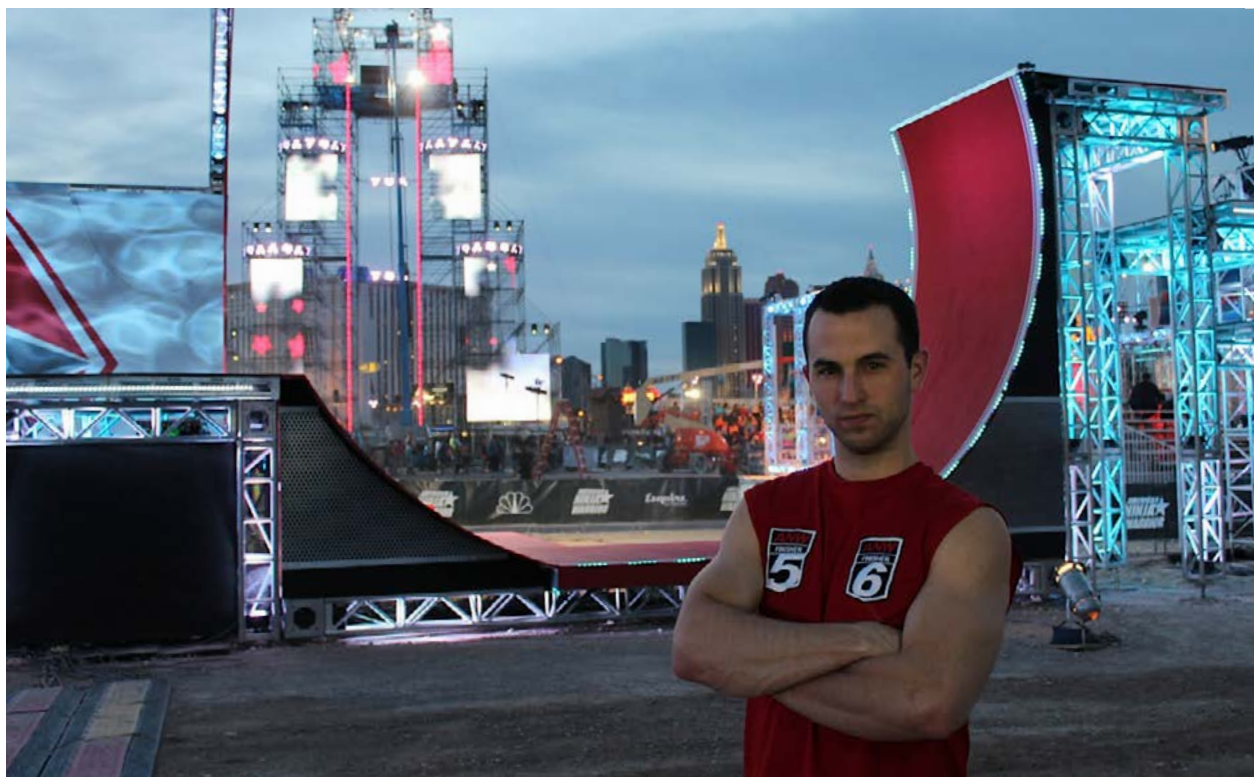

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Desert Ninjas

“American Ninja Warrior” qualifiers meet in Sin City to try and conquer Mt. Midoriyama for the first time.

By Chris Cooper

September 2014



All photos: Chris Cooper/CrossFit Journal

Joe “The Weatherman” Moravsky in front of the warped wall.

It’s hard to catch your breath in Las Vegas, Nevada.

In a city renowned for its sights—but not its views—the American Ninja Warrior Final transformed a dusty parking lot in the desert into a glowing extension of the famed Las Vegas Strip.

Scattered across two acres were four stages; three were at eye level, and the last, Mt. Midoriyama, loomed over everything else. Floodlights from helicopters illuminated the peak as a few dozen spectators were packed into small bleachers.

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Dust clouds rolled through in great gusts, and spectators begged eye drops from strangers. The heat dehydrated, the floodlights blinded, the stress caused cramps. But ninja-wannabes were still eager for their single chance at Mt. Midoriyama.

"If this were easy, it wouldn't be fun," said returning competitor Jamie Rahn.

Over several months, contestants moved through the stages of qualification to arrive at Mt. Midoriyama in Las Vegas. In the six seasons "American Ninja Warrior" has aired in the U.S., no athlete has finished the entire obstacle course.

