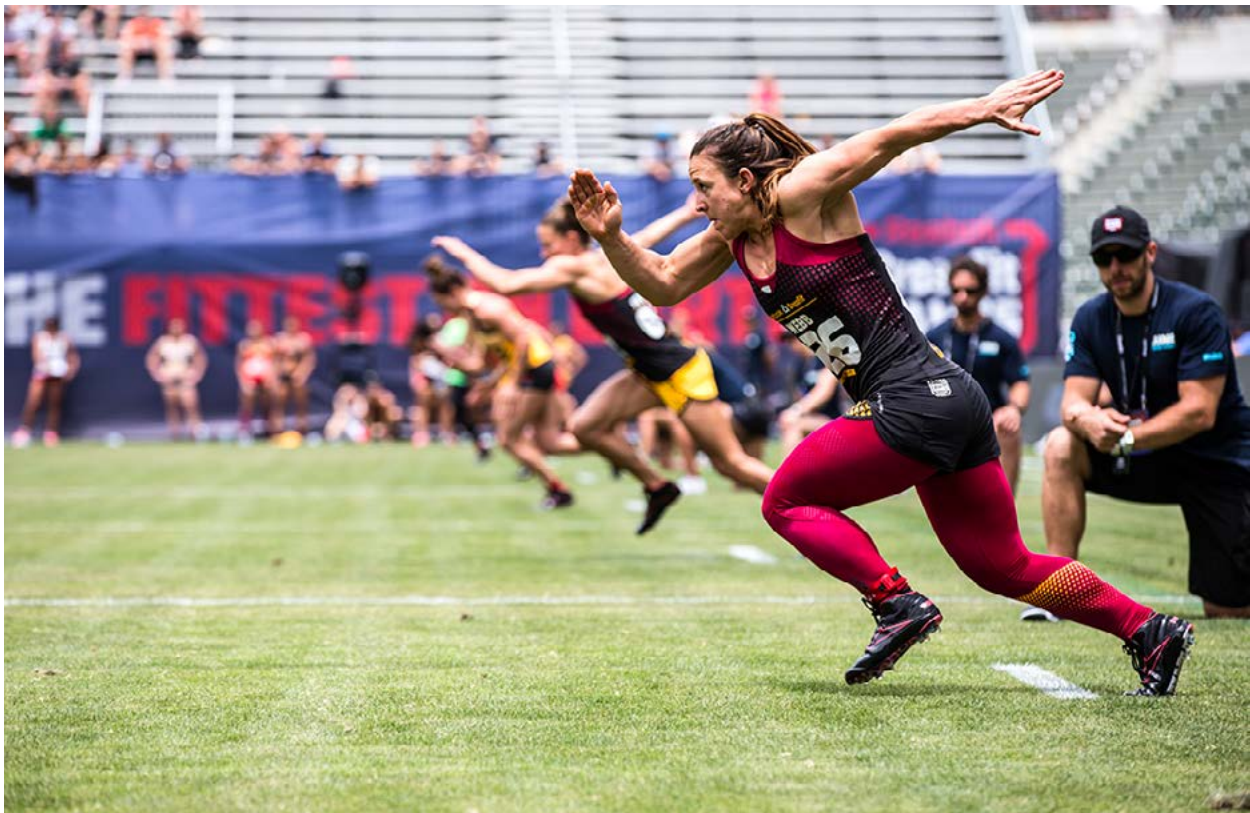

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Staying Ahead of the CrossFit Curve

CrossFit competition is evolving and growing fiercer every year. Emily Beers talks to Brian Bucholtz and Kara Webb about how the CrossFit Competitor's Course helped them finish 12th at the CrossFit Games.

By Emily Beers

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Michael Brian/CrossFit Journal

In 1972, my father, John Beers, qualified to compete in the high jump at the Munich Olympic Games. At the age of 19, he placed sixth at his first Olympics.

When you ask him about his Olympic experience, his careful training plan or his meticulous preparation, he will casually say: "Well, I got the junior Canadian record once at a local competition, and then I thought, 'Hey, maybe I'll be a high jumper.'"

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Courtesy of Brian Bucholtz

Kara Webb (left) and her coach, Brian Bucholtz.

He was simply born to jump. Combine this with the fact that the high jump was quickly evolving in the early 1970s, and it was a bit of a perfect storm.

