

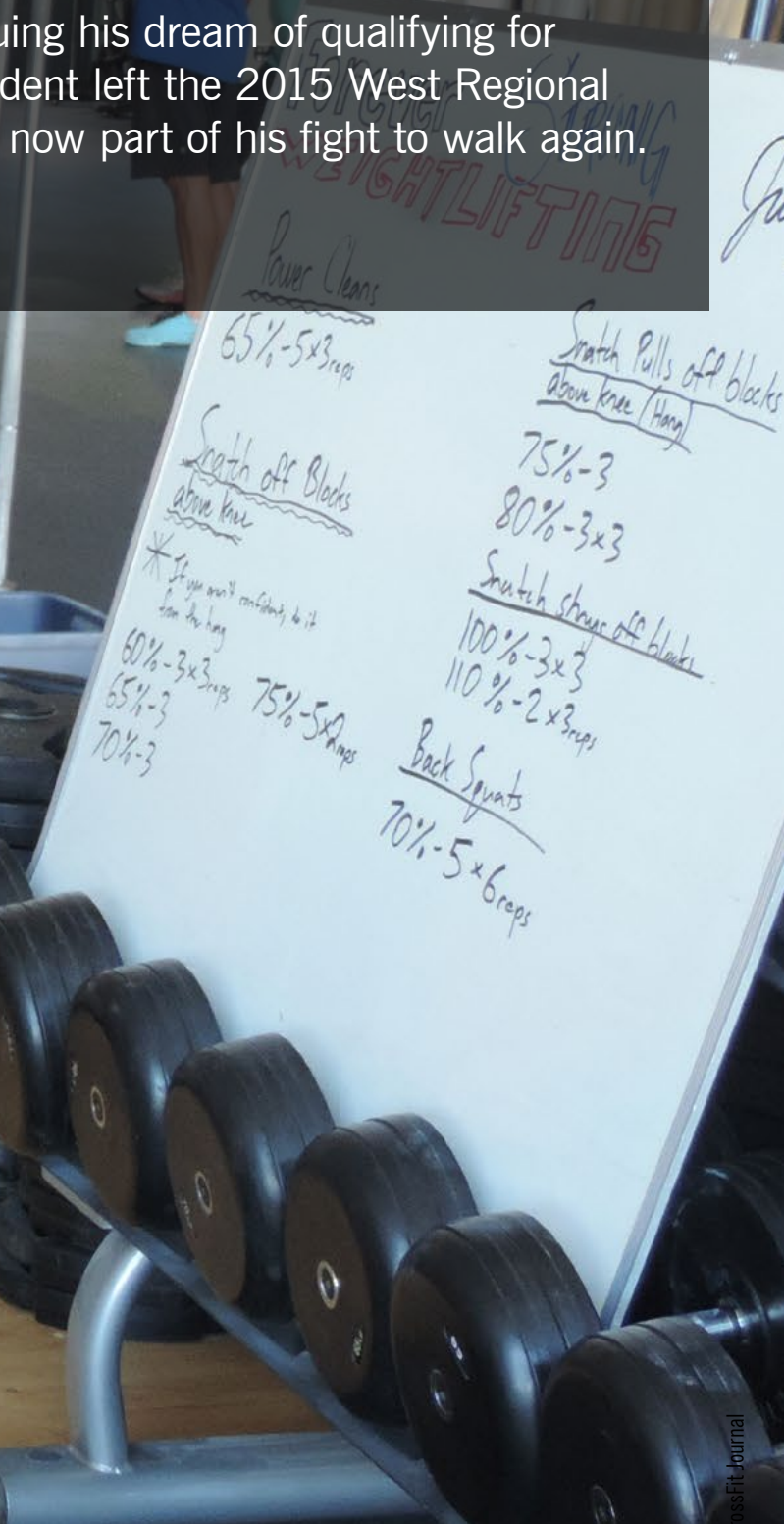


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# THE WILL TO WALK

A year-and-a-half ago, Cole Bernier was pursuing his dream of qualifying for the CrossFit Games. After a construction accident left the 2015 West Regional competitor a paraplegic, the sport he loves is now part of his fight to walk again.