Season's Beatings

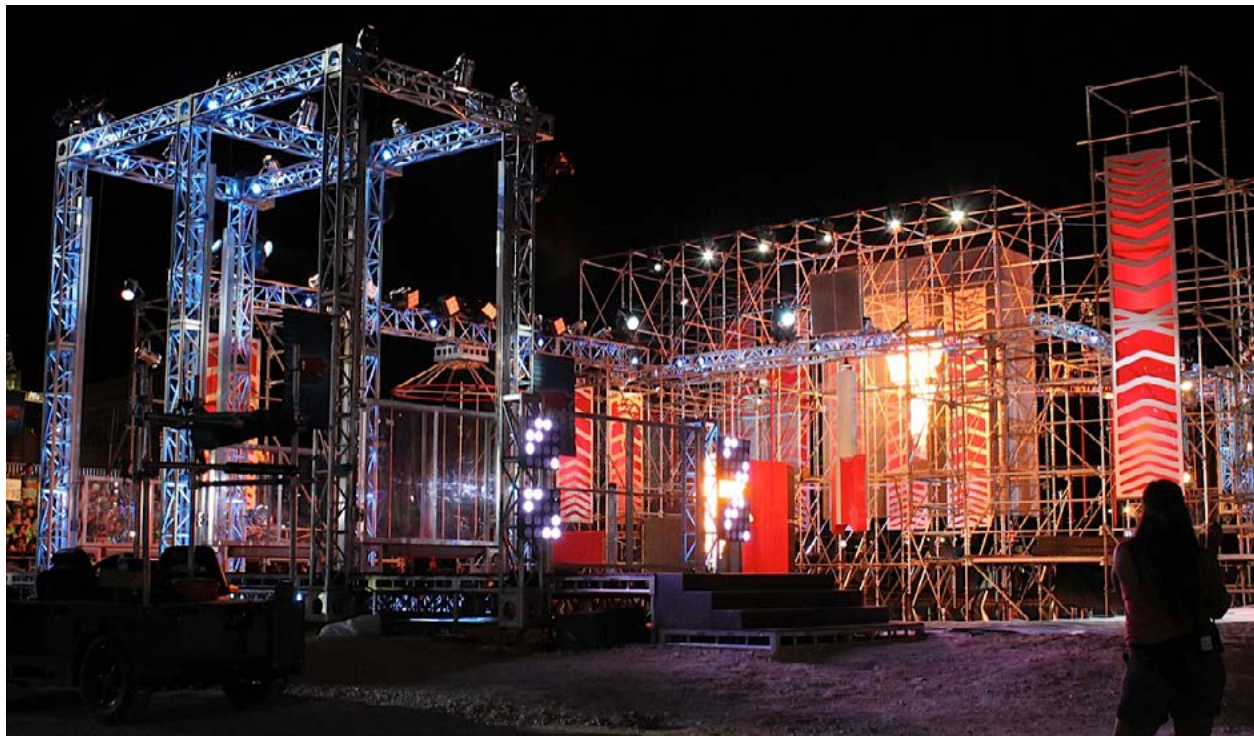
"American Ninja Warrior" is aired by NBC. Would-be contestants submitted their video applications in early spring; some were invited to a taping in one of five different locales. Some who weren't invited camped on the sidewalk for days in hopes of earning a walk-on spot. Most of those who started the qualifying course didn't make it through. This year, the roster of early exits included fan favorite Flip Rodriguez, whose baggy pants **dipped in the water** as he descended a cargo net. Brent Steffensen, who reached the

Vegas Final in two previous years, was also knocked out before reaching a regional qualifier.

Those who finished the qualifier course moved on to a regional event contested by more serious athletes. In this, the sixth season of "American Ninja Warrior," athletes who qualified for the regionals were mostly experienced gymnasts, parkour enthusiasts or "Ninja Warrior" specialists. The fastest to complete the regional course were invited to the Las Vegas final. In June 2014, 89 participants gathered in the desert.

Every obstacle in every stage is subject to change each year except Stage 4. Obstacles get tougher in each stage, but even the tilting table and curtain slider are mere foothills compared to Stage 4: a 78-foot rope climb with a 30-second time cap. The prize for completion is US\$500,000, but no American has even beaten Stage 3, though a handful of athletes reached that level last year. Joe Moravsky was one, and in 2014 "The Weatherman" changed his wedding date to be in Vegas for another attempt.

