

Bicentennial, Hot Dogs, and BB Guns

1976 was a big year for all who were alive in the USA. Sunday, July 4 was the 200th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Extra special celebrations were planned and carried into fruition with much pomp and circumstance. All over America, citizens were preparing for this special year. Some even decided to bike across the entire United States! Who came up with that idea? One of the more popular routes for this trek passed thru Scott City, Kansas. All Summer, people biked from California to Boston, the site of so much early American history. Our City Counsel even waived the restrictions on camping in the city park so the bikers had a place to sleep. The excitement was palpable everywhere for the whole Summer.

Even in the Middle of Nowhere, we had bigger-than-usual festivities including an all-city gathering at a decked out Red, White, and Blue City Park. There were booths with various arts and wares for sale, and plenty of food. And contests for cash and prizes, the biggest and most coveted was the Hot Dog Eating Contest that gave \$75 to the winner. I was 12 years old and had never seen that much cash in my life. While \$75 may not sound like much in today, remember, things cost four to five times more today than back then. So, think \$300-\$400 for present day in prize money. Not bad for consuming something so Americana; you know, Baseball, Hotdogs, and Apple Pie. What could be more patriotic than gorging yourself on all of these?

To get into this contest, one needed to sign up, and then be chosen by drawing. I thought about entering, but I was one of those skinny kids, I mean really skinny. Mom had a difficult time finding blue jeans for me. They only came in standard sizes at the stores. Therefore, if they fit my waist, they were too short in the legs. If they were long enough in the legs, they fell down around my ankles when I ran. Trying to use a belt pleated the waistband so much it pinched my skin. All that to say, I was a skinny kid. And besides, so many people would enter, and only 10 would be selected for each age group, there was no way I would get in anyway, so why waste my time.

Consequently, I never signed up. So you can imagine my surprise when I received the official phone call from the City Counsel congratulating me on being officially selected for the Hot Dog Eating Contest. I thought this had to be a mistake, but I wasn't saying anything to the contrary. I thanked them, hung up the phone, told all of my family at home, and called my older sister Linda.

"Linda, I'm in the contest! I don't know how, but I'm in the contest! I didn't even sign up. How could I be in the contest?"

"Because I signed you up, you big dork!" She always had a way with words.

"Why?"

"I've seen you eat. I think you can win."

I consulted my dad. He was a Biology teacher and he knew everything. How was I to train for this? He instructed me to eat as much as I could the week before to stretch out my stomach, then eat a light breakfast that morning to give my stomach something to do during church. That made sense. Most of the contestants would likely starve themselves thinking they would be hungrier, but their stomachs would be smaller.

The week before the contest, any prize money I might be awarded would not offset the amount of food I consumed during my training. For example, for lunch I added a sandwich to my normal fare of one box of Kraft Macaroni and Cheese, four hotdogs cut up into it, and a pint of ice cream. What? Doesn't everyone eat a whole box of Mac and Cheese with four hotdogs cut up into it and wash it down with ice cream?

Sunday, July 4, 1976 came. I woke up a bit nervous, and really hungry. Dad said to only eat something light for breakfast, so I consumed only a couple pop-tarts, a bowl of cereal, and a large glass of chocolate milk. Since the contest would be close to the lunch hour, I ate nothing until then.

A larger than usual crowd was present that day, with quite a few out-of-state bicyclists staying on to see what sort of celebration we would have in small town America. The Mayor, armed with a bull horn called for all hot dog eating contestants to come to the central covered picnic structure for final rules. Large roasters aligned the picnic tables, filled to the measure with the tube shaped mystery meat, now ready to consume after having been boiled the last couple hours.

Once in position, we would have 5 minutes to eat as many as we could. Anything in our mouth counted. If we threw-up, judges would be available to estimate the number of dogs on the ground and what was left in our gullet. If we could keep from hurling until the time was up, it all counted.



