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Competition for the Soul

Front Range CrossFit focuses on getting its athletes to compete. Head coach Skip Miller says it's key to greatness. Andréa Maria Cecil reports.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

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All images: Staff/CrossFit Journal

Skip Miller believes in competition.

At the 2012 South West Regional, held May 4-6 in Castle Rock, Colo., his affiliate dominated the individual women's category. All three podium finishers—Colleen Maher, Jasmine Dever and Becky Conzelman—were from Front Range CrossFit (FRCF), and one of two FRCF teams finished second in the affiliate competition. The other was 10th. Last year, the gym's team came in second at the Reebok CrossFit Games, behind CrossFit New England.

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Skip Miller believes competing gives his athletes specific goals.

All told, the Denver box has sent 26 athletes to the Games since 2008. But competition is about more than just accolades for Miller. Mentally, it offers an intangible that can't be had any place else, he said. In other words, "what it does for you as a person," he explained.

"That's the focus of our gym: not the CrossFit Games, specifically, but competing. I think it's really important to have goals—at all levels—and something to shoot for in terms of competition," Miller said. "We just compete a lot. And not necessarily just in CrossFit and not necessarily just (certain) athletes."

"Everybody Wants to Be a Part of It"

For starters, FRCF has an Olympic-weightlifting team.

Mahe, the 17-year-old who won the South West Regional, took gold in the National Junior Weightlifting Championship in the 63-kg weight class. Miller himself won silver in the 2010 Master's National Weightlifting Championship in the 105-kg weight class. The same year, his wife, Jodi, also won silver in the Master's National Weightlifting Championship in the 58-kg weight class.

She also qualified and competed in the American Open in December 2010 as one of five master lifters.

And FRCF members compete in kettlebell events and running races.

"We really try to get people involved—at whatever level they want—in something," Miller said.

A three-time Ironman finisher, Miller said the notion of competition being good for the soul was one he learned as a kid.

"We want you to compete at something, at anything you choose to do," he wrote in an April 2011 blog post. "We want you to compete because it brings out the greatness in you."

In 2008, Miller started the Front Range CrossFit Event Series, which includes seven events throughout the year. It includes winter and summer training camps, spring and summer weightlifting camps, the Colorado Open, Master's Championships and Weightlifting Championships.

This year, the Colorado Open, a competition with 228 athletes, sold out in less than one hour. Additionally, more than 40 athletes of each sex are on waiting lists.

"If you weren't sitting at your computer, you didn't get it in," said Thad Eshelman, who co-owns Glenwood Springs CrossFit, more than three hours outside Denver.

"I think it's really important to have goals—at all levels—and something to shoot for in terms of competition."

—Skip Miller

"Everybody wants to be a part of it."

And not just athletes.

"Everyone kind of comes together ... to help," Conzelman said of the FRCF community. "It builds a sense of family and unity and purpose."

After moving from Virginia to Colorado shortly after competing in last year's Games, Conzelman has been training at FRCF since the summer.

Unlike other boxes, where the community is grown through social gatherings, there are no picnics or BBQs at FRCF, Miller said. Still, the sense of family is strong.

**“It builds a sense of family
and unity and purpose.”**

—Becky Conzelman

“I don't have a good answer. I don't think it's anything that we do,” he said. “We just have a great group of people.”

The act of CrossFitting certainly makes for a tightly knit group, too.

“It's group suffering,” Miller said. “You suffer as a group and you become tighter.”

A lot of these shared experiences are very intense, so you just get closer through that.”

“That's Just Good Coaching”

FRCF opened in April 2006 as the 55th affiliate.

The experience of its coaching staff and athletes is “insane,” Miller said.

“Everyone knows what they're supposed to do.”

Conzelman echoed that sentiment.

“They have such depth from the coaching staff to the athletes,” she said, referencing the rowing specialist and gymnastics specialists FRCF has on staff.

Besides the Regional, Eshelman has also judged competitions in the FRCF event series. Likewise, he's gotten to see Miller in action.

“He's constantly coaching his athletes at competitions. He doesn't yell at them. You can tell that his athletes have prepared for everything that they're going to see,” Eshelman said. “When the Regional workouts came out ...



Before Regionals, FRCF athletes had tested the workouts and knew exactly how to do them.

his athletes had done the workouts and they knew what to expect. And that's just good coaching.”

Plus, FRCF doesn't overcomplicate the programming, he added.

