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**CrossFit**  
JOURNAL ARTICLES

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## All Other Things Being Equal

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### The CrossFit Fairness Doctrine

Paul Eich

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Of the many issues cooking on the Workout of the Day blog and CrossFit forums, few have generated as much heat as the butterfly kipping pull-up (BFK). The debates over this movement have been warming ever since a [video](#) of a 2:19 “Fran” performance by Brett Marshall (aka “AFT”) was posted on CrossFit.com in the spring of 2007. More recently, I remember a comment at a CrossFit event that pejoratively classified AFT’s pull-ups as “snake

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pull-ups.” Early criticism focused on the use of the split bars that permitted those “snake pull-ups.” However, when AFT put up a second-place performance at the 2007 CrossFit Games, it was clear that his pioneering movement was not an impediment to his fitness.

In the *CrossFit Journal*, [Issue 70](#) Tony Budding’s delightful, hard-hitting analysis in “Capacity Standards and Sport” puts the question into perspective: “Proper movement technique is nothing other than the most efficient, effective, and safe means for increasing power and work capacity.” So, what of the argument that BFKs are fast but don’t increase fitness? In my book, that would be a valid criticism if proven, and a good reason not to do only BFKs. (If we follow CrossFit’s prescription for variation, that should never be a problem anyway.)

However, my sense is that the real driver for all the vented frustration over BFKs arises primarily from a completely different issue—namely that CrossFit, and specifically the sport of fitness as contested at the CrossFit Games, is not fair. (See, for example, the continuing heated discussions of the BFK—and of fairness, technique, measurement, and competition—in the main page comments on [June 26](#) of this year, spurred by the imminence of the 2008 Games and the posting of a new 2:02 record “Fran” performance.)

Don’t get me wrong. I delight in CrossFit as a means to pursue fitness. I admire and enjoy the community that has grown under Coach Glassman’s nurturing. I love how I feel as a result of the training. Still, there’s no questioning that, in the sport realm, CrossFit is unfair. I think it’s fair to say that, all other things being equal, the CrossFit Games do indeed reward athletes who have tremendous work capacity in broad time and modal domains. But that’s just the point: it is never the case that all other things will be equal. For any physical attribute related to athletic performance, life delivers to humanity a bell curve distribution of gifts. Fifty percent of us are below average in whichever attribute we decide to analyze, whether that be height, weight, speed, strength, or types of “body intelligence” such as balance, coordination, timing, depth perception, agility, etc.

CrossFit is far from unique in its abject unfairness, as unfairness is a signal quality of the human condition. The very conceptualization of sport means that most of us unconsciously ignore that sport is closed off to unathletic or improperly sized aspirants. Football is



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extremely unfair to the short, small, slow, and weak, not to mention those with weak bones or ligaments, low pain tolerance, or a less than overwhelming desire to compete. Track is ruthlessly unfair to those who cannot run fast, throw far, or jump long. Basketball mocks those who are short, don't have power, or lack speed and hand-eye coordination. Competitive gymnastics isn't even possible for the tall or weak or ungainly. If we take the blinders off for a moment, there are a gracious plenty of folks we frequently omit when considering the fairness of any sport. Injury and genetic defect eliminate many contenders who might otherwise have the right skills to compete. There's no sport I know that isn't unapologetically unfair to those who are injured or old or fearful. And even beyond that, low IQ bars entry to most competitive sport for even those with incredible athleticism.

If you don't get my point in stating the obvious yet, here it is: CrossFit discriminates for size and athletic ability in its many expressions, just as every other sport does. If you are of above average height, you will be penalized in cycle-time events (such as pull-ups or air squats); if

you are of below average height and weight, you may find it difficult to compete at the upper levels of pure strength events, unless you are extremely massive and short, in which case you will be at a disadvantage in running, a limit you will share with anyone who is of above average mass. If you don't have athletic ability, or, more specifically, don't have above-average athletic ability in a number of attributes, you will not be able to compete for the best of the best at the Games. Small, [Speal](#)-sized athletes will have to possess an astonishing superiority in other athletic attributes to prevail, and the [John Welbourn](#)-sized competitors better hope there's no 10K through the hills, nor too many push-ups, muscle-ups, or other bodyweight elements.

Why would I bother to recite these obvious facts? I do so simply to make it plain that talk of fairness in regards to the Games, life, or anything is pointless because it ignores the glibly made points above. After last year's Games, one impassioned blogger lamented that [Speal](#) (as Chris Spealler is generally known) won the first two events but fell out as the fourth competitor overall due to his stature, but completely ignored the role his

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stature played in the rest of his incredible performances. Such a lament also ignores the fact that all of the top ten finishers were unfairly gifted with astonishing and broad-ranging abilities (at top of the bell curve in many aspects of athleticism), and fails to note that these monsters were all 20 to 35 years of age. The same criticism—that the weight was too high and therefore the contest “unfair” for the “little guy”—was levied again after this year’s final event. It could just as easily have been said, however, that the burpees, thrusters, and pull-ups for time in the earlier events were equally “unfair” for bigger athletes. No doubt the bigger, taller folks would have finished significantly faster in the final event (30 reps of 155-pound squat clean and jerks) had they been able to do power cleans in the final event, which would let them both leverage their strength advantage and offset the disadvantage of squatting up their additional weight.