The first set of contestants were the 6-10 age group. I didn't pay much attention as I was getting my game face on. Next came the 11-16 age group. By now most of the bikers had moved to get a better view. Our eyes widened as the ladies set before us a paper plate stacked with a pyramid of 25 Oscar Meyer wieners, juices oozing out of them from being just removed from their watery roaster bath. Accompanying this was a large glass of water. With the rules read once again, the countdown began. 10 – 9 – 8 ... 3 – 2 – 1. GO!

Immediately my hands and mouth began to work in concert with each other. Grabbing a tubed steak in each hand, I pushed the first one into the right side of my mouth, flapping my jaw faster than a wind-up chattering teeth toy. As I swallowed, I shoved the wiener in my left hand into the left side. That didn't work as well, so I quickly decided to go with the right hand only, transferring the dog from my left hand to my right hand with surgical precision. Pick a dog up with the left hand while shoving with my right. Transfer and repeat; the stack of Oscar Meyers disappearing from the plate. After 6 or 8 dogs down, I hear from the biker crowd, "Hey! Look at that little kid eat! Goooo, little kid!" They all began to chant, "Little kid, little kid, come on little kid!" And they were talking about me. Aiming to please, I picked up the pace, but just a bit too much, as dog number 13 got stuck in my throat. I started to gag. Oh NO! If I throw up, I'll lose! I reach for the glass of water, knowing this could mean at least two less hot dogs added to the count. I swallowed hard, and my throat cleared. With little time left, I whipped back into action.



"5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1, Hands down everyone!"

I still had seven hotdogs on my plate. Eighteen hotdogs downed. Would that be enough. The judges and helpers made a quick count.

"In third place, eating 14 hotdogs is,..." I didn't hear the name. I just knew I had second wrapped up at least.

"In second place, eating *memeteen* hotdogs is,..." What? What was the number? Was it my name? Who ate what?

"And in first place, winning the \$75 grand prize, consuming in only 5 minutes..."

Get on with it, would you. Get on with it.

"Eighteen hotdogs, Steven Vaughan! Congratulations Steven."

I won?

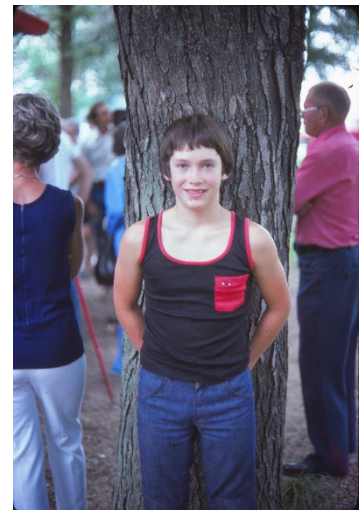
"Yeah, little kid!"

My fan club's cheers confirmed. I won! I won! I stand up to accept the applause and my money. And suddenly, my stomach is no longer happy with me. My dad wants to get my picture. He stands me by a tree. I don't feel too much like a winner right now. My siblings gather around to congratulate me. "You don't look so good," Danny, ever so observant states the obvious.

"Yeah, I don't feel so good either. Can someone take me home? I need to eat some chocolate ice cream to sooth my stomach."

Now the whole family is not felling too well. "You're going to eat some more?!?"

Dad drove me home, and I ate a bowl of chocolate ice cream, and I felt better. It's amazing what ice cream can fix.



We went back to the park to get my prize money, \$75 in cash. Now we're talkin'. I went to Wall's True Value Hardware because my grandpa worked there. Now, what to buy. I looked around the store. They had so much more than hardware. They had knives, baseball gloves, baseballs, and knives, and all kinds of other cool stuff.

And then, I saw it. What every 12-year old boy in those days longed for. A Daisy Red Rider BB Gun. It cost only \$11.99 and held 200 BBs. It came with a tube of 100 BBs, so I bought a box that had 20 tubes of 100 BBs each, 2000 BBs for another \$5. My head swimming with excitement, and my wallet still with \$55+, I left the store and headed home to look for something to shoot. And it wasn't long before my brother Danny and I found the ultimate targets. We carefully opened the barrel, poured in the first 100 BBs, and went out to the back yard to a big patch of weeds. We took aim, and with the first squeeze of the trigger we became...grasshopper hunters. But that's another story.