

A Cock and Bull Story

Bob Carey-Grieve

SOME PEOPLE, even the best eaters, think that it's all about shoving food into your mouth as quickly as possible. It's not. You can't chew if there's too much in your mouth; it slows you down. What you want is small bites that you can easily swallow.

Lawrence had a few advantages. He was naturally a fast eater as it was and could demolish his dinner in seconds. That's really a given in this game, but his upbringing had given him one crucial leg up, so to speak. He'd come from a good family, proper people, la-di-das, who taught him only to take small polite mouthfuls one at a time, so he never crammed too much into his mouth. Just small amounts, but quickly.

Secondly, he'd had to travel around a lot for school and then for work—buses, trains—he always chewed gum to pass the time, so he had developed this immensely strong jaw. He had muscles there bigger than your arm, so when he needed to he could pulverise food down to a pulp. And then, you must have noticed there was always speckles of foam in the corners of his mouth. He produced a lot of saliva—it must've been like Victoria Falls in there. So he didn't need to waste time dunking his food in water or taking sips from a cup like the others; he never dried up. All his food slipped down his gullet with complete ease.

He won his first contest easily, miles ahead of the competition and got picked up there and then by a hot dog maker, Frank's, a big sponsorship deal and that was him, off to America and the big time. He had to wear a shirt with FRANK'S BUNS on the back—he didn't like that much, but hey, here he was, small town boy living the high life, so it was a small price to pay. He won every contest: the regional, the state and then the national title. They called it the world title, which strictly speaking wasn't true, but even so, Lawrence called himself a world champion.

Now that's something. He had a trophy and everything.

Anyway, with his picture in the papers and a trophy under his arm he was all set to head home the hero; he'd done what he set out to do. But Frank's wasn't finished with him. They had a lifetime contract with him and refused to release him from it. Look, Lawrence was a man of his word, so he stuck at it. He kept winning and he held onto that trophy for another year, and then he said that was it, enough, he was done. I think he missed us all, you know.

But they didn't let him go, no matter how much he pleaded. He even threatened to go on hunger strike, or at least not eat any more hot dogs. It was big news too; there was a feature on the Lifestyle Channel. Anyway, thankfully this barbecue chicken wing company stepped in, bought the lifetime contract out from Frank's and gave Lawrence a new one-year deal. They wanted chicken wings to be as big as hot dogs and they needed a star name to bring to their competition, so they were willing to pay the big bucks. It was all starting to look up again.

There's always a *but* though, isn't there? The pay was pitiful. All the money was in bonuses—if he didn't win, he didn't get a payday. Well, he had to live off his savings for a time, but he was pretty confident he'd win again (we all were) and when he did, he'd buy a plane ticket home. Easy?

Nope. See, chicken wings are a whole different game to hot dogs. See there's more technique involved because you have to pull the meat off the bones, and you have to know how to do that properly, where to start, what to lift or pull, how to work your way around the wing; there's a real skill to it. But even though he was new to the game and had a lot to learn, remember, he still had that jaw and those unbeatable glands. He spent every night studying the anatomy of the chicken wing, learning it's every greasy nook and gristly cranny, every hollow and every *wannae* they fleshy flap and brittle bone, the hard to reach and the no-go zones.

Now it goes without saying, but hot dogs are pretty uniform in size, so in competitive eating, it's just a question of how many you can shove down your throat, it's all about numbers. Nothing too complicated about that. But chicken wings are all different sizes, some big, some small. It depends on the hens, so they judge the competitions by weight. Each competitor is given a set weight at the start of the contest, then they eat like normal, but when the time is up, they weigh the plates again and winner is whoever's plate weighs the least. It's not the quantity but the quality.

Anyway, he won all his heats and made it through to the big Grand Final at the end of the season. On the big day, Lawrence was tearing

through his pile wings. He made sure he was sat right in-between his two biggest rivals, so he could keep an eye on their progress. But he needn't have worried; he was so far ahead that he coasted through the final stretch. When the time was up, it was obvious to everyone that he had by far and away the biggest collection of bones. You could have built a dinosaur out of them and stuck it in the natural history museum.