BY EMILY BEERS







Cole Bernier was injured in a 2015 roofing accident, but he's determined to train and work to regain the use of his legs.

It's July in Kelowna, British Columbia.

Ordinarily, athletes at Bodyshop CrossFit in West Kelowna would be working out diligently. Today, they're visibly distracted.

The 2016 Reebok CrossFit Games are playing live on a big-screen TV in the weightlifting area of the gym, so the athletes take uncharacteristically long breaks between sets of squats to catch a heat of Squat Clean Pyramid.

One man in the corner of the gym isn't paying any attention to the Games. He goes out of his way to avoid turning his head toward the screen.

"It's too painful to watch," explains 24-year-old Cole Bernier.

The athlete who finished 21st at the 2015 West Regional is at the gym today to stretch his hip flexors, to practice standing—with assistance—and to rebuild core strength and stability that deteriorated rapidly after a construction accident left him a paraplegic in September 2015.

Bernier hopes working his core and putting his body through the motion of standing up will help him if the day ever comes that he can walk again.

## The Accident

Exactly 10 months after her son's spinal injury, Cole's mother Kate remembers every moment of the day she received the devastating phone call about her son.

Kate was at work at her advertising sales job when the roof Cole was working on gave way, leading to a traumatic fall that broke his spine at his first lumbar vertebrae (L1) and 12th thoracic vertebrae (T12).

"I had this really weird feeling that something was wrong," Kate said. "I left my phone in the car because I didn't want to be interrupted during a meeting. ... Eventually I just got this feeling like I knew I needed to get out of there. I didn't have anywhere I needed to be, but I just had to get out of there. I felt uneasy. Sick to my stomach."

At that very moment, her son lay fully conscious with a punctured lung, paralyzed, his body folded in half under a 5,000-lb. pile of roofing material.

"My face was in my thighs underneath 70 sheets of plywood and about 10 to 12 trusses," Cole said.

"I could hear the guys saying, 'Stay awake. You're going to be OK. We're coming for you.' I was under there for 30 minutes before they could get everything off me."

"I could hear the guys saying, 'Stay awake. You're going to be OK. We're coming for you.'" —Cole Bernier

He wasn't sure what his injuries were, but he knew something bad was going on in his body. He was having trouble breathing.

"I was fighting for air. It felt like I was drowning. I knew something bad had happened."

For a moment, he thought about giving up.

"At one point, I was like, 'I don't want to do this anymore.' I wanted to give up. To just stop. So I tried to not breathe," he said.

"It didn't work."

## Accident Aftermath

After he was extricated, Cole faced a three-month hospital journey that started with surgery at Vancouver General Hospital (VGH) to put his dislocated L1 back into position and to insert rods into his back—from T10 to L3—to maintain stability in his spine. T12 was shattered, so it was fused to L1.

The spinal injury and ensuing paralysis from the waist down meant Bernier lost all feeling and control of his bowels and bladder. The injury also affected his blood pressure, and his core stability instantly deteriorated, Cole explained. He wasn't able to sit up without passing out for a number of days—all **normal symptoms** of spinal injuries, he said.

"It took a long time for me to learn how to sit up and not have to lie down again without feeling like I was going to pass out," said Cole, who was also dealing with a bruised heart and **rhabdomyolysis** because his body was compressed for so long.

Kate, who stayed by her son's side for three months during his initial rehabilitation process in Vancouver—a four-hour drive from her home in Kelowna—said one of the most heartbreaking parts of the experience was watching her son's once-muscular legs wither away.

"It's not like I was worried about (him) not looking muscular," Kate said. "But it killed me to watch. I could see his legs dying. It happened so fast. I could notice a difference after just a matter of days."

Watching his legs **atrophy** before his eyes was admittedly one of





Cole works with trainer Ryan Stokes of Bodysnap CrossFit. The two research and experiment to find the movements that will help most.





Cole trains his upper body with clean and presses while step-father Mark Kohlen spots.

Emily Beers/CrossFit Journal

the hardest parts for Cole, too.

