

# BEYOND PROVEN

BY HILARY ACHAUER

Top athletes talk about their single-minded pursuit of the podium and how they filled the void when they stepped back from the sport they love.





Very competitive athletes often find serenity when the pressure is off and they train only for health and fitness. A more relaxed Rob Orlando actually found his way back to the CrossFit Games as a master.

My husband threw me a semi-surprise party for my 40th birthday. When I walked through the roll-up garage doors of the gym that night, I saw three banners hanging from the ceiling. Each had a photo of me along with one word. One said “Writer,” one said “Mother,” and one read “Athlete.”

There was my life, my identity, wrapped up in three words: writer, mother, athlete.

Most of us define ourselves, in part, by our job, our family and our interests. But what happens when I stop working, when the kids grow up, if I get injured and can’t pursue sports—who will I be then?

Rory Zambard—who started CrossFit at 14—took 14th place at the 2013 Reebok CrossFit Games. Now, at 24, she’s stepped away from competitive CrossFit, and it wasn’t easy for her to leave behind something that had defined her.

“I had found my identity in CrossFit for too long, and when I could no longer be who I thought I needed to be, or who people thought I needed to be in the world of fitness, things sort of fell apart,” Zambard said.

When a CrossFit Games athlete makes the decision to step away from the sport, it’s not an easy transition. Competing at the highest level of any sport is all consuming, and giving it up leaves a vacuum many struggle to fill. However, these athletes often find a pot of gold on the other side of hours of training and time away from family and friends: a return to basics and a renewal of what they initially loved about CrossFit and fitness.

Competitive athletes often find a pot of gold on the other side: a return to basics and a renewal of what they initially loved about CrossFit.

## The Decision

After her strong showing at the Games in 2013, Zambard was ready to compete again in 2014. She hurt her back swinging a kettlebell just before the regional competition but still qualified for the Games. When she hurt her back again three weeks after regionals, Zambard got an MRI and discovered a softball-size



After Rory Zambard finished 14th at the CrossFit Games in 2013, health issues made her re-evaluate her priorities. Now, she's given up competition and focuses on her work as a coach and CrossFit Inc. Seminar Staff member.

tumor in her pelvis. She withdrew her name from the Games but was determined to come back in 2015 after surgery.

Once her body healed, Zambard began attacking workouts again, but something had changed.

"My heart had become hardened to the process," Zambard said. "I didn't find joy in (training) anymore, and I didn't love it anymore. It was work. I had to really push myself to just walk into the gym."

She continued: "As that started to grow ... I realized I was in jeopardy of falling out of love with CrossFit, which isn't something that I wanted to do."

Halfway through a partner competition in January 2015, Zambard realized she was miserable. She hated every second of that competition, she said.

So Zambard stopped working out altogether, determined to figure out who she was beyond a CrossFit competitor. It would take five months of soul searching to find the answer.

Like Zambard, Miranda Oldroyd's transition away from competitive CrossFit was precipitated by an injury. When competing on NorCal CrossFit's team at the 2015 Reebok CrossFit Games, Oldroyd tore her ACL and damaged her meniscus. Through rehabilitation and recovery, a move to Southern California, and a new position with Progenex, Oldroyd realized she needed to take a break from competing.

The deceleration process was not easy, especially for someone unaccustomed to sitting on the couch. Oldroyd said she knew she'd never be the type to fall into inactivity, but she also knew she needed time away from competition.

While Oldroyd was done competing, many of her friends were not.

"I still talk to Molly (Vollmer, former NorCal teammate) every day. She's my best friend, and she's getting PRs and I'm happy for her, but I think, 'I couldn't do that.' And I think, 'Oh my God, I'm losing that,'" Oldroyd said.

It's not easy to switch off the competitive, hard-driving mindset. Even though she's sure about her decision to step away from competing, Oldroyd said she finds herself slipping into the old thought patterns.

"This morning I was trying to figure out (when to fit in a workout), and then I thought, 'Why am I stressed about this?'" she said.

## Family First

Val Voboril has long been a hero to CrossFit athletes with full-time jobs and kids at home. The five-time CrossFit Games athlete, who took third in 2013, works full time as a fourth-grade teacher and has a daughter, born in 2011. Voboril did not qualify for the Games in 2015, and before the Open started in 2016, she decided she wouldn't proceed to regionals no matter where she placed in the Open.

"I've been back and forth on the idea for a while," Voboril said. "I think trying to compete last year at regionals was a mistake. I don't think my heart was in it. And Day 1 showed that more than anything. I think I spent the training leading up to last year's regionals trying to force it. I just didn't want to force it this year."

