

A man in a light blue t-shirt and dark shorts is walking on a grassy field, carrying a large black speaker on his shoulder. The speaker has the word "ROGUE" written on it. In the background, there is a large, blurred crowd of people sitting in stadium seats. The scene is outdoors and appears to be at a CrossFit Games event.

On the Shoulders of Giants

A look below the top of the podium at the CrossFit Games.

By Mike Warkentin

Rich Froning was high-fiving volunteers on the evening of July 26.

It had been one of the longer days of competition, with athletes starting just after noon with the Muscle-Up Biathlon and ending around 9 p.m. with the Push Pull. Froning had spent the afternoon and evening digging out of a hole created by a poor performance a day prior, when the fittest man on the planet had looked beaten, sluggish and all too human.

So poor was his performance—at least by the shining standards he'd set in previous years—that many had written the champ off, taking to Facebook and Twitter to post king-is-dead proclamations. Froning was in the fiercest fight of his career, and he was under the weather—something he revealed to media only after he came back to win the CrossFit Games for the fourth time. He had every right to duck out of the stadium on July 26 to rest up for a showdown with Mathew Fraser on the final day of competition.

But long after other competitors and most fans had left the tennis stadium, Froning was still there, shaking hands with an army of volunteers, posing for pictures, thanking people for their contributions to the sport, the community and the event.

“He’s certainly a champion, and to be a champion I think you’ve got to remember the people that help you . . . ,” said Dr. Sean Rockett, an orthopedic surgeon who volunteered with the Games medical staff. “He remembers, I don’t want to say the little people, but he remembers the guys that are behind the scenes.”

Indeed, Froning remembers the giants.

The Best and the Rest

Christy Adkins has competed in six CrossFit Games. She’s got a 2:49 Fran, a 210-lb. clean and jerk, a 419 Fight Gone Bad—the numbers roll by and put her in elite company.

She also has one other special accomplishment. First to the rings in Heat 1 of the chipper that closed out the 2009 Games, Adkins is the first woman to do a muscle-up in the CrossFit Games.

It was a skill she’d learned just a month before the Mid Atlantic Qualifier in April of that year, partially because of a [CrossFit.com picture](#) featuring Shana Alverson.

“The picture was just her transitioning through the whole muscle-up. I put that on the background of my computer until I got my first muscle-up. That was like, ‘OK, that’s what I want to do, and that’s what I’m going to visualize until I get it,’” Adkins recalls.

Adkins had been introduced to CrossFit in 2007 by Melody Feldman and John Main, two of her Globo Gym co-workers who went on to open CrossFit



Rich Froning thanking volunteers on the evening of July 26.

MPH in Washington, D.C. Adkins has been a member there since 2010 and hands credit for her success to the affiliate and those who run it.

“They created me as an athlete, to be honest, and so has the Washington, D.C., CrossFit community,” she said.

Once inspired by the likes of Alverson, Tanya Wagner and Heather Keenan Bergeron, it’s certain Adkins, who finished 21st this year, is now returning the favor for a new generation of CrossFit athletes.

“The coolest feeling in the world is to go into a CrossFit event or affiliate throwdown event . . . because you get that feeling of being a role model and being an inspiration, and you aren’t that in every part of your life,” she said.

“I think that gets back to even stuff that Coach (Greg Glassman) said years ago, where our needs don’t vary by kind; they vary by degree.” —Chris Spealler

Jordan Cook, a trainer at CrossFit Bay Area, finished 36th at the Games. He sees a clear link between the elite and the average athlete who just wants to get fitter.

“I want to help them be better in life, and I invest in their lives, and it goes down to a personal level, I think. I get excited every time I see them PR . . . It excites me. I invest in them, and so I think they feel very close to the coaches, and it’s a very personal relationship. And whenever we do something good, they feel just as excited.”

He added, “I think it’s just an exciting time of the year. It’s, ‘Hey, these are the best CrossFitters, these are the guys that coach us, these are the guys that we look up to, and we want to see our people do well, and we want to see our community grow, and so I think it’s Christmas for the CrossFitters.”

Chris Spealler, a seven-time Games athlete who finished 28th this year, owns CrossFit Park City in Utah. He agreed with Cook.

“I think all those athletes relate to us, and there’s this, you know, really cool blend of where athletes in an affiliate do the same things we do, so they get an idea of what it is, they know what it’s like to suffer and what it’s like to work hard and to earn your first muscle-up or PR. . . . That’s what I think makes them excited to come to all this,” he said of the Games.

The perhaps-unexpected connection between those at the top of the sport and those at the bottom isn’t a new idea, even if it’s often overlooked. In fact, it’s foundational to CrossFit—something that isn’t lost on Spealler,

who is a member of CrossFit’s Level 1 Seminar Staff.

“I think that gets back to even stuff that Coach (Greg Glassman) said years ago, where our needs don’t vary by kind; they vary by degree. I mean that’s the same struggle. That a newbie comes into the box trying to learn how to do an air squat, that fight and that struggle is still there for a guy like Rich (Froning) or any of us here trying to be better,” Spealler said.

Those Who Serve

It takes more than 750 volunteers to make the CrossFit Games happen—far more than all the athletes who compete.