“It took a really big hit on my confidence,” Cole said. “I don’t really care anymore, but coming from being a CrossFit athlete when people always tell you, ‘Oh wow, your ass. Your legs!’ CrossFit athletes are used to being specimens. They’re unreal to look at. And going from that to nothing was a hard hit for me.”

Going to the bathroom and learning how to use a catheter was another hard hit for Cole.

“As a guy, you’re not supposed to be sticking a tube up your penis and into your bladder. It doesn’t feel like the right thing to do,” Kate said.

Cole added: “Other guys at the hospital often just refuse and say, ‘I’m not doing that.’”

But he knew if he didn’t learn to take care of his bladder and bowel, the hospital wouldn’t release him.

“So I got it all dialed in,” said Cole, who has to empty his catheter every three or four hours.

The moments of desperation in the days and weeks immediately following his accident often made Cole feel like his life was all but destroyed, he said. But at the same time, there was an element of relief.

“As much pain as I was in, I was super grateful to be alive,” he said.

Kate added: “Everyone that saw him said there was no way he should have lived. Doctors said that his health and physical condition were the only reason he survived.”

## Adaptive Training

Bernier arrives at Bodyshop CrossFit in his pick-up truck.

“I got it modified so I can drive it with my hands,” he explains as he wheels into the gym, throws himself out of his chair and onto a mat, where he starts stretching with the help of his coach, Ryan Stokes.

“It’s important for him to keep stretching his lower body because he’s in the chair every day,” Stokes says. “He’s in flexion all the time, so the hip flexors are really important to stretch.”

\* \* \*

Much of what the two of them do together at the gym three days a week they have discovered through trial and error, as well as through websites such as [WheelWod](#), Cole explained.

The medical system offered little direction when it comes to fitness, he said, even as a patient at the [Spinal Cord Injury Program at GF Strong Rehabilitation Centre](#) in Vancouver, where he spent two months after he was released from acute care at VGH.

“The medical system has basically given me zero direction,” Cole

said. “It was like there were just a bunch of generic checkmarks or milestones you had to reach. That’s all they looked at. Could I get in and out of my chair? Could I go from a chair to a bed? Into a car? And once I hit those milestones, I was allowed to go home.”

Even when Cole expressed keen interest in pushing a bit harder at GF Strong, he was shut down.

“There was this bike there that straps you in. And I thought it might be worth trying to keep myself moving as much as I can. But they basically just said it’s pointless because I don’t have function because I have a [complete injury](#).”

He added: “I fuckin’ hated being in the hospital. I just wanted to get out of there. So when I had done everything I needed to do, I told them, ‘I can do everything I need to be able to do. Can I leave now?’ And they were like, ‘Uh, I guess so.’”

\* \* \*

After stretching his hip flexors and legs, Cole and Stokes move on to standing drills.

Cole wheels his chair close to a squat rack, and Stokes attaches a weight belt with a chain hanging from it to Cole’s waist. Then he straps two AbMats between Cole’s legs with a Thera-Band.

“This will keep his knees in place when we get him standing,” Stokes explains.

It’s time to stand up.

Cole holds onto a barbell Stokes firmly attached to the rack, while Stokes faces Cole and grabs onto the chain. On the count of three, Cole pulls himself up with his arms while Stokes tugs on the chain until Cole is upright on his feet.

“If he can keep putting weight on his bones and his muscles, even if he can’t feel it, it’ll help prevent atrophy and will keep his bone density up,” says Stokes, still hanging onto the chain. “It’s important he keeps practicing standing or he’ll become frail.”

A [2006 article](#) in the Journal of Spinal Cord Medicine, “Bone Loss and Muscle Atrophy in Spinal Cord Injury: Epidemiology, Fracture Prediction, and Rehabilitation Strategies,” explained science is conflicted as to whether weight-bearing activities such as standing drills affect muscle and bone strength—as well as atrophy—in patients with spinal-cord injuries. Regardless of the murky science, Stokes says common sense tells him these exercises are useful for Cole’s rehabilitation.

“When he’s able to walk again one day, it will be easier for him if he keeps practicing standing up. His brain is telling him to stand up straight even without him being able to feel it,” Stokes says.