In 2016, Voboril qualified for the California Regional but didn't film her workouts, a requirement for entry. She said the Open was "so much more fun" knowing she wasn't going any further, but stepping away from competition wasn't easy.

"The biggest struggle was leading up to the decision, worried about letting other people down, because at this level of the sport you have a lot of people who put a lot of their time and energy into you," Voboril said.

"So many people in my world just give so much to me, and I feel like I was really letting them down by not moving forward," she said.

"When you're doing CrossFit for fitness ... it's all positive."  
—Rob Orlando

Like Voboril, Rob Orlando stopped competitive CrossFit to focus on work and family. Orlando competed as an individual at the Games in 2009, 2010 and 2011 but was disqualified during the swimming event that opened the 2011 competition.

"It left a little bit of a bad taste in my mouth," he said about the swim event, "but such is life. I realized, though, at the Games that year that the competition was just getting so much younger and that my ability to recover was dramatically different than somebody who was 10 years younger than me."

Orlando has two children, ages 10 and 7, he runs two affiliates—[Hybrid Athletics](#)—and he created the CrossFit Strongman Trainer Course. He wanted to focus on his work and his family, not competing.

“I would have these moments where I’d think, ‘I wish I was still on the floor,’ but then as quickly as that comes it immediately washes away because you think, ‘No, I’ve got a 10-year-old and a 7-year-old that want me around, and I’ve got a wife that wants me around’ ... and so these moments would come and go,” he said.

“When you’re doing CrossFit for fitness ... it’s all positive.”

## Letting Go

You can become tremendously fit with one CrossFit workout a day, and many busy people spend 60 minutes training, then get back to other daily responsibilities. Some of these athletes are so fit they can do well in competitions without spending more than an hour a day in the gym.

The elite levels of the sport, however, often require additional time and effort spent weeding out weaknesses, learning new or more complex movements, or training to handle the volume of a multi-day competition. That type of commitment usually means the athlete has to prioritize competitive CrossFit over other aspects of life, something Chris Spealler talked about in the 2014 article [“Hanging up His Shoes.”](#)

Stepping away from something that takes so much time and energy can be a painful process.

“I think that’s why a lot of people do this (work out so much), because they feel a sense of control and you don’t really have to think about anything else (other than your workout),” Oldroyd said. “You can be like, ‘I can’t do that because I have to train.’”

Zambard said being the best in the world at anything requires selfishness.

“In order to go to the CrossFit Games and in order to really be the best, you have to ignore other parts of your life,” she said, “and for me that meant my relationships with people and my relationship with God and my relationship with coaching ... I had to let a lot of other things slide, and in that process I sort of lost sight of who I am other than how fit I am.”

For the longest time, Orlando said he’d show up to family birthday parties with his own food, telling people he could only stay for 30 minutes because he had to go train.



Cheryl Boatman/CrossFit Journal

After retiring from competition, Zambard took five months to figure out who she was—and who she wanted to be.



Courtesy of Miranda Oldroyd

Even in yoga, Miranda Oldroyd has a drive to be the best.



Will Duncan/CrossFit Journal

For years, Val Voboril balanced life, work and training with great success.

“To train at that level and to compete at that level, you have to be a bit of a narcissist,” Orlando said.

“Everybody makes concessions around you,” he said. “Everybody says, ‘That’s where he is, that’s really important to him,’ but I think at some level you’re missing this bigger picture—at least for me, anyway. (Competing) started to become a whole lot less important. How I ranked in this particular workout, how I ranked in the Open—it just didn’t carry as much weight with me.”

It takes time to figure out how to fill those hours once spent training. For a while, Oldroyd worked out on her own, but one day she was in a hurry and decided to jump into a class at CrossFit Chalk in Newport Beach, California. It was so much fun she’s been working out in the group classes ever since.

“It’s fun, and I actually think I’ve improved a little bit since I’ve been doing it because I’ve been going so much harder than when I’m alone,” Oldroyd said.

“The members there are cool ... they don’t expect me to be the best,” Oldroyd said. “That’s the weird thing too about going to regular classes is sometimes you kind of feel like you need to beat everybody every day and put up these crazy numbers, you know? But I don’t feel that from them.”

Oldroyd has also taken up yoga, boxing and salsa dancing, and she writes regularly on her [blog](#), but it’s been a challenge to dial back the intensity in some of these other pursuits, too.

