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EXCLUSIVE: FIVE GUYS GAMES: PART 1 - JOSE ONCE

BY: Keith S. Shikowitz, Editor in Chief/Investigative Reporter

Americans are obsessed with food competitions. Usually, they are watching people try to gorge themselves with the food to see how much they can eat in a particular amount of time. Their prize is generally a trophy. Five Guys has taken food competition to another plane. They have an employee-based contest in which the contestants have to put food together in the fastest time possible. The prize for winning this competition is $100,000. Two Rockland residents Jose Once and Jackson Chimbay, made the finals of this competition.

For those who have never been to a Five Guys restaurant, you have an appetizer of fresh peanuts to snack on while your meal is being prepared a drink dispenser with a plethora of Coca Cola products as well as very thick shakes to wash down your meal. The meat is fresh as is everything. The fries are fresh cut every morning and the size of the serving can feed more than one person. They cut around 500 pounds of fries a day.

Jose Once one of the finalists in the, Five Guys, challenge is 33 years old, born and raised in Rockland, specifically Nyack, but throughout his childhood he was living in Spring Valley. He is currently living right now in Garnerville. He graduated from Spring Valley High, 2012.



Jose Once

How did he end up in the Five Guys Challenge?

"I never expected to work at Five Guys for this amount of time. It all started with my sister. She was the assistant GM for Five Guys located in Nanuet, in the Rockland Plaza. she told me she needed, looking for new employees, so I joined in 2012 August and right after then my other brother that's in the finals, joined as well and we just sort of grew within the company, including my sister and my other brother as well."

"I'm currently a GM for Five Guys located in Newburgh in Orange County for the past 6 years and currently trying to be a multi-unit, trying to move up.

When you were just flipping the burgers and stuff, what was your favorite thing to do with the fries, and now you guys make your own fries and you, what was your favorite thing to do and why?

"My favorite thing was working on the fry station. That's because it's a lot of multitasking in that position, that specific station, but the main reason why is because time goes fast. I don't like just standing or sitting down for 8-hour shifts or anything like that. I like to be moving around multitasking, and the fry station is one of the hardest stations to work in Five Guys, but for me I just like time goes fast so my shifts are done." Once said.

What's some of the tasks in the fry station and why is this the hardest one in the place? More specifically what's different from Five Guys from other restaurants?

https://youtu.be/KC1gXKTYxNo

He continued, "Not a lot of people can handle that, multitasking, but a person that's working there for years knows what to do, like I said, for me, I'd rather be on that station than being on the register. Time goes quick. If I'm in the register, 30 minutes I'm taking orders, I'm already sleepy. I'm already I cannot do this. I'd rather be in the back."

He's done everything that's in the store which he says is part of their, training requirement. "All employees have to learn every station in, in 30 days so they can understand what's Five Guys. Usually we put new employees, on the dressing station so they have an idea what we are selling to the guests instead of putting them on the register, up front because they don't know what we're selling."

The order of the training for a new employee to get to know what Five Guys is selling is, the dressing station for like 3 days. Once they get the hang of it, then we put them on grill, the shake machine, and then the register. That's a lot of process.

What made you decide to get involved in the competition?

"The Five Guys games, I believe they started around 2013. Back then we didn't know about I joined; I started to be in the competition in 2019. When they started to let's say like announce or every week we call it the petty press they say hey first place gets 50,000, 2nd place gets 25, and so on. The money motivated me to join in, and it was just three things, How fast you could separate the cheese, how fast you could cut potatoes properly, and dressing a hamburger and a hot dog quick. But before 2019 they had a lot of other games like showing how to cook perfect bacon, how to weigh the patties correctly without using the scale. Back then it was more challenging. Right now, it's just 3 simple races. That motivated me to join in."

How big a stack of cheese do they give you and how fast can you pull it apart?

"The cheese, one stack is 40 slices. As long as you separate them correctly, you're fine as long as you don't break the cheese apart and don't have double stacked cheese, so not fully separated. Then cover with two foils completely, not have an exposed cheese. Before I was a supervisor, I used to open a lot, so cheese was one of the main things we had to prep in the morning and I just started at the gist of it, like separating cheese as fast as I can, but I was doing it at 30 seconds, which for the Five Guys games it's all right, not fast, fast but it's all right to just start going into the games."

Once said that the competition is really tough, starts, especially since now it's worldwide. This is the first time they're doing this, internationally, but the prior games. It was just the US but like I said, this is the first time they're doing it internationally, so every employee that works in the in the store is eligible to compete.

"For this year it made us more challenging because it used to be only 8 finalists only for the US, but they took it out, they took away 2 spots for the international people to join in. Jackson and realized this, this is going to be the toughest competition we ever competed in because there's now 6 finalists for the US to join into the finals. I hate when that happens."

When you're going to the competition and everybody's focused, how do you get focused for this? He stays focused by not thinking about the end result and it's all about getting used to it. He competed the first time in 2019. He had no idea what he was doing. He did do a lot of practicing, but he was just practicing by himself. He got shaky in the regional round for 2019, he messed up because he couldn't handle the atmosphere of the crowd, like the yelling, the music, so he was really nervous because it was his first time. He didn't make it to the semis, so he had to redeem himself or 2022.

