

Amazing Grace

Rich Froning overcomes adversity and pressure to stand atop the CrossFit Games podium for the fourth consecutive year.

By Andréa Maria Cecil



He looked determined, almost angry.

It was seconds before Sunday's Midline March at the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games—the first individual event of the final day. Three-time champ Rich Froning awaited the buzzer.

Between the athletes and the finish line were 3 rounds of 25 GHD sit-ups, a 50-foot handstand walk and 50 feet of walking overhead lunges with 155 lb.

Noah Ohlsen, a rookie who had been near the top of the Leaderboard for most of the competition, was ahead early in the event. When he moved on to the second round, it looked as if he'd win—as long as he could keep that pace.

He couldn't.

In quintessential fashion, Froning surpassed his competitors on the second round of lunges. Spectators in the 27,000-seat soccer stadium inside the StubHub Center erupted in cheering, rooting for the unexpected underdog. Then they rose to their feet as Froning finished the final lunge and recorded a time of 5:25 flat. He dumped the barbell and extended his arms straight out to his sides, vigorously waving them upward to elicit roars from the crowd.

He wasn't done.

After winning the heat and the event, he went on to encourage nearly every competitor who remained on the field, one by one, until each man crossed the finish line.

That was followed by a short, live on-camera interview. Then he made his way toward the tunnel beneath the stands only to be stopped by incessant fans seeking autographs and pictures.

"Rich! Rich! Rich!" seemed to come from every direction. Fans shoved in his face a postcard-sized advertisement, a trucker hat—one threw a pair of sunglasses down from seats too high to make a handoff—and smartphones. "Rich turn around," yelled one woman from the stands on the other side of the tunnel. He did; she snapped a picture. And then he went right back to signing his name and taking selfies.

"Thank you, guys. Thank you, guys. Thank you, guys," he said as he finally made his way inside the tunnel.

Three cameramen, trotting backward to capture footage as Froning walked, promptly accosted him.

"Talk to my camera, talk to my camera," joked CrossFit HQ's Sevan Matossian with a smile.

Such is the life of the man who—with struggle—would later that day become the fittest man on Earth for an unprecedented fourth consecutive year.



Ruby Wolff/CrossFit Journal

Froning started the final day of competition looking determined and fiery, and he won Midline March by more than 35 seconds.

An Unlikely Underdog

The previous two days hadn't been kind to Froning.

He finished five events outside the top 10, and there was talk that this year would be of a changing of the guard. Ohlsen, 23, was at the top of the Leaderboard after multiple events. Out with the old, in with the new.

Froning started the four-day competition well. Swimming hadn't been his strong suit in previous years, yet he recorded an eighth-place finish on

the opening event, The Beach. That was followed by a tie for first with former Olympic weightlifter Mat Fraser on Overhead Squat. Both men squatted 377 lb.

As expected, Froning was in a good position after the first day of competition. He would either place in the top five or win all the events that followed, onlookers theorized.

So when Friday morning's Triple-3 arrived, the 27-year-old was expected to dominate. The event called for a 3,000-m row, 300

double-unders and a 3-mile run. The story was playing out as expected until the cameras focused on Froning during the event's last leg. He was walking. It was difficult to believe. He'd pick up the pace, only to walk again; competitors breezed past him. Froning finished the event in 37th, his worst finish in any Games event since The Pool in 2013. In that event, he finished 30th.

As Froning exited the event area and proceeded toward the athlete tent, he was visibly upset and stone-faced as he hurried along to the ice baths—a stark contrast to his typically relaxed demeanor.

“I just turned into a wuss,” Froning said, explaining he felt dizzy during the run. He added, “I haven’t been runnin’ enough.”

It wasn’t until after he had won his fourth title two days later that he revealed he had been sick earlier in the week with headaches and stomach pains.

Later on Friday, Froning was up against Sprint Sled 1 and Sprint Sled 2, both requiring male athletes to push a stealth-bomber-shaped Rogue Fitness sled 100 yards. Froning finished the events in 15th and 27th, respectively.

When he completed the latter, he shook his head.

That night, though, he made easy work of the 21-15-9 Complex, winning the event by about 10 seconds over Josh Bridges. But was it too late?

“The CrossFit Games has a way of showing you that your training sucks,” Froning said as he sat in the tunnel to watch the final heat—the top men—attack the same complex.

“I’m just trying to enjoy it,” he added.

There he sat, with his right forearm on the back of a plastic folding chair, eating a red apple in front of a flat-screen TV while volunteers milled about. It was quiet except for the occasional clang of equipment being moved. He appeared relaxed—the usual Froning.

Now for the tough questions: What if you don’t win? Then would you come back next year?

He shook his head.

“My decision is final,” he said with a tone of absoluteness. “I’ve told Hillary (my wife) it’s over competing as a CrossFit Games individual. . . . I have a beautiful baby girl who needs a dad.”

Froning focused his attention back to the screen, watching as the final heat made its way through deadlifts, cleans, snatches and ever-more-difficult versions of pull-ups.

“I’m not used to being in that third heat,” he said.

