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Kids Throw Down for Cystic Fibrosis

For the first time, CrossFit Kids HQ provides guidance on a competition involving children. Dan Edelman tells the story.

By Dan Edelman

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All images: Stacey Smith and Robyn Vargas

Gauntlet competition director Dan Strametz and I cruise past a cluster of dilapidated shotgun houses dotting the desolate patch of desert and sweep down into the Indian Wells Valley via U.S. Highway 395.

We're headed to Ridgecrest, Calif., for CrossFit Ridgecrest's CrossFit Kids v. Cystic Fibrosis Throwdown on St. Patrick's Day. Dan and I are pretty new to competition organization and have been in learning-under-fire mode since October 2011, when CrossFit Brand X, aka CrossFit Kids HQ, threw a party called The Gauntlet for a bunch of firebreathing teens. So we're spending the day in the desert on behalf of CrossFit Kids founders Jeff and Mikki Martin, not only to learn some more but also to show our support, bring our burgeoning experience to bear and to help in any way we can, knowing the premium attached to volunteers for events such as this.

We cross a half-finished lot under clear skies while a chill wind peppers us with moisture from a looming storm crowding around the valley like a smug bully. Inside CrossFit Ridgecrest—which shares space with owner Janet Kowalchick's place of business, Kowalchick Physical Therapy—we are instantly warmed, not only by the temperature but also by the energy of a packed house.

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Kids of all ages cluster and flow like schools of fish, and adults bustle about getting things ready. Everywhere is green in honor of St. Patrick's Day. CrossFit Ridgecrest has an open floor, a Rogue rig, and equipment stacked and stashed anywhere it can be stored safely. In other words, it's like most boxes: no frills and built for high speed and low drag.

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On the main gym floor, gear for the final WOD is partially staged. Next door, in space borrowed for the day, WOD 1 is ready to roll. With pre-WOD sympathy angst and still walking funny from an utter tanking of CrossFit Games Open workout 12.4, I'm perfectly content in leaving the shenanigans to the kids today.

This is Kowalchick's event and it's apparent by the way she is everywhere at once, a little harried but coolly directing traffic. A former triathlon junkie and current CrossFit enthusiast, Kowalchick is a commanding presence without seeming authoritarian. With a smile she says, "Boo," and we say, "How high?" and along with Kate Hunt, co-owner of CrossFit Monrovia and a veteran SoCal Regionals and CrossFit Kids judge, Dan and I are assigned to the athlete assessments.

The safety assessment is a good place for us. We get to meet all the athletes and watch them perform the weighted movements to ensure they can handle the RX loads safely. It's gratifying to be greeted happily by a few kids who have competed in one or more Gauntlet competitions; they move so well. And the new faces belong to beginning CrossFitting teens who easily take our instruction and seem eager to get on with the competition.

Go time approaches, and Dan and I swap out our assessment caps for judge caps, though our safety badges remain firmly in place. This is going to be cool. Although there have been other CrossFit events involving kids, this is the first one for which CrossFit Kids HQ has provided guidance, and we're excited to see how it plays out.



The competition at CrossFit Ridgecrest was the first for which CrossFit Kids HQ provided guidance. The emphasis? Safe movement and lots of fun.

Why the Event?

Although it's St. Patrick's Day, the real reason we are all here is to raise money for the Cystic Fibrosis Research Institute. For the day, the face of the long-standing nonprofit organization belongs to two delightful sisters, Taylor and Isabella. They are two of Kowalchick's CrossFit Kids who wage a daily battle against cystic fibrosis. There also is Lucy, a young woman who lost that battle at age 18. The event's three WODs bear their names.

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The WODs

Kowalchick's intent is to deliver CrossFit Kids fun to children of every age to which our program caters. We're talking ages 3 to 18, and we know how fun changes for kids as they get older. Kowalchick handles that well. The majority of the participating teens are junior-varsity and varsity baseball players from Ridgecrest's Sherman E. Burroughs High School.

For the little ones, Kowalchick designs a compact but adventurous obstacle course called Isabella, built under and around the Rogue rig. The children can't get enough of it. Taylor is the name of a more elaborate obstacle course laid out next door in the rented space. Seven- through 11-year-olds must demonstrate good squats before encountering various challenges like boxes to scale or jump, burpees with hurdles to leap, and medicine balls to lift with a good angry-gorilla back and carry.

Each lane has a trainer cueing good movement and ensuring safe passage. The teens must face the Taylor obstacle course, too. And although the JV baseball players are new to CrossFit and not officially competing, a trainer holds them accountable for good and safe movement as they negotiate the course. The competing teens move fast



An obstacle course named Isabella provided a fun challenge for the youngest kids at the event.

and furious under the gaze of judges watching for good reps and, again, safe movement. What had been a fun little route for the young 'uns transforms into a surprisingly tough run for the two varsity athletes with simple adjustments to standards and programming.

The final WOD is Lucy. This one's for competitors only. It's a two-round, four-station Fight Gone Bad-style burner. Rowing, front squats, kettlebell swings and hand-release push-ups. The music is jamming and so is the crowd, and the teens tuck into the WOD with gusto. It is a high-energy finale for a high-energy day.

Demo Classes

Between the Taylor and Isabella obstacle courses and Lucy, noncompeting kids are invited to participate in one of two demonstration classes.



In addition to the workouts, the event included demonstration classes showcasing how CrossFit Kids works for both young kids and teenagers.

On the main gym floor, Kowalchick runs a CrossFit Kids class, while next door the JV baseball team comprises the bulk of a large teens class demo. Spectators have the opportunity to see general similarities between the classes, particularly in terms of structure and key contrasts when it comes to programming, coaching style and substance—and the kind of fun the kids are having. Both classes are well run and the kids enjoy what they're doing.

The Takeaway

By mid-afternoon, Dan and I are making our way back to Ramona under a heavy downpour that does nothing to dampen our mood. We discuss the day and agree that it went well and that we'd like to see more of these kinds of events run out of registered CrossFit Kids affiliates.

What is most striking to me about CrossFit Ridgecrest's throwdown is the spirit of the kids involved. Throughout the day, their camaraderie never flagged. For every heat, they crowded close to the competition floor and remained engaged with the happenings, shouting encouragement as their friends and teammates put in the work. I've been involved in CrossFit since 2007 and I've seen and felt the fellowship it generates, but this was less sporting than it was familial. The kids seemed genuinely in this thing together.

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I like that and want to see more of it.

Thanks again to Kowalchick and all the volunteers at CrossFit Ridgecrest for running such a great event.

