

GOING FOR GOLD

A short play

Brendan Connor has seen Olympians winning medals and fancies some glory for himself. A review of the Olympics is playing as stage lights go up to reveal Brendan sat behind a table. He wears an athlete's vest and jogging shorts. He picks up a remote control, points it at a TV and switches it off.

BRENDAN: Made you proud to be British didn't it. At least it did once we started winning. The first few days were a bit crap. I mean, Mark Cavendish sticking with the Peloton. You're never going to win like that. And what is a Peloton? It's not even a proper word, just some cyclists taking it easy.

But, once we started winning, and we got to Super Saturday, it was different, I was proud to be British. In fact, I reckon I must have watched more of the London Olympics than I have all the others put together, and it inspired me, seeing them all going up there and getting their medals. All that hard work, and years of sacrifice paying off.

It made me decide that I want a piece of the action, and that's why today I'm starting the journey that will lead me to glory and immortality as I commence my bid for the ultimate prize. World Champion Chilli Pepper Eater.

He rises and lights go up to reveal the bleak setting of a rundown cafe with Brendan the only person in it. He has set up a camcorder, and talks to it as if there was a large audience behind it.

Now, I know what you're thinking. This doesn't look like the venue for a world championship. Every great sportsman has to start somewhere. Bradley Wiggins had to cycle around a shitty bit of road getting splashed by cars and chased by dogs, before he could go to France and do the same thing. One day, I guarantee you there will be a plaque on that wall saying 'Brendan Connor World Chilli Pepper Champion ate his first Naga Bhut Jolokia here.'

What's that? You weren't thinking that. You were thinking chilli eating isn't a proper sport. You're wrong. I mean, I know the IOC don't recognise it, but then they don't recognise Darts, and try telling Eric Bristow that that isn't a sport. He won't like you for it.

Chilli eating requires training, self discipline and hard work. It's the toughest sport known to man. I'm going to let you into its secrets and give you an insight into the life of a professional sportsman. Waiter, bring the first dish.

A waiter enters with a tray that has a Cayenne Pepper Chilli (n.b. for reasons that will become clear, it is suggested that marzipan or pepper shaped sweets are used, rather than actual peppers) and a large glass of milk on it. He puts it in front of Brendan, and exits.

Brendan leans conspiratorially towards the camcorder.

He's not actually a waiter. That is Steven Morgan, my mentor, and the current UK Champion Chilli Pepper Eater. He doesn't realise how serious I am about this, but he will do, when I take the title from him.

Brendan sits down and picks up the chilli.

This is the Cayenne Pepper. A mild little chilli checking it at 50,000 Scoville heat units. If you don't know what a Scoville heat unit is, it's like the Richter scale of chillies. This is just a mild tremor. Eventually we'll get the full earthquake.

He goes to put the chilli in his mouth.

WAITER: (Off) You can't eat that yet. We've not completed the formalities.

Brendan puts the chilli back on the plate as the waiter re-enters with a bucket. He puts it by the side of the table, and then takes a sheet of paper and a pen from it.

He puts these on the table. Brendan reads the paper and signs it.

BRENDAN: A legal waiver. Doesn't mean anything. My wife, when I started this, told me it proved it was dangerous and could seriously affect my health. I told her, it's nothing. It's like signs on the swimming baths about risks of drowning, or bags of peanuts saying 'may contain nuts.' It's just to stop legal cases from idiots that don't know what they're doing.

The waiter takes it from him and exits.

That's not to say the sport doesn't contain risks. It does, but no more than skiing, or parachute jumping, and people don't give them up because shoves a legal waiver in their face. Anyway, I'm not a man who takes the easy option. If I was I'd play snooker.

He gestures to the bucket.

The bucket is a mere precaution for lightweights, and because the owner got his floors carpeted last week and doesn't want to have to get them done again.

He picks up the glass.

You can have any drink you want. Milk is my drink of choice. Some people have alcohol, but not me. I wouldn't drive or operate heavy machinery after a drink, so why would I take the chilli challenge after one? It'd be stupid.

He picks up the chilli and goes to put it in his mouth, then stops just as it's about to go in.