Between panted breaths, an upright Cole adds: “I couldn’t do this a few months ago. The hardest part is the core stability. It’s really hard to stop my hips from just giving out and falling over. Ryan





For conditioning, Cole often uses a SkiErg, but he finds his shoulders and triceps often burn out before his lungs.

is helping keep my hips in place with the chain.”

Cole’s next goal is to be able to stand up on his own.

“It would be nice if I could stand up when I go for drinks with friends at a bar so I’m not having a conversation with someone’s butt all the time,” Cole says before calling out to his stepfather, Mark Kohlen, for help.

“Can you come over here and twist my foot forward a bit?” he directs Kohlen, who walks over and straightens Cole’s foot.

“It’s a huge confidence booster when I do something I couldn’t do before. It’s what I have always loved about CrossFit.” —Cole Bernier

After about three minutes of standing, he rests. Cole’s core is fatigued.

It’s time to get his heart rate up a little bit—admittedly one of the hardest things for him to do.

“I haven’t been able to figure out a way to get a really good cardiovascular workout yet. When you take your legs out of it, it’s hard,” Cole says. “Ski-erging is good, but it’s still the shoulders that burn out first, and triceps, more than the lungs. I haven’t been challenged cardiovascularly for a while. It kind of sucks.”

For now, the SkiErg is the best tool he has discovered, so he wheels himself across the gym and logs 500 meters. By the end, he’s breathing pretty hard.

“I usually do things like Tabata sprints or something like one minute on, 45 seconds’ rest, for five sets,” Cole explains, still out of breath.

Next on the agenda are muscle cleans and presses.

He spends a few minutes warming up his lats and shoulders with Crossover Symmetry bands. Then he grabs a dowel, stretches his rack position and works on his overhead position by holding the dowel overhead for about a minute.

While Cole is warming up, Kohlen sets up two 15-inch Rogue jerk blocks. Stokes lays a barbell across the blocks. Cole wheels over and does some warm-up clean-and-press sets with the empty barbell. Today, his working sets are sets of three muscle clean and presses at 65 lb.

“He couldn’t do this the last time I was here,” Kohlen reveals. “When he first started coming to the gym after the accident, he couldn’t even hold a barbell over his head. His core was too weak. He’s come a long way.”

Today, 65 lb. looks like no problem for Cole, who finishes his sets and then looks to Stokes to figure out what the last piece of the day will be.

On the menu for Bernier are four rounds of 10 shoulder presses and 10 pull-ups. Pull-ups are done with Stokes holding Cole’s feet, while Cole pulls his chin over the bar 10 times without taking a break.

“I use Wheelwod.com a lot to find conditioning workouts. It’s pretty good. There are always scaling options on there, too,” says Stokes. The trainer notes he isn’t an expert in adaptive fitness but has learned a lot working with Cole in recent months.

“Most people just aren’t knowledgeable about people in chairs, so we’ve had to figure a lot out on our own,” Cole says.

“It just comes down to being self-motivated, I guess ... . When I came back to Kelowna, I met a guy who was three years post-injury and he couldn’t even transfer out of his chair to the floor and back again. I mean, it was a hard thing to learn, and it took me a while, but he should be way further along than me after three years.”

Though he’s no longer training for CrossFit Games regionals, Cole explains the feeling of accomplishment he gets at the gym is the same as it always was: He still feels the high of knowing he has improved.

“It’s a huge confidence booster when I do something I couldn’t do before. It’s what I have always loved about CrossFit, and although it’s different now, that part of it is still there.”

## Dating and Relationship Reality

Although his gym routine is like therapy, Cole said he’d be lying if he said working out has prevented moments of great despair in the last 10 months. One of the concerns that has eaten him up is dating and starting a family.

“One of the worst parts after the whole shock of everything settled down was not having feeling in my genitals, not knowing if kids will be a possibility,” Cole said.

“I think about things like teaching my kids to play sports, about kicking a soccer ball with them, or teaching them to ride a bike. You know, doing stuff dads are supposed to do, and being someone your kid can look up to in those physical ways. That has been one of the biggest barriers for me. I’ve had a lot of breakdowns about it because I have always looked forward to being a dad.”