High jump's rapid evolution began after Dick Fosbury revolutionized the sport in the 1960s, becoming the first man to jump backward over the bar, a method that soon became known as "the Fosbury flop." Fosbury won gold at the 1968 Olympics, and pretty soon old jumping techniques such as the straddle and Western roll were abandoned for Fosbury's new technique.

Fosbury changed the sport forever, and when my father was competing in the early 1970s, it was as if high jump was going through a rebirth. Coaches and athletes alike were still fine-tuning the small details of the flop, meaning the door was wide open for huge improvements in the sport. My father jumped on the opportunity, so to speak.

When the Fosbury flop was introduced, the decade that followed saw five new records, beginning with Dwight Stones' jump of 7 feet 6 and a half inches (2.30 m) in 1973. He was the first jumper to set the record with the new technique. The current mark of 8 feet and a half inch (2.45 m) was set in 1993 by Javier Sotomayor of Cuba, who also used the flop.



Courtesy of John Beers

John Beers employing the Fosbury flop.

To a certain degree, the Fosbury flop is to high jump what CrossFit is to fitness. The concept of fitness has been around forever, but it was poorly defined or not defined at all, and many pursued it by similarly unfocused methods. But Greg Glassman's definition provided a way to measure fitness, and CrossFit provided the program to systematically improve it. And as in high jump in the '70s, the door is currently wide open for athletes to emerge and make their mark on the world CrossFit stage as they find new ways to do more work faster. It's an exciting time for fitness, a time of change and rapid evolution.

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Evidence of this quick growth is in the numbers.

In 2009, the best snatch at the Games was 240 lb. by Jeff Leonard and 145 lb. by Tamara Holmes. All competitors had 10 minutes to max out. In the 2012 Regionals, 19 males and 18 females beat those numbers in a ladder format in which athletes had 50 seconds to complete 20 double-unders and perform one increasingly heavier snatch.

Dan Bailey's 1:35 judged Diane from 2012 would have been laughed off the CrossFit Message Board as impossible had it been posted there a few years earlier.

In 2013, a total of 138,610 athletes from 118 countries signed up for the CrossFit Games Open, more than twice as many as the previous year. In Event 13.3, a repeat of 12.4 from 2012, about 80 percent of participants who did the workout in both years found they were fitter in 2013.

Just as athletes and coaches pushed the numbers up in the high jump in the '70s, CrossFit athletes are pushing the limits of performance. But what makes our situation different than the 1970s is that our knowledge of functional fitness and training, nutrition, injury prevention and rehabilitation, and sports psychology is far greater than it was 40 years ago.



Courtesy of Brian Bucholtz

Bucholtz attended the first CrossFit Competitor's Course in the hopes of improving Webb's placement at the 2013 Games.

All this means that if you're a competitive athlete, you'd do well to keep up with the latest trends, techniques and training information. In 2013, only 0.07 percent of the athletes who registered for the Open qualified as individuals for the CrossFit Games. And the competition is only getting fiercer as fitness levels improve.

Bringing experts together to teach athletes and coaches how to train for competition is what the CrossFit Competitor's Course is all about. It's taught by Level 1 Seminar Staff members Chris Spealler, Matt Chan and Eric O'Connor, who have more than a dozen CrossFit Games appearances among them.

The course is for athletes and coaches who want to learn more about creating a well-structured training program, training weaknesses, peaking at the right time, moving efficiently, analyzing workouts, and optimizing recovery and nutrition.

Australian Kara Webb is one of these athletes. Webb (then Kara Gordon) competed in the Games in 2012, and she finished 19th. In 2013, her coach, Brian Bucholtz, flew from Australia to San Diego, Calif., to partake in the first CrossFit Competitor's Course.

Webb was already a Games athlete, but Bucholtz wanted to up his game and believed the course would get her back to the main event in 2013.

The Webb-Bucholtz Evolution

The Webb-Bucholtz relationship began before either knew what CrossFit was. A former member of the Australian military, Bucholtz became a personal trainer after he left the service. Webb was one of his clients.

When a friend told him about CrossFit, Bucholtz signed up for a Level 1 Seminar in 2009. His first CrossFit workout was Fran. That weekend, a light bulb went on.

"A lot of previously unanswered questions in training made sense with the CrossFit methodology," said Bucholtz.