“They keep it simple. They don't try to reinvent the wheel. They do simple met-cons and they lift,” Eshelman said. “That keeps them from overtraining and being hurt. They're not doing 40-minute met-cons every day.”

Those workouts are determined by whatever competition is on the horizon, Miller said.

"Programming at our affiliate revolves around the next upcoming event. And that might be a CrossFit event, that might be a weightlifting event, that could be kettlebells, that could be a running race," he said.

**"They keep it simple.
They don't try to reinvent
the wheel."**

—Thad Eshelman

"We have 200 athletes that work out with us; 40 of them compete. And the rest of them are there to be fit and have a good time and take advantage of all the good things CrossFit brings to the table."

Of late, the programming was focused on the Regional and now on the Games.

"I believe that if the CrossFit Games is the pinnacle of fitness, then why wouldn't I program it that way?" Miller asked.

Miller described FRCF's programming as "completely backwards from everybody else."

Each training day, Regional/Games competitors do a warm-up, spend time on skills work and then do a met-con that ranges between eight and 10 minutes. Afterward, athletes go into a separate weight room and do either a general Olympic-lifting workout or one that is individually tailored, Miller said.

Likewise, FRCF competitors typically are at the box from 5 to 8 p.m. five days a week, he adds.

There also are reoccurring dinners for athletes who compete.

"I just really could tell when I walked in that they run a unique gym," Conzelman said. "I would sum it up as a dedication of the Front Range CrossFit staff and its members in all that they do."



In competition, there's no substitute for teamwork based on smart training.



Incredibly, FRCF swept the women's competition at the South West Regional.

The 40-year-old joked that when she first walked into the 9,500-square-foot facility with 12 lifting platforms and enough equipment to train 36 athletes at one time, she thought she'd arrived at the country club of CrossFit boxes.

She thought to herself, "This place is amazing. I actually might get soft here."

Conzelman added: "But given how much competition there is, that didn't get me too soft."

Like Outlaw CrossFit in Virginia, where she trained before moving West, Conzelman said the Millers are dedicated to producing the best athletes possible.

"Everything they do, they do with excellence," she said. "They take pride in everything that they're doing, but they're not prideful people—they're not arrogant—and I really respect that a lot."

"Lucky to Be a Part of That"

As for the Games, Miller didn't venture any predictions for his athletes.

"The CrossFit Games literally comes down to ... whose weaknesses are exposed the least," he said.

As is often said, it will all come down to the programming, Miller stressed.

"They take pride in everything that they're doing, but they're not prideful people—they're not arrogant—and I really respect that a lot."

—Becky Conzelman

"We got second last year and there's a bit of a hunger there to not let that happen again," he said of the Affiliate Cup.

The team has trained together for 10 months and is "really motivated" to snag that top ranking from CFNE.

"There's a bunch of really strong teams. It's just going to come down to who's having a good weekend and the programming—that's going to determine who wins. We're one of the top teams, but I wouldn't say that any one of us is the front runner," Miller said. "We just go out and let our experience that we have on that team kind of do what it does, and we'll see what we get."

He gave the same "we'll-see" answer in regards to how Conzelman, Dever and Maher would perform in July.

"As a coach, I learn something at every CrossFit Games," he said.



With a huge crew heading the CrossFit Games, the FRCF athletes will have team support throughout the competition.

Eshelman noted that both Skip and Jodi Miller “care a ton” about their athletes.

“Skip has a father-daughter relationship with a lot of the women in his gym,” he said.

“As a coach, I learn something at every CrossFit Games.”

—Skip Miller

At the Games, the three FRCF women will have something most other athletes there will not: each other.

“In the competition, having three women that genuinely like each other, genuinely are rooting for each other,” Miller started, “in a competition environment, it’s a gigantic advantage because you’re not alone.”

In the warm-up area, in the holding areas, they will be amongst friends.

“Everybody (is) so dedicated to achieving the common goal,” he explained of all his athletes. “More than anything, that’s the big deal, we’re just ... lucky to be a part of that.”



Courtesy of Andréa Maria Cecil

About the Author

*Andréa Maria Cecil was the North East Regional Media Director for the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games. She spent nearly 13 years as a professional journalist, most recently as managing editor of the **Central Penn Business Journal** in Harrisburg, Pa. The 33-year-old is a native of New Orleans who lives in York County, Pa. There, she’s been doing CrossFit since 2008 at **CrossFit York**. Additionally, she dedicates three days a week to training in Olympic weightlifting at **McKenna’s Gym**.*