Typically Froning doesn’t set the pace. Usually he comes from behind to win. This time, things were different. He led his heat early and never relinquished.

“I needed to. Luckily, I had James (Hobart) go in an earlier heat, and he said, ‘Step on the gas harder than you need to.’”

Froning’s time: 4:16.63. And so he sat, watching, waiting. He had to know.

As the clock ticked past 4:16 and he saw Bridges finish at 4:26.03, he assuredly said, “Got it.”

He stood up, gave a confident nod and a half wink, and walked away.

“This Is What It Looks Like for Rich to Lose”

Saturday was a new day. It began with Jason Khalipa in first place overall.

And the day’s first event was the much-strategized Muscle-Up Biathlon. Athletes were required to do unbroken sets of 18, 15 and 12 muscle-ups lest they be cast out on the 200-m penalty run.

Froning failed a handful of muscle-ups. He finished at 13:07.44. The winner, rookie Cody Anderson, did all muscle-up sets unbroken for a time of 10:43.46. The champ finished the event 13th overall.

Next up was a simpler task: the Sprint Carry. Pick up heavy objects, run as fast as you can with them to the finish line. For men, the loads were 100, 120 and 150 lb. each. Big guys such as Nate Schrader and Tommy Hackenbruck found their sweet spots. Froning, however, found a 15th-place finish.

But when Dave Castro, Director of the Games and of Training, unveiled the Clean Speed Ladder, fans knew it was an event made for Froning. He can lift heavy and with solid technique. When the event started, however, the 245-lb. barbell knocked him back a bit and he almost lost it. In the semifinal round, he took a second to look around at the competition before cleaning 310 lb. That second cost him the final heat. Instead, he sat on the tennis-stadium floor and watched as the top men tried to outlift each other for time. His face remained so stoic he seemed angry.

Later that day, he noted his mistake.

“Instead of watching everybody else, I need to take more chances.”

The Froning most had known as unwaveringly confident, the one who always played his own game, seemed rattled during the event.

It was a sharp contrast to the man who had maintained his pace at the announcement of Open Workout 14.5 in San Francisco, calmly closing the gap between him and all four competitors on the floor.

Meanwhile, CrossFit Inc. Founder and CEO Greg Glassman looked on and thought, “This is what it looks like for Rich to lose.”

The day held one more opportunity: Push Pull. It promised increasing numbers of strict handstand push-ups—with a growing deficit—and a 50-foot sled pull with growing weight.



Tai Randall/CrossFit Journal



Staff/CrossFit Journal

During Sprint Sled 2 (top) and Triple-3, Froning looked worn out and sluggish. He turned things around by winning four of the next eight events.



Ruby Wolff/CrossFit Journal

Froning finished the event second overall—roughly 2 seconds behind Bridges.

He ended the day in first place overall.

“I’m blessed to be where I’m at because I feel like I don’t deserve it,” he said as he walked through the tunnel toward the athlete tent, seeming equal parts relieved and pleasantly surprised.

Froning went on: “It’s been a crappy week. The things that usually go my way haven’t gone my way. . . . Everything’s been up and down.”

When asked about the final day of competition, he said he felt good. Only one event was known at that point: Midline March.

“We’ll see.”

Calm Under Pressure

On Sunday—typically a training day for him—Froning had something to prove.

With a win in Midline March, it seemed he had finally flipped the switch. But unknown events remained.

“We’ll find out, I guess,” he said with a smile that seemed to predict mischief. “It’ll be fun.”

Castro first revealed Thick ‘N Quick—4 rope climbs and 3 overhead squats at 245 lb. for the men. The event was capped at 4 minutes. Froning finished it in 1:40.3 to take first overall. Afterward, 135-lb. barbells were rolled onto the floor and a two-minute clock was set.

With one minute remaining, Castro announced the closing challenge.

“Your final event for the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games is Grace, 30 clean and jerks for time,” he started.

And then, with 30 seconds remaining, Castro kept talking.

“This is the CrossFit Games. You’re not gonna end on Grace. You’re gonna end on Double Grace.”

Froning nodded. He was ready to play his game.

When the beep signaled the start, he casually approached the bar and went to work. With textbook form, he moved through the reps, looking tired but not winded. After rep No. 40, he even stopped to tighten up the right side of his barbell. Khalipa was hot on his trail, looking spent.

With 5 reps remaining, his judge’s hand went up: 56, 57, 58, 59. He jerked the barbell for the final time, letting it fall behind him, and calmly walked across the finish line. Time: 5:05.6. Khalipa: 5:08.8.

“It’s the sweetest one yet,” Froning said afterward in the tunnel as he put on his champion’s T-shirt with a video camera inches from his face. He was happy, smiling.

“I never really got discouraged.”

Only a few feet away stood a crowd several people deep of fellow competitors—men and women—as well as staff and volunteers, all eagerly awaiting his approach.

Throughout his poorer performances during the previous days, he kept telling himself, “If it’s not meant to be, then it’s not meant to be, and it’s someone else’s time.”

It wasn’t. ■

About the Author

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