



Emotions **in Motion**

Emily Beers finds the tests of the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games are more mental than physical.

By Emily Beers

When I qualified to the CrossFit Games, I was ecstatic. Overjoyed. Just happy to be there. My original performance goal was humble at best: not to come dead last. And I accomplished that by finishing 37th.

But the problem with being competitive is you never enjoy being near the bottom—even when your competition happens to be the entire world.

So the Games—ostensibly a physical test—took my mind and spirit through a week-long series of tumultuous emotions: denial and isolation, bargaining, anger, sadness, and finally acceptance. While my body was tested time and time again, the physical component of the weekend was much less excruciating than the chaos in my mind.

The experiences that propelled me along my journey were the fleeting moments, the quick glimpses of pure human generosity, humor and inspiration, each moment temporarily removing me from my struggle to accept myself and lifting me up to a place of pure appreciation.

As athletes, we believe CrossFit makes better people. We talk about how the workouts require so much effort that people of weak character just don't want to do them, and we believe our trials make us stronger, physically, mentally and emotionally. At the Games, I learned that while the workouts themselves contribute to our growth, CrossFit is really about people making better people.

Denial and Isolation

It's Monday evening, and all the athletes have filed into a bus that's taking us to the StubHub Center for the first time.

I'm one of the last athletes to walk onto the bus. I see Julie Foucher and Annie Thorisdottir, Talayna Fortunato and Michele Letendre, women whose shoes I've dreamed of wearing for the last seasons.

"Holy shit. What am I doing here?" I ask myself.

I try to remember the words my close friend Kate Richardson told me before I left.

"Em, I was terrified when I went to my first World Championships in 1999," the two-time gymnastics Olympian said. "I walked in, and there was Svetlana Khorkina (world and Olympic champion), and I thought, 'What am I doing here?' But you just have to fake it. Fake it and pretend you belong there until you actually feel like you belong."

I take a deep breath.

"Fake it. Pretend like you belong. Act like you belong," I try to convince myself.

It doesn't work. Instead, I sit down alone—not because I want to be alone but because I'm too intimidated to step up and introduce myself to someone and strike up a conversation. I sit down near the back, isolating myself, in utter denial that I will actually find the courage to chat with the fittest women on Earth, let alone to compete with them on Wednesday morning.

And then Valerie Voboril walks onto the bus.

"She seems like such a nice lady," I think to myself.

"Lady" might seem an odd term for a badass athlete like Voboril, but the moment I meet her, she oozes classiness and mothering ability, and the word jumps into my mind.

She asks if she can sit next to me.

"Of course," I say. Inside, I feel like I'm 7 years old, relieved to make a new friend on my first day of school.

She strikes up a conversation, and before you know it she's showing me pictures of her adorable daughter Vin. It's such a simple moment—chatting about her career as a schoolteacher—but within minutes I feel considerably less isolated, almost to the point where I believe I can

jump into the waves on Wednesday morning, if ocean swimming happens to be our fate.

And of course it is. When the first event arrives, my body goes on autopilot, and even the 4-foot waves aren't as daunting as they appeared from the warm-up area.

I survive the event and return to grab my bags and head back to the hotel for a massage. On the way back, I check my phone and find texts from a number of people who were all in the know about my goal of avoiding a last-place finish.

"I want to do better than dead fuckin' last.

What kind of goal was that anyway?"

"You weren't last. You were 27th," my sister writes. Although I appreciate her support, I roll my eyes and put my phone away.

"I want to do better than dead fuckin last," I think to myself. "What kind of goal was that anyway?"



A friendly chat with Games veteran Val Voboril helped Beers settle down before the competition started.



Beers set a pre-Games goal of not finishing last but slowly realized the goal was motivated more by fear than desire.



Seven-time Games competitor Becca Voigt offered tough love and kind words that demonstrated why she received the Spirit of the Games Award.

By Wednesday evening, fear has returned.

Not only do we discover that we'll all be performing our overhead squats alone, but I am also the first lifter in the second heat. I warm up my overhead squat to 200 lb.—ordinarily a light weight for me—but it's difficult to be steady on my jerk with my heart beating out of my chest.

My coach hasn't arrived in Carson yet, so I'm alone warming up. Nausea kicks in, and I decide to open at 195 lb. to be safe. I do not want to miss the first lift.

The moment arrives. While it's not a full house yet, one portion of the stands is completely packed with screaming fans stoked to watch their favorite athletes. Meanwhile, there's an anxious energy among the athletes. I feel out of my depth. I'm standing on my platform quite literally quivering at the knees.

Games Director Dave Castro gives me the go-ahead.

My mind goes blank, but my body is still unstable. My jerk is unsteady, but I manage to keep control. I just want this lift to be over, so I rush the squat. On the way back up, the bar gets in front of me. There's no saving it now. My face feels flushed, and a rush of heat enters my body as if I have a fever. That bar falls in front of me. Failed lift.

I can hear the crowd, but I don't make eye contact with anyone. I just stare at my platform.

"Holy fuck. I can't believe that just happened," I say to myself. "Get it together, Emily."

To my left, Lauren Brooks gets no-repped for depth.

