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The Fountain of Youth

Is there CrossFit after 60? Hilary Achauer investigates at the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games.

By Hilary Achauer

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Some couples celebrate their anniversary by going on a cruise to Alaska. Some throw a party.

High-school sweethearts Greg (62) and Becky Walker (60) commemorated their 41 years of marriage by competing together in the 60-Plus Masters Division at the CrossFit Games.



Sixty-year-old Becky Walker finished eighth in her division at the Games.

A Reluctant Competitor

"It was a 'pinch-me' weekend," said Greg. "I am so proud of Becky. She has never, ever competed before, and look at what she did. Her self-esteem and confidence are through the roof."

Here's the thing about Greg: He won his division, coming in first in four of the five events, but all he wanted to talk about was his wife. A cool-looking dude with long, white hair and a laid-back attitude, Greg told me that the change in his wife's self-esteem and confidence was remarkable.

"She's soaring," he said.

Becky never planned to compete in the CrossFit Games. She started doing CrossFit three years ago when their daughter, Jennifer Lawrence, began working as a CrossFit coach. Then Greg and Becky became co-owners of their daughter's affiliate, CrossFit Northwest Tucson, which opened in October 2008.

Becky was a cheerleader in high school and college and had always stayed active with racquetball, tennis and golf, but "Women's sports weren't big in the 1960s," she said.

When the Open came around, Becky said she didn't want to compete. On the day before the deadline to submit the first Open score, Becky was in the gym doing her normal Saturday workout. Halfway through, Greg said, "Becky, stop. You can do this. Try the Open workout."

Becky stopped, rested for a few minutes and did the workout. After it was over, she turned to Greg and said, "I guess I can do that."

In that first workout Becky tweaked her knee, and it kept bothering her, so three weeks before the Open she had an MRI. She was diagnosed with a torn meniscus, and the doctor said that her options were to stop working out or have a full knee replacement. Completely committed to competing in the Games, Becky decided to cut back on her training but postpone any operation until after the Games.

Once Becky got to the Home Depot Center, however, the doubts started to set in.

"I thought, 'I shouldn't be here,'" she said. "I was so unsure of myself. I couldn't train like the other women leading up to the Games. I thought I wasn't a real competitor, and I was blaming Greg for getting me into this."

After each workout, Becky's grandchildren would ask, "Grandma, did you win?"

Everyone told Becky just to do her best, to just do what she could. Wearing two braces on her knee, she stepped out into Lot 17, the competition area for the masters athletes, and that's when everything changed.

"Walking out there, in front of all those people, I was so excited," she said. "My knee didn't hurt. And it was fun. I thought, 'This is fun!'"

After each workout, Becky's grandchildren would ask, "Grandma, did you win?" Each time, she replied, "In my heart I did."

Becky was doing well in her heart *and* on the scoreboard. She placed in the top 10 in the first four workouts. The top eight athletes by the end of the day on Saturday would go on to the last workout on Sunday. Becky didn't think she would make the cut and remembers being relieved.

"I thought, 'Oh good, it's done. I can relax.'"

She was playing with her granddaughters by the playground when her phone rang. It was her daughter, Jennifer.

"Oh my gosh. You made it, mom!" Jennifer yelled.

Becky's first reaction was, "No, I'm tired. I can't." She was completely shocked.

But once again, Becky rose to the challenge. After talking to eventual individual champion Annie Thorisdottir in the athlete area under the stands, Becky walked out into the stadium to the cheers of a packed crowd.

"I thought I was nervous in the first workout, but this was worse," she said. "My adrenaline was running so high I felt nauseous."

Becky went too hard on the rower and felt exhausted for the rest of the workout, but she finished, taking eighth place overall.

Sticking to the Plan

Unlike Becky, Greg has spent much of his life competing. He swam and played football at Wayne State College in Nebraska. After college, Greg played semi-pro football for a few years and continued playing in flag-football leagues into his 50s.



Surprised to make it to the final event on Sunday, Becky gave it her all in the 60-Plus Masters Division final in the main stadium.



The fittest man over 60: Greg Walker.

"Before CrossFit, I ran sprints and lifted a little weight," he said, "but nothing like I'm doing now."

Greg designed and sold swimming pools for most of his career and most recently has been helping his daughter with CrossFit Northwest Tucson, running the CrossFit Seniors program.

He competed in his regional in 2010 but didn't make it because of difficulty with double-unders. He stepped up his double-under game and in 2011 earned second overall in the Open in the 60-Plus Masters Division.

Greg approached the Games much like a football game.

"Being a football player, I train for the fourth quarter," he said. Greg worked out a plan with his coach, Jim Sullivan, and followed it exactly.

Mark Laasko, who won first place in the Open, shot out to an early lead in the first event, but Greg followed the script.

"I didn't care where anybody was," said Greg. "Mark was 50 meters ahead of me after the first-round shuttle run, but I didn't panic. I stuck to the game plan."

Greg felt fresh for the second round and could sense that Mark was tiring. In the third and final round, Greg did all his overhead squats unbroken, finished his push-ups and took the lead. He finished first in the event and proceeded to win every other event through the end of the day Saturday.

"All I had to do was show up to win," he said about the last event on Sunday.

Greg's coach, Jim, said to him, "Just enjoy it."



Could this be you at 62?

And indeed Greg did. He looked up into the stands, soaking up the experience. He came in second in the event, which was more than good enough to win him the top spot on the podium.

The first- and eighth-place finishes are impressive, but what Greg and Becky remember most about the experience is hearing their granddaughters yell, “Go, Grandma!” and “Come on, