself as one of Earth's most prodigious gluttons. Aged 29, his remarkable record of 254 food challenge victories in eight countries and 22 US



"IT BECAME A COMPETITION WITH MYSELF TO STAY LEAN WHILE DOING THESE FOOD CHALLENGES. I ALWAYS SAY I LIFT TO EAT"

IF YOUR HEAD IS SET ON GLUTTONOUS GLORY, YOU'RE FACING SOME SERIOUS COMPETITION

BURN RECORD CALORIES

Joey Chestnut's 69 hot dogs in 10min contained 10,419kcal, but undoing the damage takes a lot longer. Work off 1000kcal in 60min with two rounds of this circuit from Sandy Macaskill of Barry's Bootcamp. It's a good start...



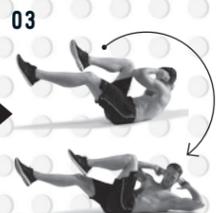
TREADMILL

12 MINUTES
Start with a jog and increase the speed by 1mph every 30sec for 5min. Walk 1min. Spend 6min doing 30sec flat-out, 30sec jogging. Wobble to the weights room.



SQUAT & PRESS

60 SECONDS
With dumbbells at your shoulders, drop into a squat. Push up, extending the DBs above your head. Lower and sink into the next squat. Feel it in your buns.



BICYCLE CRUNCH

90 SECONDS
Lie flat, lift up your shoulders and pedal your legs, bringing the opposite elbow to your knee. Repeat on the other side and alternate to get your fat-burning on a roll.



RENEGADE ROW

60 SECONDS
In a press-up position holding kettlebells, row one weight into your abs. Return to the floor. Repeat with the other arm. Put some extra mustard on those reps.



JUMPING LUNGE

90 SECONDS
Lunge forward, jump up and switch legs in mid-air. Go back to the squat/press and do another set of each. That's round one complete – now back to the treadmill.

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THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG DISTANCE EATER

hours, it could feasibly be hunger. Having spent days studying Santel's exhaustive online how-to guides (*Training Stomach Capacity*, *Staying Ripped* etc) and trying to stretch my abdomen by upping my water intake, I'm wary of disparagement.

My concerns are justified. "This is a dangerous pursuit and my medical advice would be, in no uncertain terms, not to try this at home or in competition," is the unequivocal verdict of Dr Deryk Waller, senior associate doctor at Blossoms Healthcare. "Binge eating can cause peptic ulcers in the gastrointestinal tract and further stomach perforations in those people with pre-existing ulcers. This would constitute a medical emergency."

Dr Duane Mellor, spokesperson for the British Dietetic Association, likewise urges caution. "You are going to be consuming a lot of energy and your body's got to do something with it," he explains. "Not only will it increase your chances of putting on weight, the risk of long-term conditions like diabetes and heart disease increase, too. I wouldn't recommend it."



69 RECORD FOR HOTDOGS EATEN IN 10 MINUTES

It is with these cheery prognoses echoing in my head that I arrive at Jones' Café Bistro in Leicester, home of the diabolic 666 Breakfast Challenge. In fact, it should really be called the 666666 Challenge, including as it does six rashers of bacon, six eggs, six sausages, six hash browns, six pancakes and six slices of toast. That's around 4500 calories in total – just under twice the daily

guideline amount for men. When Santel visited here in January he ate the lot in under 12 minutes (the time limit is 30 minutes), becoming only the eighth person to complete the challenge.

Whereas Leicester's fast and curious came out to watch Santel do his thing, by the midpoint of my rather more languid display I am the restaurant's sole patron. There had been another customer but she left with a sneer as I broached my third sausage. It's a pretty dismal affair. Despite a high mastication tempo in the early few minutes, by the end my pace decreases to slow-motion – each bite of lukewarm toast a chore as my jaw aches from the exertion. I'm a loser, a bloated one at that, and I've had to fork out £15 for the privilege.

According to Randy Santel's foodchallenges.com – a compendium that offers tips to budding eaters, plus

states outranks any other eater on the competitive eating scene. Living at home with his parents in Missouri and vowing to abstain from a committed relationship until he achieves his eating goals (500 wins), Santel's life revolves around this unconventional vocation. "I've always loved to eat," he tells me, "so it became a competition with myself: to maintain my physique and be lean, while doing all these food challenges. I always say I lift to eat."

His existence is a boom/bust cycle that sees him tour multiple countries to tick off food challenges, then spend the subsequent months repairing the damage with a strict diet and gym regime. Santel's most recent binge odyssey was a 44-day journey around the UK in early 2015, the results of which he documented on his website with all the detail of a sporting almanac. Over the course of six weeks he triumphed in 41 of his 43 challenges, ingesting over 200,000 calories in the process.

It was this British odyssey that caught my attention. As a civilized, mature, health-aware individual, I realise that I am supposed to be appalled by such behaviour. When researching this piece one food writer told me, somewhat piously, that such antics display "a poverty of intellect" and represent "an insult to anyone with a sense of decency". But it's a sentiment I can't share. Owing to a crappy metabolism and a complex relationship with my gym card, my waist size is in constant flux. So on one level, I'm intrigued by the simple biochemistry of it all – just how does he do it? On another, there's the geography. We're used to seeing this sort of thing over in the US – they do everything big after all – but Walsall? Swansea? Leeds? What possesses a man to cross the Atlantic and sit in a barren bar in Dundee with the sole purpose of eating 18kg of steak and haggis? And all for the sake of a Polaroid on the wall? I reason that there's only one way to find out, so I embark on my own abridged version of Santel's UK tour: five days, five cities, five monster meals.

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GRILLING IN THE NAME OF

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a geographical breakdown of every known challenge worldwide – Britain is now second only to the USA in the number of eating contests staged. Sitting alone and dyspeptic in Jones' Café this is difficult to believe, though the man on the till tells me it's a big hit with students in the area.

Convinced that my faltering start is in part down to the lack of morale-boosting support, I make contact with the godfather of dive-joint challenges, *Man v. Food's* Adam Richman, and ask him about crowd power. "There is nothing like having a room full of people cheering you on to victory," he readily admits over the phone from L.A. "There's an everyman element to it. We can't all dunk like LeBron James or score goals like Harry Kane. But we all can eat."

Listening to him talk you glean a palpable sense of the US love affair with competitive eating, and it's certainly a far cry from Leicester. Nathan's Famous Hot Dog Eating Contest, Richman tells me, takes place on New York's Coney Island every Fourth of July and is now a staple of Independence Day festivities. It is broadcast live to millions on television. A 2011 poll revealed that more Americans were interested in the Nathan's event than they were in Wimbledon.

HEROES IN A HALF BUN

Nathan's has spawned some bona fide eating celebrities. There's Joey 'Jaws' Chestnut, aged 31, the current custodian of Nathan's 'Mustard Belt' with eight consecutive wins to his name. In 2013 he set the Coney Island record by devouring 69 hot dogs and buns (HDB in eat-speak) in 10 minutes. Chestnut's long-time nemesis is Takeru Kobayashi, aged 37 and incongruously rake-thin. The Japanese eater shot to fame on his first appearance in 2001 by swallowing 50 HDBs in 12 minutes, doubling the previous record. His trademark methods – such as splitting the frankfurters in half and dunking the buns in water to soften them (known as the Solomon Method), and contorting his body to force food down the oesophagus (the Kobayashi Shake) – were contentious once but are now the industry standard.

I manage to track down Kobayashi to his New York apartment. How does a man

keep going for so long and maintain both his appetite and his figure? "Since I am the world's greatest, I want to see how far I can take myself, to what level I can actually go," Kobayashi explains, his Japanese sieved into English and recited back to me by Maggie, his translator and girlfriend. "I think it's the same as any athlete.

There's a certain type of human who, when they get addicted to something, they have to figure it out and do it. Mentally speaking, I think we are closest to bodybuilders. They don't care whether people say they're freaks. They just continue to focus on how to experiment with their bodies and reach their goals."

A few days into my journey and I certainly don't feel like an athlete. After purging my system of its contents with the assistance of some fibre tablets (another tip from Santel), I manage to

chalk up a first victory: Mission Burrito's El Triple Burrito Challenge in Oxford. Unsurprisingly, it consists of three tortilla packages – one carnitas pork, one chicken, one chilli beef – each bulked out with cheese, guacamole, beans and peppers. I opt to listen to my high-BPM gym playlist over the Santel-approved power pop.

This time around I have an audience, although it is a rather meagre crowd of one: a

confused-looking tourist who asks to take my picture once she notices my lunch is three times bigger than hers. My fan aside, the restaurant is empty. I can't even hold the attention of my server, who wanders off to clean the counter 10 seconds into my attempt. Nevertheless, I succeed. As I'm presented with a T-shirt to mark my achievement, I'm told my time of 12 minutes and 15 seconds is respectable, and aside from the literal gut punch that ingesting 1.8kg of food delivers, I feel a twinge of pride.

The same cannot be said, however, for the rest of my week on the road. In the tiny Welsh village of Llandegla I am served a narrow blow by The Plough Inn's Mega Monster Mixed Grill Challenge (gammon, lamb chops, steak, sausages and black pudding atop a pile of fries, onion rings and, tauntingly, a side salad). The following day in Portsmouth brings with it another defeat, courtesy of The Fleet's Beat The Meat Burger Challenge (five 6oz burgers, four hash browns, bacon, cheese, chicken breast, onion rings and chips). On this occasion I am forced to forfeit just a few bites from success when I lose control

TOUGH EGG TO CRACK: THE WAR BETWEEN MIND AND FOOD IS WAGED IN BOTH MIND AND BODY

"WE CAN'T ALL DUNK LIKE LEBRON JAMES OR SCORE GOALS LIKE HARRY KANE. BUT WE ALL CAN EAT"

of my bodily functions and have to run for the lavatory. One especially discreditable evening in Staines sees me fall eight ounces short of conquering the Spur Steak and Grill's 68oz steak challenge, the sheer mathematics of the meal proving too much for my tender, distended stomach.