By the way, you can't drink while you're eating. Only after you've finished, to cool you down. Not like football or road races where you have the stuff as you go along. No easy option here.

He eats the chilli fairly quickly.

Waiter, next meal please.

The waiter re-enters with the second chilli, and more milk. This one is a Thai Pepper. Brendan has not drunk the first glass of milk.

Drinking the milk would have been a bad mistake. I need to get my mouth accustomed to the taste and heat of the chilli. If I wash it away, my mouth reverts back to room temperature and I'm less prepared for round two. Also, the chilli's are going to get hotter, and each one needs more milk to put out the fire. If I drink this now, how much would I need to deal with the next one?

You see, as with any sport you have to have tactics, patience and endurance if you want to be a winner.

He picks up the Thai Pepper.

This is the Thai Pepper, which comes in at 100,000 Scoville units, twice as much as the Cayenne. You might think that's a leap up, but it's nothing compared to what follows.

He eats the Thai Pepper.

Waiter.

The waiter re-enters with the third chilli, and more milk. This one is a Scotch Bonnet. Brendan does not drink the milk

Now it's time to get serious. But before I get on to that, let me tell you why I got involved in chilli eating.

I'm an impatient man. I'm driven, and I want success, and I don't want to have to wait for it. Why should I?

You look at Jessica Ennis. It took her years to get anywhere. Now some people would say it was her own stupid fault for doing several sports rather than just finding one she was good at and sticking to it, but not me. I've got a lot of respect for Jess, but I want to strike while the iron is hot.

That's what I don't understand about the people who say they've been inspired by the Olympics and they're getting into sport. I look at them and I think, it'll be four weeks before you could run to the shops without panting, a whole year before you could do a marathon, and actually getting to the point where you could win one? Well that could take ages, and if it doesn't happen, and you don't even get bronze, then what's the point? Who remembers the bloke who came second, let alone the one that finished fourth? It's the winning that counts.

I mean, yeah, I know people say exercise and the increase in physical activity should be the legacy of the Olympics but what do they know?

When people take the mickey out of me and say they're running and that's so much better, I just say which of us has the better shot of becoming a world champion before Brazil? I might not get an OBE, but I will become an icon, to the people that matter.

Now, number three.

He picks up the third pepper.

This is the Scotch Bonnet. It's 350,000 units. That's three and a half times as much as the Thai Pepper, which in itself was twice as strong as the Cayenne Pepper. That's a massive step up. In the High Jump, all you have to do is jump two centimetres higher than you did in the last round. Now you tell me, which is the greater feat?

And there's a ticking clock in this sport. You don't get the luxury of competitors going one after the other and having a rest in between rounds. It's everyone at the same time. After you've finished one round you've got five minutes to keep it down, and then it's on to the next.

Now this one requires some concentration, so bear with me.

He puts his head back and dangles the chilli into it. He bites the end off, chews and swallows. He then pauses and

takes another larger bite. This takes longer to chew and swallow. He wipes his forehead as he chews, and after swallowing. After a pause he eats the last part of the chilli, this time swallowing without chewing. He swallows hard and concentrates, trying to ensure it stays down. He reaches for the milk and drinks the first glass.

Nearly there. Just the monster to go. Unlike most sports, this is not man versus man. It's man versus man versus food, and there's every chance food could be the winner, unless you get your mind and body into the right space. And this is just the warm up.

My first competitive game is next week. I've got a good chance, because it's like FA cup, the professionals don't come in till the later stages. If I win this, it's the regional final, and then it's the national qualifier, European heats, and the big one - the World Championship in the States.

The winner is the last man eating. If there's more than two people get through them, the first and the fastest gets the title. If it's too close to call, there's the sudden death play-off. They did suggest that they should change the name, given that it might have unfortunate connotations, but that's misreading the sport. I mean this isn't one of your eating marathons, it's not a volume sport, like the mega-burger contest, or the pickled egg trophy.

That sort of thing doesn't do it for me. For one thing, they'll make you fat, and what's the point of being a world champion if you're too fat for anyone to fancy you? In this game, I can stay slim and take full advantage of my superstar status, just like Tiger Woods.