“The (salsa instructor) told me to just relax—‘This isn’t a competition,’” she said with a laugh. Oldroyd knows that if she tries something, she’s going to go at it with gusto.

“For me, with yoga, it’s going to be the hard yoga,” she said, “I’m a perfectionist. I want to do it right.”

“So there’s a lot of crying and a lot of tears and a lot of ‘am I making the right decision?’”  
—Val Voboril

As she worked through the process of stepping away from competitive CrossFit, Voboril said she struggled with questions about her identity.

“(Competing) is such a defining part that it’s kind of hard (to let it go),” Voboril said. “So there’s a lot of crying and a lot of tears and a lot of ‘am I making the right decision?’ and ‘am I making a terrible choice or am I totally going to regret this?’”

Her husband had an adjustment to make as well.

“My husband was cute,” Voboril said. “He said part of his ego really does like to brag about me, so (my not competing) meant he couldn’t brag the same way.”

Orlando never regretted stepping away from competitive CrossFit, but he admits the transition was difficult psychologically.

“I struggled with it, because you have these moments. I would say that it’s more these impulses now and then,” he said about his intermittent desire to compete.

Of course, even retired competitors can scratch the itch by throwing numbers on the whiteboard every day or entering a competition that doesn’t require months of training. Some will still yearn for the highest levels of competition at times, but that yearning is often balanced by other aspects of life.

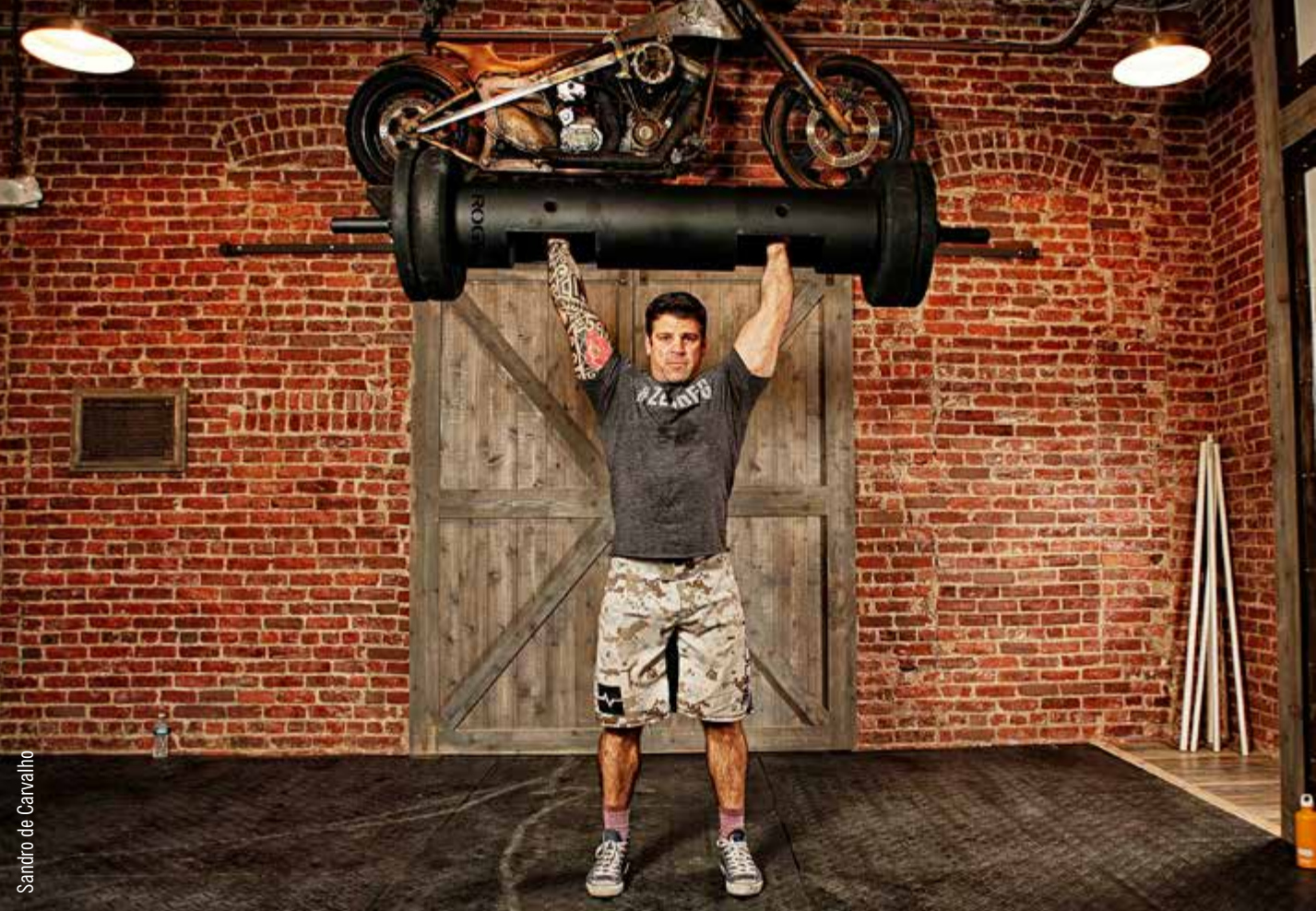
“Those moments (of regret) come and go, and with a little distance in between you’re kind of like, ‘I kind of like my life the way it is,’” he said, now that he has time to have a hot dog with his kids at a baseball game or the freedom to eat a slice of birthday cake. “I replaced those feelings with other emotions and other things in my life that bring just as much if not more value.”

