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FEATURED

Masskrugstemmen — annual test of strength — begins

By Jordan Gass-Poore New Braunfels Herald-Zeitung
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Masskrugstemmen contest participants hold their beer mugs at shoulder level for as long as they can inside Friesenhaus Restaurant and Bakery on Thursday night.

LAURA MCKENZIE | New Braunfels Herald-Zeitung

Condensation slowly started dripping down the large mug of beer Jonathan Flora was holding out in front of him, reminiscent of the beads of sweat gathering on his brow during Thursday's opening round of Friesenhaus' annual masskrugstemmen contest.

Flora was one of seven contestants in the Bavarian sport that translates loosely into the "lifting of a liter mug of beer."

"I don't drink beer," he told Cornelia Dirks, Friesenhaus co-owner.

Some participants, who had only heard about the masskrugstemmen (pronounced mass-goo-stev-in) contest just minutes prior to entering, prepared by rolling their wrists and cracking jokes.

But it was not until they briefly gathered around the table on stage to pick up their mugs and returned back to their places in line that they felt the weight of their decision.

Contestants must hold the five-pound “masskrug,” or mug, at arm’s length and parallel to the floor for as long as possible.

Günter Dirks, Friesenhaus co-owner, looked at his stopwatch and told the contestants he would shortly be counting down from five.

“Four. Three. Two. One,” Dirks said.

Audience members gathered around to take photos and shoot video from their phones of the contestants, some of whom, after about one minute, began uncontrollably shaking their arms.

According to Dirks, who is the sole contest judge, this is a usual occurrence, with the average drop-out time for women being about two minutes. And Dirks has seen quite his fair share of masskrugstemmen contestants over the last five years at his German restaurant.

“Straight arm,” Dirks told some of the contestants, including his son Walter, who also works at the restaurant.

More time passed until the first contestant to be disqualified for dropping his arm at about one minute and 20 seconds started a domino effect, with the next three contestants going down shortly after.

Pearland resident Candelario Eliserio eventually won with three minutes and 20 seconds, making him eligible to compete in the restaurant’s finals, which is scheduled for Aug. 15.

Winners from each round compete in the regional finals for a chance to win a trip for two to represent Friesenhaus at the annual National Masskrugstemmen Championship sponsored by Hofbräu USA on Sept. 21 in New York City.

Representatives also will take part in a float ride down Fifth Avenue during the 56th Annual German-American Steuben Parade preceding the national championship.

“We’re looking for someone who can win NYC,” said Dirks. “We should represent Texas bigger, stronger, better.”

The masskrugstemmen contest record at Friesenhaus is 10 minutes and 50 seconds, achieved during the 2010 finals.

Eliserio said he and his family will return to New Braunfels for the finals, despite having never heard of the masskrugstemmen contest prior to ordering a beer Thursday with his wife, daughter and group of friends.

“I just didn’t want to be the first one to go down,” he said, adding that despite locking his shoulder he was shaking toward the end of the contest.

By focusing on a banner at the back of Friesenhaus, Eliserio said he was able to keep his “game face” and persevere through the discomfort.

With the \$20 entry fee, the contestants got to keep the one-liter Hofbräu mug they used and some, like Eliserio, drank the beer inside once the contest was complete.

“We don’t usually sell the Hofbräu mugs,” Dirks said. “When we do, they’re usually \$25, and that’s without the beer.”

He said contest participants who were eliminated from round one can compete again in subsequent rounds.

Friesenhaus is one of 15 restaurants in the nation that serves Hofbräu beer on tap to host the masskrugstemmen contest.