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The New America

Marcus Hendren grew up American playing football and farming. Then he discovered a new sport. Hilary Achauer reports.

By Hilary Achauer

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It doesn't get more all-American than Marcus Hendren.

Hendren grew up on a dairy farm in Johnston, Ohio. His grandfather started the farm in 1956, and Hendren spent his childhood working on the farm alongside his father and brothers. When other kids were off at the pool or playing summer baseball, Hendren and his brothers were busy feeding baby calves.

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Ann Hendren

The Hendrens on the land their family has worked since 1956.

In high school, Hendren was a star football player. He was the top rusher and scorer in the state of Ohio his senior year and earned state player-of-the-year honors in Division V. Hendren served as team co-captain for the football, basketball and baseball teams his senior year and also earned varsity letters in track and field and lacrosse. His athletic accomplishments and academic excellence earned him admission to Cornell University in New York. Hendren had a successful football career at Cornell and graduated with a bachelor's degree in business in 2011. After graduation, he did what was expected of him: Hendren returned to Ohio to work on the family farm.

However, Hendren was not the same person he was when he left Ohio. While in college, Hendren found CrossFit. This discovery had a profound effect not only on his body, but also on the way he viewed the world—more specifically, his opinions about food and the way it is produced in our country.

A New Perspective

Hendren's brother played football with Graham Holmberg, which was how Marcus first heard about CrossFit. He started doing CrossFit.com workouts while in college. When he graduated in 2011 and moved home, Hendren began working out at CrossFit New Albany. Even though he was an experienced athlete and had done CrossFit on his own, Hendren said he "got his ass kicked" during his first workout out CrossFit New Albany. "But I loved it," he said.

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The CrossFit Games were a goal of Hendren's from the beginning, but he was committed to helping his family on the farm. In addition to raising dairy cattle, Hendren Farms also grows corn and soybeans. In the spring and fall, the farm's busiest time, Hendren works 14-hour days.

Right around the time Hendren discovered CrossFit, he also began learning more about food and nutrition. As a third-generation farmer, Hendren is more familiar than most with the traditional methods of producing our nation's food. At Cornell, he discovered there are other ways to produce food that are better for the environment but also result in better quality, healthier food.

"I read *The Omnivore's Dilemma* by Michael Pollan, and that revolutionized my thinking," Hendren said.

In the book, Pollan visits several traditional farms in the U.S. and explores the way the corn-based diet of the cows negatively affects both the nutritional value of the meat and also the animal's life. Pollan discusses how the industrial model of agriculture is detrimental to the environment and our health, and he advocates a return to localized, sustainable agriculture.

Soon Hendren was reading about sustainable farms and thinking more carefully about food and where it comes from. This new way of looking at food and its production dovetailed perfectly with his growing interest in CrossFit and its emphasis on clean food and grass-fed meat.

Hendren's new interests and ideas were not popular with his family.

"I've been ostracized because of my beliefs," Hendren said "My family doesn't understand."

**"Farming is a hell of a grind.
It's all about getting
through stuff."**

—Marcus Hendren

It would be one thing if Hendren was spending all his free time training for a sport his family had heard of, but he was disappearing to the gym to do CrossFit. The CrossFit Games are a big deal for CrossFitters, and the sport of fitness is reaching more and more people via airtime on ESPN platforms, but it's still not football or basketball just yet.

The Games

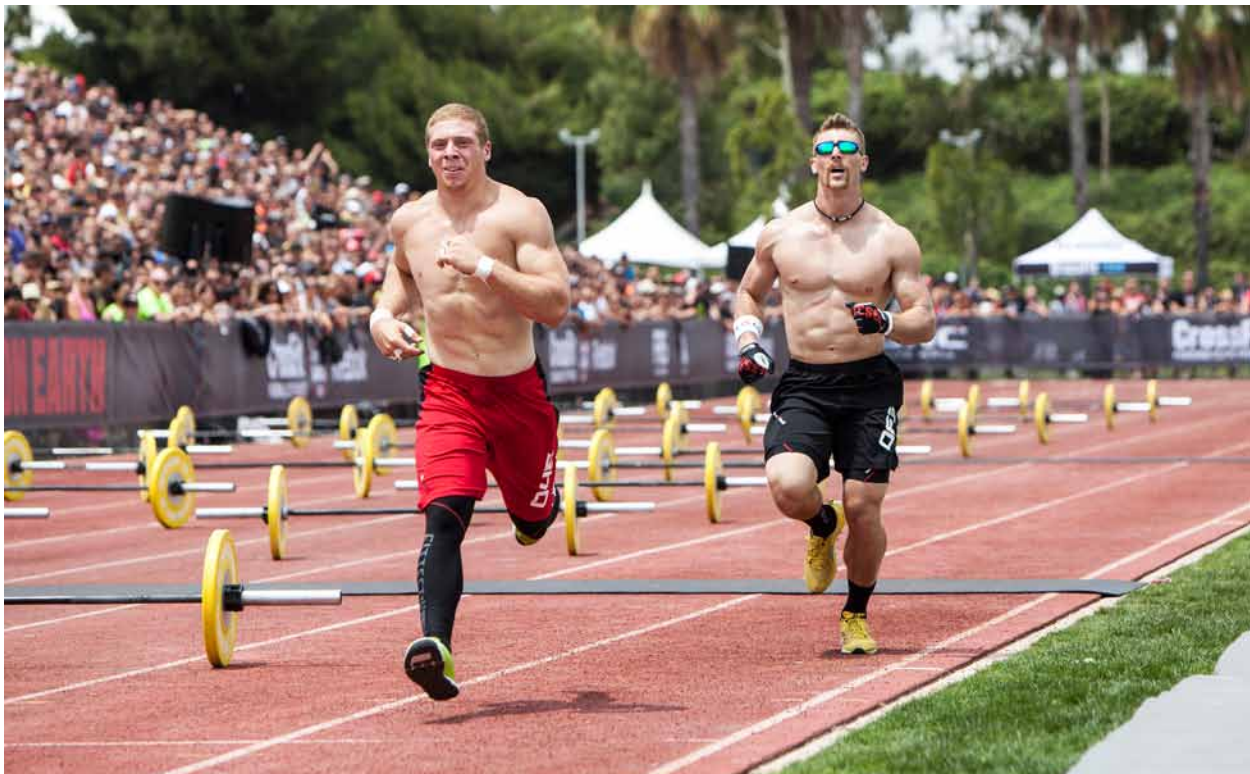
Even though his family did not support his efforts, Hendren trained hard all year. Some days he woke up at 4:30 a.m. to get a workout in before a day of farming, and other days he trained into the night after a full day's work.