As we wait for our next lifts, Brooks looks over at me with the fiercest eyes I've ever looked into.

"Hey, Hey," she yells to get my attention. "We got this," she adds firmly, making a fist to reiterate her point. "We have two more lifts. We got this. We got this."

Her words ring strongly in my ears, in my mind. They're just what I need to hear.

"We got this. We got this," I start saying to myself, as if Brooks has just enlightened me with some higher truth.

More than anything, though, Brooks' simple words are powerful. She didn't say, "You got this." She said, "We got this."

I'm not alone, after all. I'm in this with Brooks. And 40 others. I cherish this thought as I hit my next two lifts.

Bargaining for Double-Unders

It's Friday morning.

Ahead of me are my two CrossFit nemeses: running and double-unders.

Double-unders are the reason I didn't qualify for the CrossFit Games when I was a rookie in the sport in 2010. In 2012, I entered Day 3 of the Canada West Regional competition in first place, but during the snatch ladder, I was so focused on not tripping up my double-unders that I kind of forgot to think about the snatch.

Two years later—even after much practice—the best way to describe me with a speed rope is "inefficient."

I've received what seems like a million cues from a million people who want to help me get better at skipping. People just can't help themselves when they see me fumbling around. They walk over, pained and confused, to offer up the tip of the day.

A few days before I left for California, I told my mother I asked Kate how she dealt with performing a floor routine in front of 20,000 people at the Olympics.

"I don't know why I'm so scared. Kate had to perform routines in front of thousands of people. All I have to do is double-unders," I said.

My mother's response: "The problem for you is your skipping isn't very impressive, Em."

Before Triple 3, my greatest fear is to be the only one left on the double-unders, frantically skipping away as every other athlete motors through the 3-mile run. That vision leads me to start bargaining with myself, somehow thinking I can get myself far away from the fear.

"Your shoulder has been sore lately. Maybe I should sit this one out."

"Just put in 75 percent effort so the run doesn't hurt that much."

"It's OK if you walk on the run."

"Maybe your rope will break. It could be a blessing if it does."

"Just get through this workout, and if your shoulder still hurts you can chill the rest of the weekend."

I actually have a vision of myself sipping a margarita at the pool the next morning so I can avoid the Muscle-Up Biathlon.

Ridiculous thoughts, indeed—thoughts I know I will ignore. But they still creep into my mind, distracting me from the task ahead.



Camille Leblanc-Bazinnet (left) went out of her way to cheer Lauren Fisher up after a tough go in Sprint Sled 1 and 2.

And then a good friend of mine sees me standing near the ergometers and offers some kind words:

“Well, Eunice,” he begins, using my nickname. “I’ve been checking out all the women out there, and I think you win the award for the best natural tits.”

“It’s just exercise,” I tell myself, shaking my head at how seriously I take this sometimes.

“You have a couple rivals out there, but there are unconfirmed reports on whether or not they’re real,” he adds.

“Laughter is the best medicine,” I say aloud, letting out a genuine laugh. It felt good to laugh amidst the intensity.

And the truth is—as insane as it sounds—his words actually give me confidence that at least my boobs will look acceptable as I jump up and down.

But more than anything, the comment allows me to gain perspective, to appreciate that a friend of mine clearly recognized my bubbling-over stress and went out of his way to make me laugh just to help me get through the workout.

“It’s just exercise,” I tell myself, shaking my head at how seriously I take this sometimes.

When the horn sounds, I pace my 3-km row well and head to the 300 double-unders in eighth place. I take a deep breath, have a drink like my coach instructed and manage to stay calm on the skipping. I never redline on any portion of the event—which was my main goal—and actually feel recovered and fresh 20 minutes after the event, ready to hit it again.

Anger and Frustration Under the Lights

As the 21-15-9 Complex unfolds on Friday night, anger—rage—appears.

“Why the fuck do these snatches feel so heavy?”

“Why can’t I string 6 bar muscle-ups together?”

Rage is never a good thing for those around me. It usually stems from feelings of inadequacy, and tonight is no exception. My mother is metaphorically punched; my boyfriend receives uncalled-for, accusatory text messages, and I’m sure my body language is far from perky and positive.

The anger lasts for the night.

But the next morning, I witness a scene that snaps me out of my rage.

After the two Sprint Sled events, Lauren Fisher hops on an Assault bike to

cool down. She’s just taken 37th and 39th in the paired events, and she can’t contain tears of disappointment. Suddenly, she doesn’t look like one of the fiercest and most capable women on the planet, as she normally does. She looks like a dejected and vulnerable 20-year-old girl. She looks human.

I know how she feels. I, too, have been holding back tears all weekend, yet I’m still surprised to see her crying. What I see when I look at her is an unstoppable force, an athlete with the potential to win the CrossFit Games one day. What does she have to be upset about? Could it be that she, too, is having a hard time accepting her performance? Could it be that she has insecurities like I do?

Instead of letting Fisher pedal with tears running down her face, Camille Leblanc-Bazinnet goes over to Fisher, hugs her, gets right in her face and offers some words of advice: “It’s only one event.”

“It’s only one event.”