The next day, he signed up at a local box to learn more, and he immediately started experimenting with CrossFit methods and Webb, who took great interest in CrossFit. Eventually, he opened his own affiliate—CrossFit Roar—in 2011.

At that point Webb was competing in CrossFit competitions. She placed 19th at the Australia Regional that year, and the following year she made huge gains and won the Australia Regional, qualifying for her first CrossFit Games.

Bucholtz's commitment to Webb was total.

"I don't think I could ever coach another individual female competitor while I'm devoted to Kara. I put so much of my heart and soul into it that I wouldn't be able to provide that to one of her competitors," Bucholtz said.

Bucholtz's devotion to Webb led to a decision to up his game as a coach. And after "stumbling across a YouTube video" about the CrossFit Competitor's Course, Bucholtz was sure he had found an answer.

"I knew it was a must-do course," he said.

So in September 2012, he flew 14 hours to Los Angeles and then drove another two and a half hours to San Diego to learn from Chan, Spealler and O'Connor.

Learning From the Experts

A year later, Bucholtz looks back at the Competitor's Course fondly.

Two of the main things he took away from it were how to structure a program for a Games athlete throughout an entire year of planning and how to program for weaknesses.



After a great year of training and competition, Webb returned to the CrossFit Games and improved on her 2012 placing.



Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

While Eric O'Connor (right) focuses on basic press mechanics at the Level 1 Seminar, he addresses advanced techniques such as increasing cycle times for overhead movements at the CrossFit Competitor's Course.

In CrossFit, the skill requirements are vast and sometimes seem endless, with competitions demanding competency in everything from Olympic weightlifting to running to gymnastics. It's tough to know how to develop an athlete's new skills while maintaining or continuing to improve his or her strengths. Where does a coach spend valuable training time?

To answer the question, the CrossFit Competitor's Course introduced a tool called the Spider Web to help with programming for weaknesses. The Spider Web is a visual tool that identifies eight areas:

1. Metabolic conditioning (in its various modalities)
2. Flexibility and mobility
3. Stamina (and what causes stamina to break down—lungs or muscle fatigue?)
4. Olympic weightlifting
5. Cardiorespiratory endurance
6. High-skill gymnastics

7. High-volume gymnastics

8. Strength

An athlete then ranks himself or herself on a scale of 1 to 10 in each category. This allows the athlete and coach to see where the athlete's holes are. The same is also done for specific workouts such as Fran, Filthy Fifty or Nate.

Once the rankings are complete, the athlete and coach are left with a solid framework they can use to develop a specific training plan, one that focuses on areas, workouts and skills where the athlete is weakest.

Bucholtz explained how the tool helped him: "Using the Spider Web allows you to identify and link together a common theme where the athlete might need more focus—not just in one singular movement but in a movement pattern; for example, someone who is very strong in the heavy lifts but deficient in Olympic lifting," said Bucholtz, who went home and immediately used the Spider Web to set Webb's 2013 training plan.

Webb said Bucholtz didn't waste any time implementing what he learned in the United States.

"We sat down as soon as he got back from the course, as we always do, and just had a big chat about it all. I am always 100 percent invested, and I trust Brian so much that I love to hear his feedback," Webb said.

One of the major areas where Bucholtz's newly acquired knowledge helped Webb was the mental game.

"We spoke a great deal about how your words and actions before the workout really set the tone for it. We focused on no negative talk at all," she said.

She added: "I will honestly try anything to make me a better person and athlete, and so I was fully on board and really have applied it to my training."

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On Bucholtz's end, he noticed right away that Webb's training improved.

"Kara was able to work on her weaknesses without losing her capacity on her strengths," Bucholtz said.

Webb's results speak for themselves. Her 2013 Regional win and 12th-place finish at the Games were significant improvements over 2012. This fall, she earned a spot on the prestigious Team World at the CrossFit Invitational that was held in Germany at the end of October. She was a key part of Team World's 24-19 victory over the American team.

Webb credits much of her improvement from 2012 to 2013 to improved confidence.

Smaller Course Details

Another area the Competitor's Course covers is nutrition.

Webb happens to be studying nutrition in university, so she has a good grasp of what she needs to put in her body,

as well as when and how much she should be eating and drinking.

But where the course offered Bucholtz the most nutrition information was in the area of game-day diet. For the most part, Bucholtz lets Webb take care of her own nutrition, but he steps in when he needs to, especially on competition days.