In short, I feel ruined. When I first spoke to Adam Richman about my challenge, he had advised vigilance: "My doctor said, 'I need you to start looking at 35 minutes of cardio like a pill and you must take that daily'. And so after the challenges I'd fight the urge to sleep, take a gallon of water and go to a treadmill." I had fully intended to heed this advice, but in practice it proves

unrealistic. At the end of day four I attempt a bodyweight workout on the floor of my hotel room, but within a minute I'm a wheezing mess. Subsequent efforts are listless; I note with each passing day both my increasing weight and my waning strength; motivation and stamina evaporate. Worst of all, I feel stupid. Did I really believe it would be any different?

BURNT AT THE STEAK

After five days on the road I return home for my follow-up medical. My BMI, previously in the 'normal' range, is now classified as 'unhealthy'. Blood tests reveal that my fasting glucose has increased, though overall cholesterol is unchanged. The most troubling statistic is provided by the scales: a 4.8kg increase in weight,



7KG WEIGHT OF EGGS EATEN IN EIGHT MINUTES



47 SLICES OF PIZZA EATEN IN 10 MINUTES

GREAT BRITISH BINGE-OFF

Follow this road map to break calorie-even on your own eating odyssey and path to recovery

- 01 Amalia's Calzone Challenge**
Where Amalia's Italian, Liverpool
What 5lb meat and cheese calzone
Time 30min
Kcal 6840
Bust your gut 9 hours of spinning
- 02 Pit and Pendulum's Leaning Tower of Dessert**
Where Pit and Pendulum pub, Nottingham
What 12 scoops ice cream, 6 donuts, 3 waffles
Time 12min
Kcal 5633
Bust your gut 5.5 hours of HIT
- 03 BIG Boston Belly Buster Burger Challenge**
Where Smokey's American Grill, Trowbridge
What 12¼lb patties topped with bacon, cheese and pulled pork
Time 60min
Kcal 7629
Bust your gut 14 hours of rowing
- 04 The Skylark Sports Bar's 50oz Steak Challenge**
Where Skylark Golf and Country Club, Whiteley
What 50oz ribeye steak, onion rings, fries
Time 50min
Kcal 7110
Bust your gut 10 hours of tennis
- 05 Country Arms Sausage Roll Challenge**
Where The Country Arms, Wandsworth
What 2ft-long sausage roll
Time 5min
Kcal 1752
Bust your gut 3 hours of walking
- 06 Longhorns' Breaking Badass BBQ Challenge**
Where Longhorns BBQ Smokehouse, Newcastle
What 7lb BBQ meat: pulled pork, ribs, wings, sausage
Time 60min
Kcal 7938
Bust your gut 17 hours of weight training

close to 1kg per day. And what else do I have to show for my efforts? There's a commemorative T-shirt I'll never wear, £125 I'll never see again, acute lethargy, vicious mood swings and my first outbreak of spots since I was 16. In a week, I have gone from an excitable food-challenge fanboy to a miserable, sickly mess.

But what about Randy Santel and Takeru Kobayashi? These are the men who

buck the trend, who inspired me to hop on the gravy train in the first place. I decide to put last calls in to both. It turns out that Kobayashi is no longer quite the athlete he claimed to be. After 14 years in the game, he is beset with health conditions. His kidneys don't work well when competing, his posture is permanently hunched and he suffers from temporomandibular joint dysfunction – that's arthritis

of the jaw to you and me. "Ten years ago I would have said, 'If I die from this, it's fine', but your priorities change," confesses Kobayashi. "As of now I have no regrets, but if I get stomach, throat or oesophagus cancer, I don't know how I'll feel."

Santel is more upbeat, casually swatting away concerns with fairly unconvincing biological reasoning. "I basically treat my stomach kind of like my biceps, chest or whatever," he says. "I mean, you can over-train, but if you practice moderation then you're letting your body recover and rejuvenate. Your body has its triggers to protect itself – if you drink a whole bunch of alcohol, your body will make you throw it up so you can be better. If you fill up your stomach with food to a point it can't handle, it'll get you throwing it up before it starts to burst."

If that sounds grossly unappealing, it's because it truly is. Take it from me. After one failed challenge, my insides throbbled to the point of agony. Without a viable alternative, I forced two fingers down my throat and threw up the food I had eaten not one hour previously. Sadly, no amount of fame, novelty T-shirts or free dinners could ever rid me of the bad taste it left. The reason for Santel's YouTube success and the endless reruns of *Man v. Food* is that everyone involved manages to make insatiable pathological engorgement look like a day at the races. My advice is to keep pressing replay. Because the reality is a lot harder to stomach. 🍷