
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

“Dude, This Is a League Game”

James Hobson starts a rec league for athletes in the Atlanta area.
Jack Goodson reports.

By Jack Goodson

July 2011



All images: James Hobson/CrossFit Addiction

James Hobson was frustrated.

CrossFit Addiction, Hobson's own slice of sweat and dreams in the Atlanta, Ga., suburb of Kennesaw, had enjoyed good success in its first year of operation. Yet its owner felt CrossFit, as a sport, could offer so much more to its audience.

Hobson wanted to act. So he sat down and wrote.

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He emptied his frustration into an article-turned-e-mail later sent to affiliate owners across Atlanta. He spoke of developing CrossFit at the grassroots level. He stressed interaction, not only with clients but also—and particularly—among gyms.

How then to move forward? His plan was simple but audacious. In the vein of, say, parks-and-recreation softball or basketball, Hobson envisioned a CrossFit sports league that would span the greater Atlanta area.

That was three years ago. Fast-forward to the present, and Hobson has transformed his dream into a reality.

The Atlanta Affiliate League is now live. And thriving.

A Foundation

Hobson's emotion-filled piece of digital prose slowly began to make its way across the Big Peach. People were talking. Affiliates, it seemed, understood his position.

Hobson grew up a multi-sport athlete in Augusta, Ga. His love for amateur athletics continued at the University of Georgia, where he fittingly met his future wife during intramurals. It made sense to him, then, to approach CrossFit from a similar point of view.

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—James Hobson



Local grassroots competitions are thriving in the Atlanta area thanks to James Hobson's affiliate league.

"I didn't think the future of CrossFit was a 20-minute workout. I still don't," Hobson said. "So many people have misconceptions when it comes to CrossFit. I spent much of my first two-plus years as an owner educating people on the methodology.

"Like any other sport, you have to develop it at the grassroots level and with youth."

It was from this ideology that the idea for a competitive league was born. Hobson longed for more people to be involved in the competitive aspect of CrossFit. He also understood that, while the CrossFit Games were, and are, a bona fide success, the event could be reaching a far larger audience.

"We have the Games, but that's only once a year. What about the other 90 percent of CrossFit athletes who would like to compete?" Hobson asked.



Beers after the game? How about bacon and almonds instead?

His goal was to begin branching out via his own community.

Hobson's e-mail was just the tip of the iceberg. Word was spreading, but there were many, many questions. People were, after all, still ignorant to the concept. So he began making trips to nearby affiliates, hanging out with members, mingling with interested parties, explaining exactly what he had in mind and why it would prove beneficial. Hobson was, in a sense, a door-to-door evangelist spreading his own version of the CrossFit gospel.

An affiliate sports league, with the purpose of encouraging and nurturing small-scale competition for regular CrossFit athletes, was the promised land.

"Your normal CrossFitter is intimidated by the Games. This is my fourth year doing CrossFit, and I'm intimidated," Hobson said. "We have to get those that are scared to compete doing so at a local level. Once they do, the gloves are off.

"This is where a competitive league makes sense. Imagine five years from now how big the Games could be if people are ready and willing to compete."

What he preached, the unconverted bought. Before Hobson knew it, 15 teams from seven metro-area CrossFits—84 competitors in total—had signed up for the inaugural season of the Atlanta Affiliate League.

The AAL's tagline is "a league designed for everyone."

And, you know, it is.

How It Works

Ever played recreational-league kickball? Softball? Perhaps something similar?

If so, then you probably have a pretty good idea how the Atlanta Affiliate League operates.

The AAL's debut season, which began the week of June 4, consists of a four-week regular season and two-week postseason single-elimination tournament. Tournament play commenced on July 9.

Teams consist of four to six members. Affiliates may register as many teams as they wish, and teams can employ athletes from more than one affiliate. At least one member of each team must be female. Train by yourself? No worry. Free agents who register will be assigned to a team near their home base.



Everyone can compete in the Atlanta Affiliate League regardless of ability.

Teams are then placed into a conference—North, South, East, West—according to their location. Conference teams play each other during the regular season to limit travel.

A team entry fee of \$200 is required to pre-register. The fee is slated to rise to \$300 come Sept 1. That breaks down to at or around \$50 per team member; it really is a fairly affordable extracurricular activity. Most, if not all, of the proceeds are pumped back into the league, Hobson says. He's working toward potentially covering the cost of travel for teams in future seasons.

