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Taking Age Out of the Equation

Hilary Achauer explains how the oldest and youngest athletes in the Southern California Regional approached the competition.

By Hilary Achauer

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If you're a CrossFitter over the age of 30, it's likely that at some point you've given yourself a little extra credit for your years.

Yes, you've played the age game.

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After getting demolished in a workout, you allowed yourself to think, "Yeah, I didn't get as many rounds as I thought, but I'm 10 years older than her! I'm doing fine."

As a 38-year-old in a gym filled with mostly twentysomethings, I was happy giving myself a pat on the back for my extra years until I met 42-year-old Bill Grundler at the Southern California Regional. I didn't even think about the effect of being 10 years *younger* than most of the competition until I watched Connor Martin, age 20, compete at that same event.



Bill Grundler, 42, does Amanda at the 2011 SoCal Regional.

Good at Everything

A former wrestler, Grundler runs CrossFit Inferno and works as a captain at the Shell Beach Fire Station in Pismo Beach, Calif. He has been in and around CrossFit since 2001, but he didn't start to get serious about it until 2007. Up until that point, Grundler had been doing CrossFit-style workouts at a regular gym, and he had the guys at his fire station doing circuits that incorporated CrossFit skills, but he wasn't focused on his fitness goals.

In 2007 he took a long look at his workouts and thought, "What am I trying to do?" He went back and read Greg Glassman's classic article [What Is Fitness?](#), and a spark was ignited. He didn't just want to be strong or fit. He wanted to be good at everything. He wanted to be better at his job. He wanted to have the strength to save someone's life by blowing through a wall on his way out of a burning building.

"At the fire station, everyone thought I was a freak," Grundler said. "I didn't have the ability to explain to them what I was doing and why, so that's why I became a student of the movements." He began using CrossFit to help train his firefighters, and he opened CrossFit Inferno in 2008.

It wasn't until his blistering performance in the 2010 Southwest Regional qualifiers that everyone realized the guy was 41 years old.

Bill first competed in the 2009 Southern California Regional competition and finished in 10th place. He never made a big deal of his age; he just went out and competed. He so effortlessly crushed men half his age that most people didn't know how old he was. It wasn't until his blistering performance in the 2010 Southwest Regional qualifiers that everyone realized the guy was 41 years old. "Once everyone found out how old I was at the 2010 regionals, Tony Budding came up to me," said Bill.

Budding, the media director at CrossFit Headquarters, told Grundler that he hoped he made it to the Games. However, if he didn't, everyone at headquarters was so impressed by his personality and presence that they wanted Bill to do commentary for the live webcast of the Games. Bill took seventh place in the Southwest Regional in 2010, which meant he attended the Games as a commentator, not a competitor.

He enjoyed the experience, but for 2011 he had his sights set on the Games.

"I'm pretty excited about it," the firefighter told me a few weeks before the 2011 Southern California Regionals, "This is the first time I've made a concerted effort to train for a CrossFit competition.



Fit past 40.

The Original CrossFit Kid

Grundler was not the only SoCal competitor completely undaunted by the date on his birth certificate. Connor Martin, known as "The CrossFit Kid," competed in the very first CrossFit Games in 2007 when he was 15. Although he didn't finish the first workout, he proudly did everything as RX'd, including pull-ups and pushing 135 lb. from his shoulders to overhead.

After all, he had been doing CrossFit since he was 12. Connor's parents, Jeff and Mikki Lee Martin, are the founders of CrossFit Kids. Jeff used Connor to test out CrossFit Kids workouts, which started just as scaled-down versions of the main-site workouts. After researching the types of exercises that would most benefit kids, Jeff and Mikki began creating workouts specifically designed for young athletes. Connor competed as a wrestler in high school and did CrossFit for fun and as a supplement to his main sport.

Connor competed in sectionals in 2008 and 2009, but he began to seriously focus on training in 2010. He worked hard all year, and then the week before sectionals he dislocated three ribs and didn't compete. After finishing 60th in the Southern California Region following the Open competition, Connor scaled back his training to avoid aggravating his back, which he hurt wrestling.



Fit since 12.



Connor Martin competed in the very first CrossFit Games in 2007.

"My goal is to finish in the top 14," Connor told me the week before the SoCal Regionals, "but I'm worried about the deadlift/box-jump workout. My back is not as strong as it should be."

The Competition

Although Bill and Connor entered the SoCal Regional at either end of the leaderboard and the age spectrum, they shared a similar mindset. After the first workout, the two met for the first time and began talking about their perspectives on the competition.

"We got to talking about our approach to the competition," Connor said. "Bill took the same stance about age as I did, which was that we had to separate age from the equation. Both of us could easily walk away saying that what we had already done was 'good enough for our age.' But in competition, good is the enemy of great, so we couldn't become complacent with what we'd accomplished."

Most of us engage in some version of the age game—whether it's giving ourselves a break for our age or not sleeping well or not working out at our normal time ... the list goes on.

Wearing a purple weight belt and neon-green socks from his sponsor, Life As Rx, Connor started the deadlift/box-jump workout with the goal of simply finishing and preserving his back so that he could continue to compete. He ended up completing the workout with a two-minute PR, and more importantly, he walked away feeling good.

"Although I didn't beat most in the competition, I did accomplish exactly what I wanted to," said Connor.

Grundler placed 15th in the second workout and 19th in the third workout, meaning he was dangerously close to finishing below the top 14 by the end of Day 2, which would have put him out of the competition.

The last workout of day two was the infamous 100s: 100 pull-ups, 100 kettlebell swings (24 kg), 100 double-unders, and 100 overhead squats (95 lb.). Not satisfied with good, Grundler began the fourth workout determined to be great. He worked steadily but quickly, moving through each of the elements with confidence and determination.

The reports from that day all focused on Josh Bridges' world record. It was an astonishing feat: Bridges finished in an amazing 14:09. However, what was lost in the world-record noise was that Grundler came in second with a time of 19:57, beating everyone else who ended up on the podium at the end of the competition, including Jonathan Pera and Jeremy Kinnick.

The 42-year-old finished the SoCal Regional tied for sixth place with Ronnie Teasdale, and Connor tied for 41st place with Paul Castaneda. Neither made it to the Games, but both proved to be fierce competitors and tough athletes.

When I asked Grundler what he thought about the experience, he was typically humble and enthusiastic:

"The Southern California Regionals were an amazing mix of extraordinary athletes. Where else in the world can you have ex-Games competitors, the Original Firebreather (Greg Amundson), the original CrossFit kid, the winner of the Open, some old names, some new names, the fittest woman in the world (Kristan Clever), the CF Valley girls, and me with new tennis balls on my walker? It was a great event."

Most of us engage in some version of the age game—whether it's giving ourselves a break for our age or not sleeping well or not working out at our normal time ... the list goes on. Watching Grundler and Martin compete, and talking to them about the experience, I realized that all those thoughts don't have any place in CrossFit.

The great equalizer, CrossFit respects hard work, sweat, and tenacity. Everything else is secondary.



Courtesy of Hilary Achauer

About the Author

Hilary Achauer is an award-winning freelance writer and editor with a background in marketing and communications. An amateur-boxer-turned-CrossFitter, Hilary specializes in health and wellness content, focusing on emerging fitness trends. Her writing has been featured in a leading online parenting magazine as well as a number of travel and lifestyle publications. She is an editor for Frommer's travel guides and writes websites, brochures, blogs and newsletters for universities, start-ups, entrepreneurs, accounting and financial service organizations, and management consultants. She lives in San Diego with her husband and two small children and spends most of her free time at CrossFit PB. To contact her, visit HilaryAchauer.com.