Despite his Ivy League degree, Hendren works in the field, not an office. Some days he shovels dirt all day long. The next day he might spend eight hours moving hay bales. In a video on Games.CrossFit.com, Hendren described how moving a hay bale is the essence of functional fitness.

"The movement of picking the hay bale up and putting it somewhere—you pick it up with your deadlift, bring it up here, explode with your hips, and push press. It transitions into everything," Hendren said.

Beyond the physical benefits, Hendren said farming's biggest impact on his performance is on the mental side of CrossFit.

"Farming is a hell of a grind," Hendren said. "It's all about getting through stuff."



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At the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games, Marcus Hendren (left) finished seventh overall.



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Hendren cleans hay bales all day, so perfectly balanced barbells didn't pose much of a problem for him in the Clean Ladder at the Games.

He said that mental toughness has served him well during grueling CrossFit workouts.

The hours in the field apparently paid off. Hendren finished 11th in the Open, just one spot behind 2010 Games champ Graham Holmberg. At the Central East Regional, Hendren battled through a stacked field that included Holmberg, 2011 Open winner Dan Bailey and 2011 Games champ Rich Froning. Hendren finished fourth and earned a trip to the Games because extra qualifying spots are opened when a past champ takes one of the podium positions.

Even though his parents watched him compete at Regionals, they still didn't understand his dedication to CrossFit.

"We got into a fight before I left (for the Games)," Hendren said about his family.

In Carson, Hendren performed consistently and steadily throughout the four days of competition. While he finished well back of the leaders in the Camp Pendleton events, he hit his stride on the Saturday of competition.

Over the weekend's eight events, he took no lower than 12th place and threw in a second on the Double Banger and a third on the clean ladder. Of course, Hendren was comfortable with a sledgehammer, and the awkward hay bales had him more than ready to pull a nicely balanced barbell weighing 355 lb.

Overall, Hendren placed seventh in the Games—an impressive accomplishment for someone so new to the sport.

Once he returned home, it was back to work on the farm. When asked if it's difficult that his family is not supportive of an endeavor that's such an important part of his life, Hendren answered with workmanlike stoicism.

"It's more annoying than anything," he said.

Moving Forward

Determined to practice the type of farming he believes in, Hendren has applied for an internship at a farm in Virginia that is the "exact opposite" of his family's farm.

"They do sustainable farming with grass-fed beef and pastured poultry. I'm in love with that kind of stuff," Hendren said enthusiastically.

"I could help a lot more people by starting a farm."

—Marcus Hendren

When I told Hendren my family had just ordered goat milk from a local farm, he said, "That's what I'm talking about! I try to tell people about this, but the Midwest is so dominated by big farms," Hendren said. "People are totally into work, and health is not a priority. I saw a lot fewer obese people in San Diego and Los Angeles," he said of his trip to California for the Games.

Hendren's dream is to put his business degree to work and start a sustainable farm. He's interested in working as a CrossFit trainer but said "I could help a lot more people by starting a farm."

With Hendren's help, maybe someday CrossFit and sustainable farms will be as American as football and industrial agriculture.



Gary Allard

About the Author

*Hilary Achauer is a freelance writer and editor specializing in health and wellness content. In addition to writing websites, brochures, blogs and newsletters, Hilary is an editor and writer for the **CrossFit Journal** and contributes to the CrossFit Games site. She lives in San Diego and coaches and trains at CrossFit Pacific Beach. To contact her, visit HilaryAchauer.com.*



Ann Hendren

If Hendren gets his way, he'll be raising grass-fed cattle one day.