While eyes are fixed on Froning, Camille Leblanc-Bazinet and the rest of the stars, volunteers scurry about, sunburned and sweating as they move gear, judge workouts, deliver water, clean blood off bars or do any of the thousands of tasks required at the CrossFit Games.

Most aren’t noticed. In fact, they’re given drab T-shirts that won’t stand out if they’re caught in the background by a camera. They’re like football linemen: utterly essential but mostly nameless.

But when teams couldn’t finish the Big Bob event and about 1,000 lb. of steel needed to get back to the starting line in a hurry for the next heat, it was a crew of volunteers that stepped up, leaning into ropes alongside the athletes. The image was both symbolic and less than subtle.

Video: [Thanks to Our Volunteers](#) by Jordan Gravatt

On Sunday at the Games, Nicolas Avila and David Granados, members of the medical team, were sitting for a moment near the warm-up area, waiting for an athlete with a torn palm or a sprained ankle. But it was a volunteer who limped up with a gnarly blister on her Achilles after several hours working in the sun. She was whisked off to medical and patched up.

Avila could have been in the stands above, beer in hand, watching the event live. Instead, he and his colleagues chose the fluorescent sunshine of the bowels of the StubHub Center.

“I get to feel part of the team, you know what I mean? I don’t get to compete like those guys do, but I get to do my part to make the whole thing run,” Avila said.

Leia Mendoza worked with the media volunteers and highlighted Mikey, a volunteer of about 8 or 9, and another, Jordan Demagante of Australia, who just showed up to help.

“He paid \$1,800 to fly out here and was, like, stoked about it. Didn’t care. He said, ‘I did it all for the love of CrossFit,’” Mendoza said.



Look behind the athletes at any CrossFit event and you’ll see an army of volunteers putting their fitness to good use.



August Sigurjonsson/CrossFit Journal



Scott Wallace/CrossFit Journal

For time: set up all the equipment for every single heat of every CrossFit Games event, then get it off the field before the next event starts.

The sentiment was common among all volunteers, most of whom simply love the sport and wanted to donate some time, expertise and sweat to make the Games a success.

“I think they like being part of something big, I think they like being sort of ... in the depths of CrossFit behind the scenes. I think this is their life, and (they like) to be able to use their profession and what they do to help other CrossFitters,” Rockett said of the medical team of about 30 care providers ranging from doctors to firefighters.

“I volunteer because I love CrossFit.”

—Josh Crawford

Josh Crawford of Build Up CrossFit West in Mesa, Arizona, took a minute between duties at the StubHub Center to step back from the special-operations crew and look at the big picture.

“I volunteer because I love CrossFit,” he said. “It’s a ton of fun. It’s taken over my life. I think it’s an extremely healthy way to live, and I just enjoy it.”

He continued: “I hope that it keeps taking over the way that it is because I have two young children, and I hope that it just takes off, it keeps going like a wildfire. That way my children are healthy, and all the children around them, and you just end up with a lot healthier nation.”

And at the end of the day, a handshake from Froning or another athlete makes it all worthwhile, said Erik Miller, also of Mesa.

“We actually walked out at the same time that Froning was walking out, and we walked next to him all the way up the ramp, and he thanked us. It was awesome,” he said.

“The appreciation we get from CrossFitters is unanimous,” Rockett confirmed. “They’re very appreciative. They’re very grateful for what we do. Having someone thank you is a very cool thing.”

The Future

“The fittest on Earth live here,” read the giant banner on the front of the Manhattan Beach Marriott during Games week.

According to volunteer Sue Burton of CrossFit OKM in Ohio, that was all it took to get one more athlete to try CrossFit for the first time.

Working at athlete registration at the beginning of Games week, Burton said a man and his wife came in off the street pushing a stroller. Earlier in the

day, they had seen the banner and done bit of research.

“They went home and YouTube’d stuff, and they came in and he’s like, ‘I want to register for this stuff. How do I do it?’” Burton said. “So I explained to him, like, how those athletes got there, how they started with the Open. ... And I told them it starts with a local affiliate.”

She added: “You can even start at CrossFit.com.”

Beyond crowning the fittest athletes in the world, the Games celebrate what the community has built together.

And perhaps that’s the true purpose of the CrossFit Games, which are supported by a global community. Perhaps the Games are really just the grand equivalent of the guy who grabs his buddy and says, “I just did this brutal workout called Fran. You gotta try it!”

Beyond crowning the fittest athletes in the world, the Games celebrate what the community has built together. They show current athletes what’s possible and push them further, and they draw new faces out of Globo Gyms and into garages and affiliates to learn how to deadlift and snatch.

A select few of those new athletes will one day compete at the CrossFit Games, but all of them will enter the ever-growing ranks of a community that allows the very best to shine for one week in July. Some will even become coaches and affiliate owners, joining the thousands of trainers who teach others about nutrition, muscle-ups, and horrid couplets and triplets that taste like lungs.

Along the way, they’ll all get stronger and faster and fitter. They’ll work hard, eat better, suffer with their friends and become the best versions of themselves. They’ll change their lifestyles and become healthier.

And they’ll widen the base of the pyramid and allow it to grow taller, becoming giants themselves in the process. ■

About the Author

Mike Warkentin is the Managing Editor of the CrossFit Journal and the founder of CrossFit 204.