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Once said that the head-to-head competition is more nerve racking, because now it's, a race, so yes, if you finish first, the faster the time is better. But if you make the mistakes throughout that time you will not make it to the next round in the finals.

"It's nerve-wracking because I've seen other competitors, they put your head, they look at you and then that's when they fumble. Luckily, I don't do that. I just keep focusing on what I do and I go, keep continuing until the finish line."

I was going to ask you, how difficult is it not to look over and see how the other guy's doing. How fast he or she is going.

"Yeah, I've seen other people do that and they mess up. Now it's just keep focusing, let the energy of the crowd help you stay on top of things and just keep doing your thing. The first year I had trouble because of the crowd and the noise, and music. I overcame that with a lot of practices. Five Guys does help us with the training. We train in groups. My mistake in 2019 I was just doing it solo. For the next games we competed in we set up group meetings, group practices, and then we have other people just cheering, screaming at you or using the spatula or the patty presser, banging stuff on the table so you get comfortable with that noise. So, once you're up in that stage, you're used to it." Once explained.

According to Once it just become background noise, and you're not really hearing it. It's like white noise when, you want to sleep. He uses that noise, to push himself further. It's like you're using the headphones. It just pumps you up. During the 2024 he lost the second-round match to Joshua Harvey, and he thought he was eliminated. The coordinator walked over asking, what are you doing? Are you ready to compete for the third or what? He remembers 2024 Vegas when he competed against Josh. He was devastated. He couldn't make it to the final for the 100 grand race. He had to try his best to get at least 3rd place, 25,000 it's something.

"I was really tired. I was not in shape to compete a 3rd round again, especially in Vegas, dry heat, no humidity, yeah, so, and it was 100 degrees outside. I tried my best. I didn't win 3rd place. I ended up in 4th. I still walked away with something, and I thought that would have been my last time competing because in 2022, I came in second. My brother came in 1st, so it was brother versus brother. I felt that whatever place I get, as long as we're in the finals, we're good."

How was it competing directly against your brother?

"We never expected that to happen. I didn't see myself making it to the last round for 100,000. We're on stage, we said some words, but I told him, I feel like he's going win because he's in better shape than me. I was like whatever. Whatever place I get we both want. We both won and then we realized once they announced that he won 1st place, 5 Guys decided to double the prize money. They were so amazed it was a brother versus brother match. Back then it was just 25 and 50. 100 for him and 50 grand for myself."

Let's look at this year's competition, how did you do?

"2026, like I said, This game has new rules, new qualifying ways. Like I said it's down to 6 finalists from the US. That was nerve racking because it's like we have to try our best like we have to make it, especially like this is the first time they're doing in a documentary series back then was just all quiet, no one knew about the Five Guys games, but for celebrating 40 years, Five Guys decided to do this, so more cameras everywhere, a lot of interviews and each stop along the way, so the Regional round was really nerve-wracking." He stated.

"In New Jersey, I did fine. I believe I came in 3rd place. They give us 20 right off the bat for passing to the semis. The semifinals is where. I cut myself while cutting potatoes, so I was bleeding a lot. They wrapped around with band-aids; they call it the finger glove. While I was doing the cheese with my injury. I believe I had 39 seconds. That knocked my time out and I was really devastated that I'm not gonna make it to the finals. My boss Roberto, he came up to me and told me not to put my head down, you got this. He suggested to take the band-aids off cause last thing you're going to do is dressing. Just a hamburger all the way and a hot dog ketchup mozzarellish run, he said, I just get a nail glue. Get something, but he didn't want to see me wearing that for the dressing and it worked."

He had another person give him nail glue to temporarily stop the bleeding. That helped. My time for dressing was 37 seconds that made me move on to the finals. I was so amazed, really shocking to believe I actually made it after that cheese, horrible cheese time.

The competition started in January 2026, and, and it finished, the finals was in May 2026 in DC.

How'd Once do? "For me, I did great. I can say it sucks that I had to face one of my colleagues, he's in New Hampshire, Peter Lee, we all knew it was. It sucked that we had to face each other.

Why did it suck you know you're going to face a colleague somewhere sometime.

"At Five Guys, we have corporate employees, we have franchise employees. For us it was we're under the same franchise under Bill Gellert, we have 4 people representing for our franchise Jackson, my brother, Jonathan, the winner that lives in Kingston myself and Peter. Jackson didn't face any one from our franchise until the finals. But I had to face Peter right away in the first round. I finished first pressing the buzzer, but I've I flew 2 potatoes out. That devastated me. I already knew I didn't make it. I'm really happy for Peter for making it to the next round. Other players that are not from our franchise."

He stated that in the end they're all happy, it's the love of the game. He walked away total 12 grand and they pay your taxes for you as well. The next competition is in 2028.

People in competitions usually have advice for those who are getting into it. What does Once have to say to the people in the competition about competing, what is it that makes you so hyped about this.

"We all know it's every 2 years, I say practice right now, because then you're used to it when the time is up for the for the real thing. Focus. Keep doing what you do at work, so like prepping cut potatoes every day. If you don't have a right-hand cutter, go to other stores keep cutting every day until you get used to it. I say just work focus, prep a lot, then you will get better and be ready in 2 years' time. Don't do it last minute because then you won't be ready."