"My motivation is solely to beat the course," Moravsky said. "It's not, I just like doing it, so I'll keep doing it either way."



Shining in the desert like another casino, a host of obstacles stood between 89 contestants and \$500,000.



No American competitor has ever earned the right to attempt the 78-foot rope climb that is Stage 4's only test. Athletes who make it are given only 30 seconds for their ascent.

The trials are hard enough, and a made-for-television sport creates other challenges.

The Reality of Television

Most sporting events closely adhere to a schedule. Gameplay might be interrupted for the odd commercial break, but the nature of a live event determines the flow of the production. Not so with "American Ninja Warrior," whose participants were given a dusty tent in which to wait for hours before moving to a dustier spot offstage to wait again. Several times athletes jumped to the starting platform, greeted an applauding crowd and stood awkwardly for several minutes while cameramen fiddled with gear. Several commented, sotto voce, that they weren't nervous until they had to stand still for so long.

Eventually, after an unpredictable interval, a producer's assistant would emerge and begin a countdown with a changing cadence and without a visible clock. The loud beeps of the starting clock heard on television are dubbed in later. No contestant complained about the jagged pace of the starting order, but the effects of their fidgeting delays weren't lost on the crowd.

"That guy had to stand still for 15 minutes," one spectator said. "No wonder he went out on the second obstacle."

"Those guys must be so dry," said her husband. "We're all just eating dust out here, and they have nothing to drink while they wait."

Given a cap of 2:05 to complete Stage 1, most fell into the water waiting below before reaching the halfway point.

Between 10 p.m. and 3 a.m., ninjas rotated onto the starting block. Given a cap of 2:05 to complete Stage 1, most fell into the water waiting below before reaching the halfway point. Days of travel were washed away in less than a minute.

The first stage of the final featured familiar obstacles: the quintuple steps, swing circle, curtain slider, spider wall, half-pipe attack and warped wall. All were familiar to veterans, but several contestants still failed to clear the stage.

Rahn was one. Though the curtain slider posed no problem to "Captain NBC," Rahn was knocked out on the next obstacle, the spider wall: two vertical walls between which athletes wedge themselves, arms and legs outstretched, as they attempt to travel horizontally between the walls using friction. The athletes use a trampoline to launch themselves between the walls, adding more difficulty.

"The drop onto the little platform (on the curtain slider) was really freaking me out. I made it past but thought I wasted some time, so I didn't take a lot of time going into the trampoline before the spider. I flubbed the jump into the trampoline, had my chest down and tried to compensate with my feet up and just jammed in there and slipped out," he said.

Rahn failed on an obstacle he'd practiced many times before. This is common, according to Moravsky.

"Any potential slip-up of any sort can be potential failure, whether you're a veteran or rookie," he said. "You can't overlook any obstacle. I promise you, if you do, you are increasing your chances of falling by at least 50 percent."

Though 89 attempted Stage 1, only 19 cleared its obstacles. Attempts at the final three stages were planned for the second night of shooting. Moravsky, called The Weatherman because he's a meteorologist, was one of the few to qualify for Stage 2.

The First to Stage 4?

Stage 2 began with a Tarzan-like swing from rope to rope. Some ropes stretched, and some didn't. Next was a climb up a **salmon ladder**, including a transition across a gap to another climb. Then athletes dangled from suspended doors, shuffling their hands along the edges and jumping from one to the next. Several dropped when their forearms gave out, and those who continued faced a suspended rotating butterfly.

Athletes who were able to jump onto its wings and then to the safety of a high wall beyond were faced with four



Obstacles on "American Ninja Warrior" generally require impressive agility and gymnastics skills.

dangling chains suspended from a wheel. Ninjas had to run and jump, hit the chains high enough to make the wheel turn, and drop onto a platform. This test eliminated most of the best Ninjas, but Moravsky made it through to the three walls. He lifted each in turn and dove to hit the buzzer with under a second left.

“The first obstacle in Stage 2 was much more time-consuming, which made it more taxing on the upper body,” Moravsky said. “That, coupled with the fact that Stage 2 is mostly upper body, made it much more difficult.”

In Stage 3, Moravsky faced a familiar obstacle with a twist. Doorknobs were mounted to the side of a sheer wall, and he’d have to climb from one to the next while suspended 10 feet above water. He’d done it before, but this year the wall was slanted toward him rather than vertical, adding a new element to challenge his grip.