I said that to my wife, just before we split up. She made out it wasn't going to be the world I said it was. Said that it didn't matter how slim I was, women would be put off by my breath, and even if they weren't they wouldn't kiss me because they'd singe their lips.

She didn't get that it doesn't happen like that. As with all the best sportsmen, I won't be in action straight after I finish. I'll need time to recover, let the adrenalin slow down, and soak in the joys of success before I start thinking about sex.

I miss my wife sometimes, but that's the way it goes. She couldn't handle the prospect of being married to an international superstar.

Anyway, time to call for the beast. Waiter.

The waiter enters with a tray, the fourth pepper (Naga Bhut Jolokia) and a final glass of milk. This time he is wearing gloves, and there is also a pair of gloves on the tray.

This is the ultimate in chilli experiences, the god that is the Naga Bhut Jolokia. So hot you need gloves to handle it. It checks in at 1,400,000 SHU's, 400 times hotter than Tabasco Sauce. In 2009, scientists in India said they were going to use it in hand grenades to flush out terrorists. That's how hot it is.

This is the first time I've attempted to eat one. I've been building up to it. After I cracked the Scotch Bonnet, I did the Peruvian White Habanero and the Red Savina Habanero, using them as the fourth chilli, making a bigger and bigger leap, and getting to the point I'm at now. The pinnacle of my sport, like the 4 minute mile or the ten second 100 metres.

This is my moment.

He puts the gloves on slowly and reaches out for the chilli. He picks it up and opens his mouth to dangle it over it. He freezes in this position as a newsreader enters and begins to deliver his report.

NEWSREADER: That footage was recorded in 2012 as Brendan Connor began his bid for the title of World Chilli Pepper Eating Champion. Mr Connor ate the chilli, but did not keep it down, and nor did he manage to make the bucket, leaving

him having to reimburse the owner of Charlie's Chilli House for the cost of new flooring.

Undeterred, and also because he needed money to pay for the carpet, he continued his bid, and two months later reached the national final where his growing confidence saw him achieve cult status amongst the viewers of Extreme Food Sport, Sky channel 728.

The 13 e-mails he received saw him established as a national hero amongst the bizarre food eating community, and Mr Connor achieved his dreams of global success and immortality' amongst that demographic.

Unfortunately his first brush with immortality was followed by a longer brush with mortality in the European final at Antwerp.

While Brendan remains frozen in position, the waiter re-enters and changes the table cloth to a Belgian flag or makes some other change to indicate the new location. He also takes the chilli out of Brendan's hand and replaces it with another. He then exits.

Unbeknown to Mr Connor, his mentor and reigning UK champion, Steven Morgan, switched the Naga Bhut Jolokia for a Trinidad Moruga Scorpion -

Brendan puts the Chilli into his mouth. He starts shaking and sweating as he swallows it.

- a chilli which took the new world record for worlds hottest chilli in 2012 with a 2,009,231 rating on the Scoville Scale.

Brendan drinks a full glass of milk in one.

Like many before him, Mr Connor suffered a violent reaction to the chilli -

Brendan collapses face down on to the table. As the newsreader speaks the waiter comes in, pushes Brendan back in his seat and takes the table cloth, plates and glasses off stage.

- and was admitted to hospital for food poisoning and severe intestinal burning. After two weeks in intensive care, he passed away. Mr Morgan was charged with involuntary manslaughter.

The waiter re-appears, now dressed as himself (Steve Morgan) He stands next to the reporter, but does not acknowledge him.

At a preliminary hearing Morgan told the court-

MORGAN: I admit doing it. But in my defence, your honour, all I wanted was a bit of fame and success. Seven years I'd held the UK title. I couldn't give it up and become yesterday's man. I wanted to retain my crown. I didn't mean to kill him. Honest.

NEWSREADER: Morgan said he took no comfort from the fact that, as a result of his actions, he achieved the goals of both men by getting them and their sport on the 6 o'clock news. He told the court he was truly remorseful for his actions.

In passing sentence Judge James Jenkins said he could not accept Morgan's claims, noting he smiled as it was reported that a film about the incident was already in production.

This is Simon Edwards, wondering whether to go for a Mexican.

THE END