The unfairness is everywhere, and it is exactly like all of life in that respect, so I suggest—for the sake of intellectual integrity and sanity, and for a bit of common ground on which we can all stand—that we just get over it.

If you don’t like the feeling that you can’t compete for top honors at the Games because you are too this or too that, I don’t blame you. I don’t like how that feels at all. I too am seduced by the desire for the rewards reaped by those who distinguish themselves on the field of competition. But emotional intelligence demands that we deal with that desire by accepting the simple reality that life didn’t deal most of us a 99th percentile performance in anything (a possible exception being that those of us who are U.S. citizens are in the 99th percentile worldwide for standard of living). Appeals to some hypothetical standard of absolute fairness are a distraction that, from individual perspective, gives one nothing good, and in a community setting, diminishes the celebration of athletic accomplishment for no good reason.

As humbling as it is for me to admit this, I am not the first to notice the heart-rending unfairness of sport. Because others were on to this fact first, there are Olympics for subsets of a variety of folks who are not in a state of, for lack of a better characterization, “normalcy” for athletic competition. And sports are frequently divided into categories of gender or age to make them more “fair.” In this regard, it is possible that the Games will develop over time to offer a broader range of competitors an opportunity to distinguish themselves in the Sport of Fitness. A Masters (e.g., old guys) division, weight classes, and height and weight classes have been proposed numerous times in comments on CrossFit.com or the message board, sometimes accompanied by a suggestion that perhaps scoring based on power output rather than pure time to completion would somewhat compensate for height and mass differences. I personally am holding out for

the day when tall, over-40 guys with bad knees, a low pain tolerance, a wishy-washy attitude about training and winning, a 40-meter sprint time of 5.5 seconds or more, and a vertical jump of less than 20 inches get to go head to head just with one another. Now, there’s a class I might be able to dominate!

In the ideal, we may one day be able to quantify and measure every measure of athleticism and provide a competitive category for each. We could then view the winners as those who had the most courage, trained the hardest, and performed the best when the chips were down, which is the essence of what we like to like in athletic performers. Until then, we watch the Games to admire the competitors and enjoy the astonishing performances, all the while knowing that, really, it just isn’t fair.

However, fairness is a “fair” term to apply in the context of sport. That’s why there are rules and standards and attempts to establish level playing fields. In this context, Budding’s pre-Games comments are worth repeating:

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“[The Games] will necessarily require arbitrary standards and rules to be established for the sake of sport. These standards are human creations, which often get reified to the status of natural laws.” This is just common sense. What we should care about is whether the rules are fairly communicated, established such that athletes can comply, and adjudicated impartially, consistently, and to facilitate enjoyment of the performance. If so, that’s about all the fairness I can stand.

Later on in his analysis, Budding usefully contextualizes competition by reminding us of the key element of CrossFit, fitness: “It is at our peril that we forget the arbitrary nature of standards. Proper movement technique is nothing other than the most efficient, effective, and safe means for increasing power and work capacity.”

This last is the most significant point to make, in my opinion. For most of us, the Games are something to enjoy as spectators, aspiring competitors, former competitors, and perhaps even as coaches who want to train competitive CrossFitters. However, we shouldn’t

allow ourselves to be distracted in the process of enjoying the Games. The distinguishing factor of CrossFit is not that it allows competition or gives those 99th percentilers a stage to show us their skills but that it provides them and the rest of us with the best means yet determined to build useful bodies—the best fitness with the least wasted time and the most satisfaction in the journey.

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When I'm in the middle of a workout, disappointed in my performance, or frustrated by my lack of fighting spirit, I have learned to ask myself, "What are we doing here?" That's a grounding question, because the answer for me is simply "Giving myself a great workout." In my list of life's priorities, fitness falls out well below being a good husband, father, citizen, and Naval officer. In fact, fitness is a means to those ends. And, while I've delivered less-than-stellar results on many WODs, the day has yet to come when my execution of a WOD hasn't furthered my goal of using CrossFit to make me more fit.

From that perspective, I challenge all readers to join me in rising above whatever we may find to be less than ideal about this or that movement, about the CrossFit Games' arbitrary standards, about your or my lack of world-class performance, or about our potential dislike of how CrossFit the Community may change as it grows by leaps and bounds. Let's focus instead on the

part of CrossFit that is free for the taking, benefits any who pursue it, and cannot be diminished by any other person's performance or lack thereof. Focus on your own fitness. Find and hold on to your satisfaction in gaining fitness like you've never known it. Relish the pleasure of sharing the experience with any others who will pursue it with you. These states of gratitude and satisfaction exceed any outcome that may be measured by a medal. It is our gift to ourselves to be mindful that we have the power to get for ourselves—by our own will, desire, and commitment to the Workout of the Day—the best that can be had.



Paul "Apolloswabbie" Eich is a CrossFit Level-2 certified instructor. He is in his nineteenth year of service as a Naval officer and has logged over 3,000 hours in U.S. Navy aircraft. Paul trains in his garage gym and at [CrossFit Memphis](#).