Emily Beers/CrossFit Journal



Emily Beers/CrossFit Journal

Workout partner: Cole with his Staffordshire terrier, Titus.

Cole knows now becoming a dad is still very possible for him; it just might not look like what he envisioned.

“I know there are a lot of ways you can have kids—natural or otherwise. But (it) wasn’t just that. I also became really worried for a bit about meeting someone and dating. That was huge for me.”

He paused, then added: “I mean, I’m a 24-year-old guy: The physical-intimacy aspect of a relationship was always really important to me. It was always really important to me to make my girlfriend happy in that way. So going from the shape I was in and being confident in my body when it comes to dating to being a guy in a wheelchair who can’t have sex—that was a tough pill to swallow.”

In recent months, though, Cole has learned **sexual intercourse** is still possible.

“I have a pump now (that can help bring on an erection), but I mean I’m living at home again, so I haven’t played with it too much yet,” he said.

He still hasn’t dated since his accident, but he said he’s confident that he will meet someone when the time is right.

“Now if I meet someone and they’re not OK with me, then I’m not OK with them. It’s a smaller dating pool now, because some people just wouldn’t want to date someone in a wheelchair, but at the same time I think my ratio of someone I might make a connection with (within that dating pool) is higher,” he explained.

“So I’m not worried about it anymore. It will just help me weed out people I don’t want to date.”

## Looking Back, Looking Forward

At his parents’ house in West Kelowna, Cole, his mother and Kohlen gather around an island in the kitchen, snacking on veggies and hummus, meat and cheese. Cole’s three-month-old puppy—an English Staffy—sits on his lap. The three chat about the last 10 months and what the future will look like.

“Cole and I were just talking about this the other day. It will be 10 months (since the accident) tomorrow. It’s crazy how insanely fast it has gone by,” Kate says.

“The last few months have been a lot easier now that he can drive again and we’ve finished with all the house modifications.”

The family installed a wheelchair stair lift so Cole can get to and from his bedroom downstairs, as well as a lift to help him get into the house from the garage.

Kohlen turns to Cole: “Just watching you get around the house now, and in and out of your vehicle—you do it every day, so you probably don’t notice the improvement as much as we do, but you’re getting around so much better now.”

Cole nods and agrees things have gotten easier. He’s in a much better place than he was just a couple of months ago, he says, which has allowed him to start thinking about the future—of going back to school and returning to work.

Recently, Cole accepted a role at CrossFit Vernon—a 45-minute drive from his home box in West Kelowna—to be an apprentice coach under Jeremy Meredith and Deanna Fester.

“I like coaching a lot, so I’ll see where it takes me. I’m still not 100 percent sure what I want to do long term in terms of a career. But I’m really enjoying coaching right now and learning from (Meredith and Fester).”

Another part of Cole’s one-year plan is to venture into adaptive sports: Basketball, sledge hockey and downhill skiing are high on his list.

“I’m just going to try a whole bunch of different sports and see what I like,” he says.

Although Cole is taking great strides making the most of his situation, he’s adamant he hasn’t accepted his paralysis as permanent.

He believes he will one day walk again.

“I don’t think I’ll ever really accept it. It still feels temporary to me,” he says.

“And I’ve always found doctors very negative about injuries, but there are stories left, right and center where doctors were wrong, where five or 10 years post-injury people make full recoveries. And with research and technology, there are so many new procedures coming out. Nothing is ever for sure.”

Part of what’s keeping his hope alive is that he’s been experiencing pins-and-needles tingling in his legs and feet in recent days—that and the dreams he has at night.

“(In my dreams,) I’ll be lying on the couch still paralyzed or getting out of my truck, and I’ll just be able to walk out of nowhere. But it’s not a normal walk. Either it will really hurt, or it’s kind of sketchy. My balance is off, or one leg doesn’t fully work, so that’s how I know it’s realistic and not just a fantasy dream,” he says.

“I have no doubts I will be able to walk again unassisted in my lifetime.” ■

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