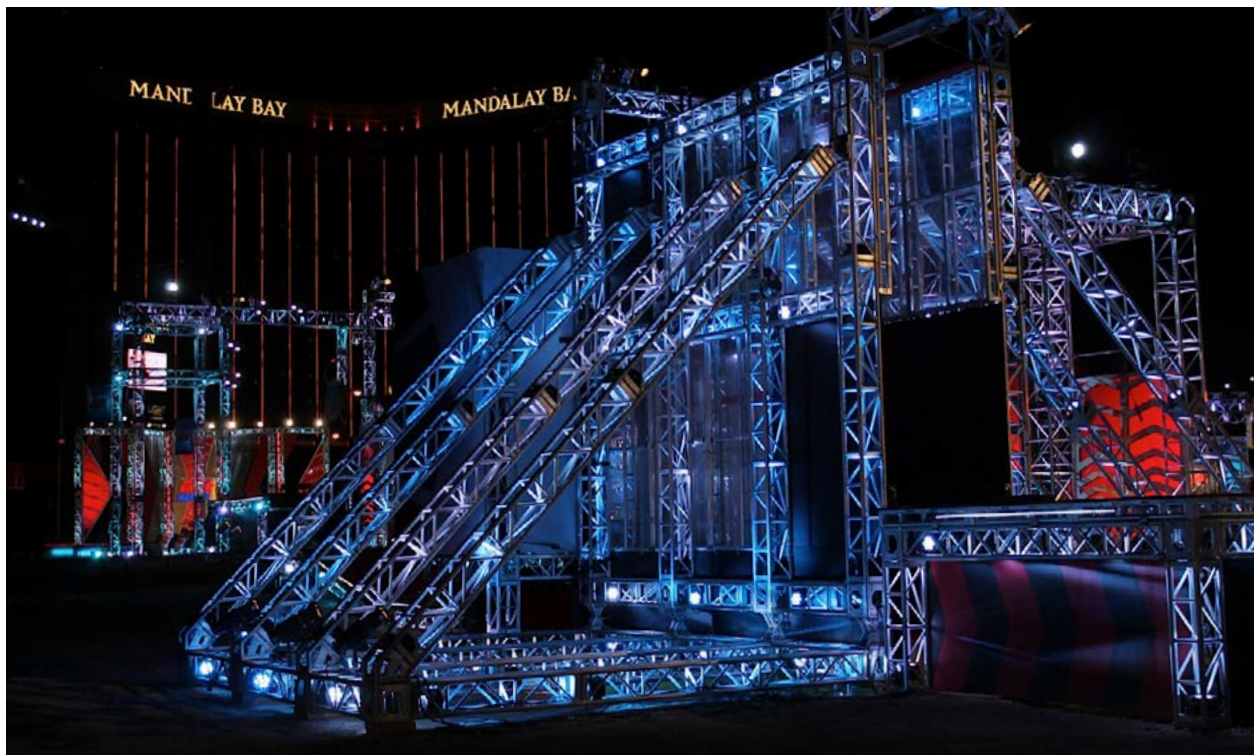
“Stage 3 was intense,” he said. “The first obstacle was brand new, and only rock climbers are used to seeing the apparatus. The second obstacle—doorknobs—(was) difficult because of the incline, but overall not too bad.”

Moravsky held on, suspending his 135-lb. frame by his fingertips. His forearms, already pumped from Stage 2 an hour before, were taxed but not beyond their limits.

He cleared the obstacle, shaking his hands like the rock climber he needed to be on the next obstacle.

The floating-boards obstacle—vertical two-by-sixes dangling from chains—required more skill than strength, and Moravsky had practiced heavily in the offseason. Likewise the cliffhanger, a series of ledges athletes have to navigate with their fingertips.

“If I hadn’t trained it, it would have been very difficult,” he said. “But I was prepared and demolished it. The next two



Sadly, the 2014 competitors didn't have any winnings to gamble away in Sin City. The \$500,00 prize is awarded only to the competitor who completes the entire course and achieves "total victory."

obstacles were tough. That jumping-propeller-blade thing to the upside-down rock wall—if I had the endurance, I would have beat it, but it looks like I need to condition even more than I thought.”