She repeats the words over and over as she continues to give Fisher an intense hug.

I can’t hear what Fisher says, but she starts nodding over and over as Leblanc-Bazinnet continues to console her with the words: “It’s only one event.”

Sadness: Working From a Deficit

I’m walking back from the tennis stadium, dejected, after Push Pull. I’m trying to convince myself I did everything I could out there, and the truth is that I did. I finished 6 of the 10 strict handstand push-ups at the deepest deficit, 4 reps from completion.

Had I tried this event last year, I wouldn’t have been able to do a single rep at the deepest deficit and likely wouldn’t have even made it through the previous round.

I’m not sure if I say anything to anyone as I walk back to the athlete’s area, but perhaps my body language speaks of disappointment. All of a sudden, Rebecca Voigt is consoling me.

As we walk back to the locker room, she speaks with confidence and certainty—borderline tough love—and I know I need to listen.

“I know it’s tough, and you’re probably not where you want to be in the rankings at least. Trust me, I know,” says Voigt, who was sitting in 28th place overall at the time, much lower than I’m sure she wanted to be.

I mumble something about it being a tough day emotionally.

"I know, but you can change that. There's one more day tomorrow. Go home tonight and look back at all the workouts and find one positive thing—even if it's just one tiny positive thing—from each workout," she continues.

"There are so many people out there who wish they were in your shoes." —Rebecca Voigt

"You've trained an entire year. This is just one weekend. Don't let it ruin your year of training."

I feel a tear coming and wipe my eye.

"There are so many people out there who wish they were in your shoes. I know it sounds cliché, but it's true. You're here," she adds.

Here is a woman, in her seventh CrossFit Games, taking time out of her competition to speak to me, to help me. She did this simply because she saw a human being in front of her hurting.

I'm so choked up I can't even say anything. Can't even thank her.

The next day, I gather myself and thank her for her words the night before.

She smiles.

"I don't like to see anyone suffering," says Voigt, who is later given the Spirit of the Games Award. They couldn't have picked a more deserving athlete.

Acceptance ... and Freedom

I wake up on Sunday morning clinging onto Voigt's words.

"You can change that," she said about my headspace.

And I know I can.

I'm not sure if the whole atmosphere is more relaxed on Sunday or if I'm finally in a place where I can appreciate the humor around me.

After the team competition, Pat Barber arrives in the warm-up area grinning ear-to-ear. His NorCal CrossFit team of all-stars narrowly missed the podium, but he doesn't seem to care.

"We're happy. For a team with a couple of has-beens, an Instagram celebrity and a couple of 'randos,' we're happy," he laughs. Everyone within earshot chuckles, as well.

Walking onto the field for the last time, I enjoy every minute of the Midline March. I'm completely in the moment during each step on my hands, each overhead lunge, each GHD sit-up.

For the first time, I let myself actually feel the energy of the crowd and think I even hear my friends and family in the stands cheering my name. I use it to my advantage as I kick up for my third handstand walk. My shoulders are numb and my core is wobbling all over the place, but I'm so determined not to fall over—so focused on the task at hand—that I manage to make it through.

When the event ends, I look into the crowd, appreciating the fact they've come from all over the world just to watch. I feel at peace and liberated for the first time since arriving in Carson.

Five minutes after the event ends, as we plunk ourselves down in the tunnel to watch the second and third heats on a TV, Nicole Holcomb, also admittedly relieved, turns to me and asks, "What are you going to eat tonight?"

"A burger and fries," I say.

"I can't believe I made it through," I think to myself.

Competition and Human Nature

The thing about CrossFit is it doesn't really matter what level you're at—the feelings are the same whether you're striving to make it through the workout of the day, testing yourself in the Open, fighting for a spot at regionals, or competing in the CrossFit Games.

One thing all CrossFit athletes share is an insatiable will to improve. This is as true of a Games athlete as it is of the 40-year-old athlete getting her first pull-up.

I'm thankful for the experience and even more thankful for the athletes who helped me survive my emotional journey.

Am I satisfied with where I'm at as a CrossFit athlete? Not really. Do I want to get better? More than ever. Do I still dream of being in the final heat of women? You bet I do.

But for now I'm thankful for the experience and even more thankful for the athletes who helped me survive my emotional journey that was the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games.

I wondered prior to the Games whether I had done enough volume to successfully make it through the physical aspect of the competition. Two days later, I barely remembered the physical pain of the events. I thought I would take two weeks off, but I felt ready to get on a strength program right away.

The Games were much more difficult on my ego. I spent half my weekend feeling inadequate, and it wasn't the physical events that provided validation of my abilities. It was the people around me who did. Once I realized the other athletes and the fans weren't judging me, I could finally accept who I currently am as an athlete—and I could even be proud of who I am.

If I ever get back to the CrossFit Games, I'm hoping I can start with the acceptance phase. Then again, maybe an entirely new process will await. ■

About the Author

Emily Beers is a CrossFit Journal contributor and coach at CrossFit Vancouver. She finished 37th at the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games.



After missing an attempt at 195 due to nerves, Beers was inspired by Lauren Brooks' words and hit her next two lifts.