Much like your local rec league, teams are broken into divisions based on ability.

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The Mixed division is applicable for athletes of all levels, save for those brand new to CrossFit. Most CrossFit movements are included (no muscle-ups or handstand push-ups), and scaling is permitted. The Elite division, meanwhile, is designed for those with significant experience within the sport—firebreathers, if you will. All workouts must be done as prescribed and include everything in the CrossFit repertoire, from Olympic lifts to gymnastics and, of course, double-unders.

Teams compete in two home and two away matches during the regular season. Home team judges away, for repetitions and range of motion, and vice versa. WODs for all four weeks are posted prior to the start of the season, a key component to the design, according to Hobson. While the ultimate athlete will be ready for any test, Hobson is hoping his approach will provide an on-ramp to competition.

"A big problem with participation for the CrossFit Games is that people don't know what the workouts will be," Hobson said. "We post the workouts from Day 1. You know if you can do it or not. If not, you can train for it."

Hobson explained that two specific types of workouts are used in the league: individual, where the best four scores are recorded, and team WODs with a set number of rounds or repetitions. Team scores are determined by a sum of all WOD times or weight lifted. Round-based workouts are scored by total rounds plus extra repetitions completed.

For example, Week 1 featured Spinal Tap, which is 21, 15 and 9 reps for time of deadlifts and kettlebell swings. Prescribed loads for Mixed were 185 lb. on the deadlift (135 lb. for females) and 55 lb. for kettlebell swings (35 lb.). Elite, meanwhile, competed with 225 lb. on the deadlift (155 lb. for females) and 70-lb. kettlebell swings (55 lb.).

CrossFit Garage, from nearby Woodstock and home to the popular Garage Games, crushed Spinal Tap in 14:03 during the opening week and collected a pair of Elite Division wins in the process. CrossFit Atlanta, the oldest affiliate in Georgia, and Perimeter (Sandy Springs) scored victories in Mixed, with times of 14:19 and 14:24, respectively.

"People want to win. It's pretty friendly prior to the workout but war during it."

—James Hobson

Hobson described the atmosphere as "cutthroat"—and that might have been him just being nice. As it turns out, the atmosphere and the competitive nature surrounding game day are Stanley Cup Game 7 intense.

"People want to win. It's pretty friendly prior to the workout but war during it," Hobson said, somewhat jokingly. "What surprised me is that we hadn't even figured out everything, and I was already getting calls from people rattling out other affiliates. We are athletes, after all, and people think their reputation is on the line when they compete.

"No one likes losing. You wouldn't be doing this if you did."



Grassroots or not, these competitions get intense!

The Next Step

Though the debut season of the Atlanta Affiliate League has yet to draw to a close, work has already begun on enhancing the experience for years to come.

A fall season has been confirmed, to begin Oct. 1. Several new affiliates are joining the fray, too, many of which began registering as early as the first week of Season 1.

News of the AAL, it would seem, is spreading like wildfire—even out of state.

Hobson, in addition to adding new divisions such as masters and kids, is very much interested in expansion. He has his eyes set on extending the league's reach to Alabama and Tennessee, perhaps even Florida.

"We were very proactive at the start, but now we are reactive," Hobson said. "We have a lot of stuff we'd like to add. We really want to see where we can take this.

“One of the points of the AAL is to get people involved, to spark interest. If we can get leagues going across the nation, that would be amazing.”

The AAL, as stated on its website, has three main goals:

- To continue increasing the amount of competitions in the Atlanta area.
- To allow people of all fitness levels to compete on a small scale.
- To build the community and allow affiliates to interact with other affiliates.

These pioneers—Hobson the foremost figure—are well on their way to adding checkmarks beside each of those three bullets if they haven't already.

Success. It's a term that gets bounded about far too easily in today's reality-television age. It's safe to say, however, that the Atlanta Affiliate League is right on the cusp of being referred to as a success. In a few years' time, perhaps the scale of that success will be national or even global.

For more information on the Atlanta Affiliate League or to register a team, visit the league's official website at Atlantaleague.com.



Courtesy of Jack Goodson

About the Author

*Jack Goodson, 29, is a professional journalist located in Northeast Tennessee. A graduate of the University of Richmond, Jack has been a member of the sports staff at the **Kingsport Times-News** since 2004. Additionally, his musings about the English Premier League can be seen on a variety of national websites, including [The Offside](#). Jack began his CrossFit journey in June 2009 and has since been satisfying his addiction daily.*