

DENVER & THE WEST



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Proud to be a wiener

Philip Soderborg was nearly bent double, eyes glazed as he braced himself on his hands, looking for all the world like a boxer on the canvas who just took a blow to the gut.

Which in a way he had.

It was a sweltering Sunday afternoon, and Soderborg, a sturdy man of 43, was competing at Steve's Snappin' Dogs Hot Dog Eating Contest. He was leaning over a plate that had held 16 Thumann's beef franks, 10 of which he wolfed down.

Now he was reeling.

August had yet to arrive, but for Soderborg, the dog days sure had.

It all looked so promising just minutes earlier. Soderborg entered the finals of the event, a benefit for Project Angel Heart, as the favorite. He wasn't a contest pro like Andrew "A-Bomb" Lane, who has chowed everything from blueberry pie to burritos, but he edged out Lane in the semis by downing eight dogs in three minutes.

"I'd never done anything like this until last week, when I qualified," Soderborg told me as a crowd of 100 fans got ready to cry for blood, or at least a spectacular barf. "Who knows. Maybe this is the dawn of a new career."

I asked Soderborg where his gifts came from. He shrugged.

"I had hungry brothers and sisters, and if you didn't eat fast you didn't eat," he said.

Soderborg, 6 feet tall and 205 pounds, eyed Lane, who is lean as a runner. Lane said his secret was eating only foods he likes. "No way I'd enter a contest where I had to eat pork rinds," he said.

The two swapped notes. Both had taken on the 72-ounce steak at the Big Texan in Amarillo, Texas, a mecca for serious trenchermen.

"That thing was huge," Soderborg said.

"Whoo, no kidding," Lane said.

It was like listening to Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier talk about battling George Foreman.

I have no idea whether that analogy was running through Soderborg's mind minutes later, when he stared down at the remaining hot dogs. It was like the tube steaks were taunting him.

"Pace yourself, gentlemen," cautioned Steve Ballas, owner of the East Colfax Avenue hot dog stand.

Then it happened: the gut check of the true athlete. Soderborg straightened his back and set his jaw. He sucked it up, like he had in his days as a college wrestler.

He grabbed an 11th hot dog. Devoured it. Then a 12th. Soderborg was neck and neck with Mike McAvoy, 18 years his junior and in his chowing prime. Both reached for a 13th dog as the seconds ticked away.

Soderborg, his eyes practically crossed in agony, slowly forced his down. McAvoy's, shall we say, resisted the trip to his stomach.

"Um, can someone hand Mike a bucket?" Ballas said.

And with that, Soderborg was champ. The crowd cheered and he collected his prizes: a plaque, a "Big Wiener" T-shirt, and a \$100 restaurant certificate that I doubt he'll be using anytime soon.

I worked my way to where he sat.

Soderborg looked up at me, anticipating the stupid but necessary question, the one reporters normally reserve for a guy whose house just burned down.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

"Full," he said. "I thought I could eat more but I kind of hit a wall. Next time I'll have to train."

Hear that, kids? Natural talent to burn, but the man knows he still has to practice. Now that's an athlete worth looking up to.

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