The plates were taken away and weighed, and then the judges reconvened to announce the winner. Well, Lawrence was already on his feet. But it wasn't his name that they read out. He hadn't won. Even though there was no question that he had actually eaten the most wings, another competitor's plate weighed less. Lawrence had screwed up, he must have panicked under the pressure and not separated out the big wings. He'd lost. And not by much, only a few grams, but it was enough. The judges offered to award him a special consolation prize on the spot: WING COMMANDER—FOR THE MOST WINGS EATEN, but that didn't mean anything to him now. The cup and his ticket home were gone. I don't think he even had enough in his back pocket for the bus fare back to his digs.

Look, you know, he's a good guy. Despite the disappointment, he accepted the judgment, shook hands with the winner, never said a word. That's the kind of guy he is. The crowd though, they did not like it, not one little bit. They could see he had been cheated. So when it came to the presentation ceremony when the winner was making his way up to the stage, the whole crowd, all of them, thousands of folk, all started chanting Lawrence's name. *Lawrence! Lawrence! Lawrence!*

It was like a moshpit at Bannockburn, with everyone surging forward and Lawrence, raised up high on some guy's shoulders. They carried him to the stage on a sea of people. There was a right stooshie, they were pushing and shoving and in all the kerfuffle, Lawrence fell across the podium and careened into the cup, which fell off the stage, into the throng, disappearing into a forest of legs. His cup was truly runneth over. Amid the chaos, one of the judges dived in to try and save it. I don't know this guy's name, he was an old boy though from what I heard. Lawrence, quick as a flash, jumped in after him, but it was too late; the poor bugger judge was trampled and kicked underfoot and knocked unconscious, out cold. Well that was that, there were sirens everywhere—no joke—helicopters, ambulances, police, fire brigade, probably the coastguard too, for all I know. Anyway, the old boy got rushed to hospital, but never woke up, coma, and well, died a few days later.

It was all an accident. Lawrence had tried to save the guy, but the

authorities said otherwise. They threw the book at him. The charge sheet had everything you could think of on it: public disorder, incitement, rioting, and worst of all, homicide in the first. There was no shortage of witnesses pointing the finger, all officials from the contest, big wigs with a bit of sway and influence. Bastards. Anyway, there was a big campaign for Lawrence, and it was in all the big magazines and stuff, but it didn't matter. It didn't matter how many of his fans signed petitions, it was a done deal. Lawrence was convicted of murder and in that state, that meant the death sentence. Barbarians.

Look, I don't know much about the next eight years; he went to the big house and disappeared from view. I don't think he got any visitors. All I know is that he had no money left to pay his lawyer and his sponsors had abandoned him. All he could do was wait. Anyway, eight years later, the time came. He was to be executed by lethal injection. So the priest came and took his confession and his last meal was brought. Lawrence had ordered five kilograms of barbecue chicken wings, the same meal that had landed him in so much trouble. He wanted to prove to the world in his final moments that there could be no doubt that the cup was his. Not only that, he was going to break the world record. The people from Guinness were there and TV cameras were brought in to broadcast a live feed. Aye I know, a live feed!

Anyway, Lawrence ate like never before, I've seen the film, he went so fast! He moved wings so quickly you'd think he was about to take off! But bear in mind, with wings it's not all about speed. His technique was all out of kilter, and who could blame him? Instead of pulling the flesh off the bones with his teeth, he started eating the wings whole, bones and all. All the debris built up in his throat and he started to choke. But even though he was choking, he kept shoveling the wings in, nothing was gonna stop him. Eventually he just stopped breathing; his body started to spasm. He turned bright blue and collapsed on the floor unconscious. They tried slapping him to bring him round, chest compressions, but even the medic guy there didn't want to do mouth to mouth. Can you blame him?

So Lawrence just laid there, all bug-eyed and blue, covered in sick. Dead for all the world to see, live on TV. The priest closed his eyes, read the last rites and he was pronounced dead by the attending physician. The Warden was really pissed off, the cameras were sent out and the body was covered up. In came these two burly guards with a gurney to take him down to the freezer. One of the guards lifted the legs, and the other one put his arms around his waist like this to hoik him up onto the stretcher. But as he lifted him up, squeezed him under the ribs, all these

bones and puke came flying out of Lawrence's mouth in one big spew and he took a huge intake of breath.

Things got a bit complicated after that, but to cut a long story short, Lawrence had already been declared dead at the scene, and so his life sentence had technically already been served. Anyway, this was all very hush-hush, but the court had no choice, they had to release Lawrence. I know it sounds like a lot of cock and bull, but you should ask him about it when you next see him, he'll tell you the whole story.