

How One Contrarian ‘Broke’ Jeopardy! and Won \$1.7 Million

For all practical purposes, the way *Jeopardy!* is played hasn’t changed much since Art Fleming provided the game show’s first “answer” 55 years ago. At least, that was the case until James Holzhauer took his place behind the podium earlier this year.

After winning 22 consecutive games (and still winning) by an astounding average margin of \$64,913, one question must be asked: had *every one* of the show’s contestants been playing the wrong way?

Perhaps. Indeed, Holzhauer, “a professional sports gambler from Nevada,” may have shown the world what’s possible when a player template – never challenged or questioned over a half century – is blown up and replaced by another strategy that produces vastly superior results.

By now, [millions](#) of Americans are familiar with Holzhauer’s unorthodox *Jeopardy!* strategy (the show is seeing ratings not reached since 2005). It’s actually quite simple: unlike 99.9 percent of the game’s previous contestants, Holzhauer starts at the bottom of the board – where the biggest money is – and goes sideways.

“It seems pretty simple to me: If you want more money, start with the bigger-money clues,” Holzhauer explained in an interview with [Vulture magazine](#). [He told NPR](#), “What I do that’s different than anyone who came before me is I will try to build the pot first” before seeking out the game’s Daily Doubles. From there, he “leverages” his winnings with “strategically aggressive” wagers (read: wagers far larger than any contestant before him was willing to make).

This strategy – along with the fact he’s answering 96.7 percent of the clues correctly – has allowed Holzhauer to build insurmountable leads heading into Final Jeopardy. With overwhelming leads, he can be ultra-aggressive with his Final Jeopardy wagers – one he made amounted to \$60,013. It was that wager that allowed Holzhauer to establish his current all-time record total of \$131,016. (He now holds the [top 12](#) all-time records for one-game winnings.)

In 22 episodes, Holzhauer has earned \$1.69 million. Given that each show takes about 24 minutes to play, he’s averaging \$192,045 an hour.

How could a strategy that really is “pretty simple” – one that on a per hour basis generates more income than any job in America – have been eschewed by approximately 25,000 previous contestants?

There are several possible answers to this question, none of which speaks particularly well of America, or Americans.

One is that most people are afraid to challenge the conventional wisdom. If something has been done the same way for decades by everyone, no one thinks that it can be done differently. That’s especially true if those who do challenge the status quo [aren’t celebrated but excoriated](#).

Holzhauer’s contrarian approach to *Jeopardy!* has clearly rubbed many Americans the wrong way.

Washington Post columnist Charles Lane labeled him a “[menace](#)” who is guilty of violating the “unwritten rules of the game,” a view endorsed by CNN host [Michael Smerconish](#).

Other pundits have accused Holzhauer of using tactics that are “[unfair](#).” He’s been called divisive, polarizing, and controversial, someone who has “destroyed the quaintness of the game” and given America “deadly dull television.” Some

speculate that he's "gaming the system," perhaps even cheating. Message board posters have pledged to boycott the show until the "robotic" Holzhauer is defeated.

Thankfully, the opposite view – held by slightly more Americans, if message boards are a gauge – is that James is a sensation whose accomplishments should be celebrated. According to one story, he's the "man who [solved 'Jeopardy!'](#)"

Another depressing possibility is that the overwhelming percentage of Jeopardy contestants (and, symbolically, the population writ large) is incapable of contrarian analysis or of approaching a problem or puzzle in a unique way. Americans have either known for decades that the game was being played the wrong way but were too chicken to play it correctly, or James Holzhauer is the *only* American who's figured the game out.

It's too soon to tell whether future contestants will emulate Holzhauer's strategy. For what it's worth, over the past two weeks, 16 contestants have competed in Jeopardy's "Teacher Tournament" and every contestant has reverted to the game's normal style of play. Such is the enduring power of conformity, of conventional wisdom.

But what if the conventional wisdom is wrong? And how often is it wrong?

According to *Washington Post* columnist Robert Samuelson, the answer is "almost always."

Samuelson wrote an important if largely overlooked [book](#) on this very subject in 2001. The book's title: *Untruth: How The Conventional Wisdom is (Almost Always) Wrong*.

Samuelson's thesis is that people and organizations with an "agenda" often create problems that are either exaggerated or not problems at all. And the solutions policymakers give us to resolve these "crises" typically make things worse.

One can take his premise and run with it. Examples of when conventional wisdom has been wrong are abundant in the fields of science, health, economics, and education. We see it in our aggressive war policies overseas. We see it in our approach to presidential politics, at least before Donald Trump “broke” it. At this level, disproving the postulate that there’s only one way to play *Jeopardy!* might not seem like a big deal. It could be, however, if it opens the floodgates of independent thought among Americans.

Interestingly, as I was researching Holzhauer, I was able to identify one of his sources of inspiration.

“Do you follow hot-dog eating?” Holzhauer asked a reporter with *Vulture* who questioned whether he had “broken” *Jeopardy!*.

“No. Can’t say I do,” the interviewer responded.

Holzhauer: “About a decade ago, nobody ever thought someone could eat more than, like, 25 hot dogs in ten minutes. But this guy named Takeru Kobayashi came along and he shattered the record by so much that people realized there was a new blueprint to do this.”

So it wasn’t Secretariat winning by 31 lengths, or Bob Beamon breaking the long-jump record by almost 22 inches, or Wilt Chamberlain scoring 100 points in an NBA game who transcended what everyone thought was possible. Those athletes were simply doing the same things they’d always done, just far better than others.

The story of a 130-pound Japanese man with the goal of eating a mind-boggling number of hot dogs is what cracked the code.

Through intense study and trial-and-error experimentation, Kobayashi discovered two techniques no previous hot dog-eating champion had ever used. He quickly concluded that not only could he beat their records, he could blow them away.

He found that if he ripped the hot dog in two, squeezed each piece into a ball, dipped the balls in water (thereby breaking down the starch), squeezed out the excess water, and tossed each ball into his mouth, his stomach could tolerate many more dogs. The game-changing innovation helped Kobayashi *double* the existing record his first time out.

But here's the kicker, one that offers hope for the world. Once Kobayashi smashed the record, his fellow competitors didn't quit. They didn't demand that the rules be changed. They simply adapted their techniques and raised the level of their game. Today, an American [once again holds the hot dog-eating record](#) – 72 wieners in 10 minutes!

The lesson is as obvious as Kobayashi's bulging abdomen. When someone *does* think outside the box, when someone proves that performances once thought impossible are in fact obtainable, new levels of excellence become reachable.

When cancer is finally cured, my wager is it will be thanks to someone like James Holzhauer or Takeru Kobayashi. It will be someone who looks at all the work that's come before him and says, "This doesn't make sense. There's a better way to approach this."

Over the last two months, Holzhauer has been trying to teach Americans that eye-opening accomplishments are possible if one ignores or rejects conventional wisdom. The more Americans who absorb that lesson, the better.

"I'd be interested to see if there was a new paradigm in [Jeopardy!]," Holzhauer told Vulture. "If someone comes along and breaks my record, and attributed it to my style, that would be really great."

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