## The Other Side

Zambard, a member of CrossFit Inc.’s Level 1 Seminar Staff, moved to Kauai, Hawaii, in early 2016 to run a kids program for CrossFit Poipu and work for the **Ultimate Hawaiian Trail Run**, which raises money to develop the health and fitness of the youth in Kauai.

“Most of my time is spent developing the kids program and finding every avenue possible to give these kids the same opportunity that I had,” Zambard said.

After her five-month hiatus, Zambard returned to the gym and began doing CrossFit for fun and fitness.



A father and business owner, Orlando dialed back his competitive drive but still found himself one of the fittest 40-year-olds in the world.

“My friends and the gym community were all a big part of me finding fitness for fun again instead of competing ... (I) just go in and have fun and play,” she said.

In her time off, Zambard realized she’s not an innately competitive person.

“I wouldn’t die for points. I don’t really care if you beat me. I just happen to be really good at it,” she said about CrossFit.

“My coaching career for CrossFit and working for CrossFit occupies my head and my heart, and I love that job. I know what CrossFit can do for you as a kid. I know the lessons it can teach of perseverance and dedication and hard work and how it can show you that no obstacle is too big to overcome, and it can provide you with a community that loves on you and cares about you regardless of your circumstances,” she said.

Like Zambard, when Voboril turned her focus away from competing, she rediscovered what made her love CrossFit—the community.

“Training in my backyard by myself, there’s no community. And although that fits nicely with my lifestyle and my time schedule, it wore thin,” Voboril said.

“I’m off right now to go meet with Jamie Hagiya and Kris Clever (both of whom qualified for the California Regional) to go have fun. They are going to work out really hard, and I am going to play,” she said with a laugh.

As for Orlando, a funny thing happened when he took the focus off competition. The 41-year-old competed in the Open for the first time in years, and he qualified for the CrossFit Games in the Masters Men 40-44 Division.

“I’m still doing all the regular things I was doing two months ago and six months ago,” Orlando said. “I drink a little bit of beer every day. I eat pizza. I’m not gonna change my routine, and I’m not going to fall back into that trap of being the full-time athlete. I am a dad and a business owner ... I’ll do what I can, and I’ll be the best version I can of this guy.”

## The Big Picture

When a pursuit or a job becomes all consuming, it’s difficult to avoid linking the outcome of that activity—whether making money or winning a competition—to your identity.

Orlando said he will never forget something seven-time Games competitor Spealler said years ago.

“He said, ‘These workouts don’t define me,’” Orlando remembered. “That resonates with me. Under no circumstance does one workout define me as a person. This is just what I do.”

Orlando said there are going to be uncomfortable moments in any transition. He said it’s the same for a professional athlete who retires and goes on to do other things.

“There’s a transition time and it’s just going to be uncomfortable. There’s just no way around that,” Orlando said. “For me, personally, I looked at my kids and my family and I said, ‘These people need me around, too.’ That adds value to my life on a daily basis.”

Now when Voboril works out in her backyard, she includes her husband and her daughter. The focus is on fun as much as fitness.

“Because (there’s) less pressure, I have more time be together and enjoy it,” she said. ■

**About the Author:** Hilary Achauer is a freelance writer and editor specializing in health and wellness content. In addition to writing articles, online content, blogs and newsletters, Hilary writes for the CrossFit Journal. To contact her, visit [hilaryachauer.com](http://hilaryachauer.com).