The propeller bars look like three ceiling fans with sticks instead of blades, and Moravsky was required to dangle from each while waiting for the next to turn his way. He cleared the obstacle, shaking his hands like the rock climber he needed to be on the next obstacle. The ascending climb looked like a rock wall that had fallen onto its face. Moravsky dangled high in the air from rock holds above his head before his finger strength failed and he plummeted into the water. The crowd, tired from a long night in the desert, let out a collective groan. The Weatherman was out without thunder.

No hopefuls qualified for Stage 4 in 2014.

The Quest Continues

The 78-foot rope sat untouched by competitors for yet another year, and no one won any money. Most went home only with sore forearms, wounded pride and a desire to compete again in 2015.

But what happens when Mt. Midoriyama is finally beaten?

“The main source of my motivation is to be the first. I think once that happens, you might see a decline of veterans coming back to the course. I don’t think money is the driving force; it’s to be the first. That’s what’s driving a lot of these people,” Moravsky said.

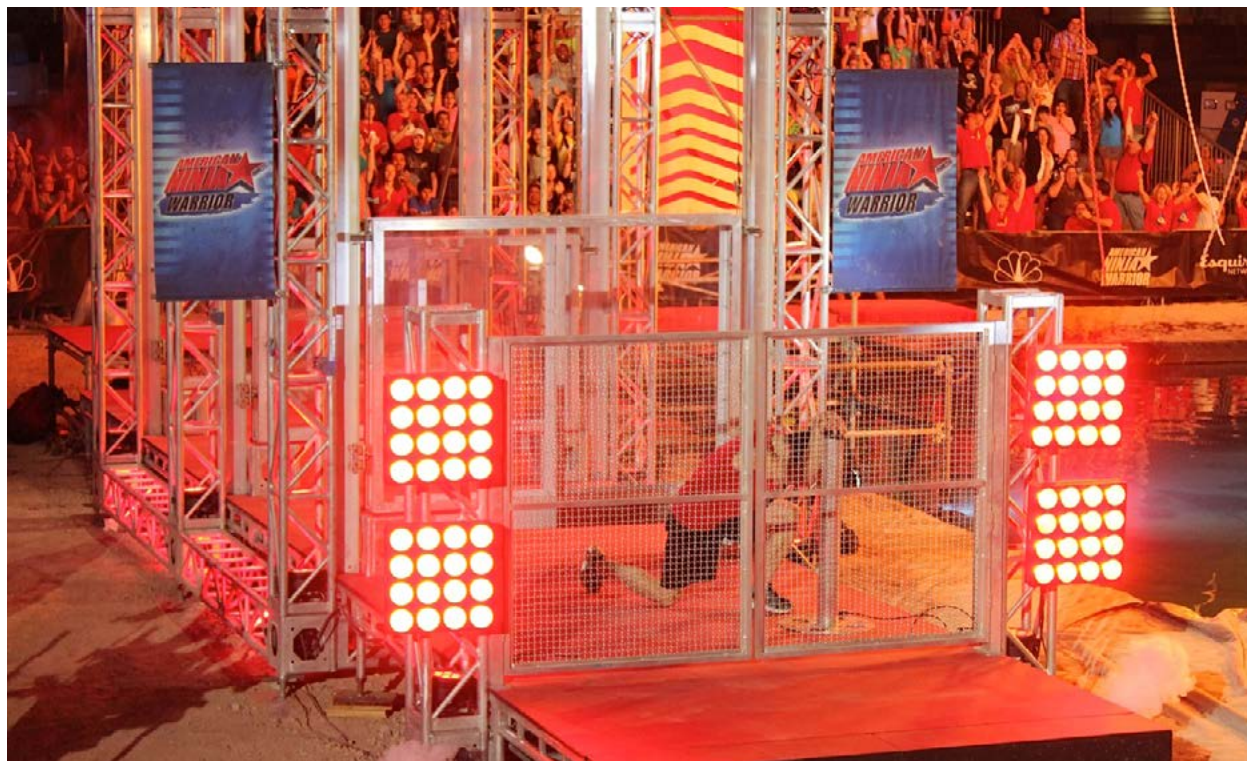
But in Japan, only three athletes have achieved “total victory” on the course in 30 seasons, with the last success coming in 2011. In 2014, two competitors made it to the rope climb, and neither could complete it.

In the United States, ninjas will stay driven for at least one more year—and perhaps many more.



About the Author

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Moravsky completes Stage 2 with less than one second to spare.