"My job is just to make sure she actually implements it correctly on the day if she gets caught up competing," he said.

The same is true of recovery, another area of focus at the CrossFit Competitor's Course.

"Being able to manage her rest and recovery in the later stage of the year is extremely important into how she performs during the Games season," Bucholtz said.

"Knowing exactly how far you can push an athlete to maximize their training throughout the year, without tipping them over the edge, can be tricky but is vital for longevity in the sport," he added.



Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

Matt Chan (right) has competed in six consecutive editions of the CrossFit Games, giving him a wealth of experience to share with coaches and athletes.

Despite his high praise for the course, one thing a course cannot teach is individual work ethic and dedication. Bucholtz knows he is blessed to have found an athlete who possesses the kind of drive necessary to reach the elite level.

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—Brian Bucholtz

“Kara is one of the hardest working and most dedicated athletes I have ever seen. Each year, she maximizes the use of her training time, and her competition results reflect that,” he said.

Course Evolution and Future

The purpose of the CrossFit Competitor’s Course is simple: to get athletes who wish to compete in CrossFit to reach their full potential, either by working with the athletes themselves or by working with their coaches. The competition goals can be as basic as doing better in a workout at an affiliate on a Tuesday night or as lofty as trying to bump Rich Froning and Sam Briggs off the top of the podium at the CrossFit Games.

O’Connor, one of the course’s instructors, explained: “The results that we hope for are that coaches can implement what we cover in their box to help others reach their goals, whether it be to help someone to just do their best in the



Nicole Bedard/CrossFit Journal

Webb moved up seven spots on the CrossFit Games leaderboard from 2012 to 2013. She hopes to continue that trend in 2014.

Open, to help someone qualify for Regionals or to help someone place at the Games.”

The CrossFit Competitor’s Course continues to evolve today, said O’Connor.

“We have added a lecture on analyzing recovery markers to stay away from overtraining or overreaching,” said O’Connor. He also said the course now features an expanded lecture on mindset and goal setting.

The course offers information to help athletes find coaches, as well as ways affiliate owners and coaches can implement competition-focused programming at their boxes.

O’Connor said he believes athletes often fall short in preparing for competition day, and athletes looking to get to the next level would do well to take notes during the section on day-of-event activities and how they can affect success.

“Knowing exactly when, what, how much to eat, when to start warming up, what to do for recovery ... , this can be huge and is often neglected,” O’Connor said.

O’Connor is happy with where the course is at, but they’re always considering possible options to take it to the next level. One idea is perhaps adding training camps for athletes in conjunction with the course.

Building Toward the 2014 Season

Bucholtz is so confident in Webb’s training program and development that much is staying the same this season.

“The same structure will be in place (this year), with the theme of building capacity throughout all movements whilst attacking weaknesses,” Bucholtz said.

He continued: “The game plan itself won’t change. We know everything about her capacity, and what she can and can’t do. After another year of training, her capacity will, of course, build, but the game-day strategies will remain the same.”

In practice, Webb’s weekly training schedule covers six days per week, and she’ll train for 60 to 90 minutes each day (including warm-up, mobility, workout and cool-down).

For Webb, Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays are considered “working days,” while Thursdays include light activity, as well as recovery sessions. Those sessions might include some gymnastics work, a long recovery run or an Airdyne workout. Fridays and Saturdays are heavier training days, and Sundays are rest days.

Bucholtz knows many Games athletes train more hours than Webb, but he believes that sometimes less can be more.

“In total, Kara trains no more than eight hours per week. I believe this is a big factor as to why she is able to bring so much intensity and dedication to her training,” he said.

Webb’s focus for the 2014 season is on making sure “there are no wasted opportunities.”

“I need to make sure that every part of my day is good for me—good food; good sleep; treatments on my body such as chiropractic, massage, dry needling; ... and making sure I can honestly tell myself that I did everything possible in that training session to get the most out of it,” she said.

Bucholtz added: “Our preparation for the 2013 season, in my opinion, couldn’t have gone any better, and with Kara’s work ethic and mentality, she will have a great result in 2014, as well.”



About the Author

Emily Beers is a CrossFit Journal staff writer and editor. She competed in the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games on CrossFit Vancouver’s team, and she finished third at the Canada West Regional in 2012. In 2013, she finished second in the Open in Canada West.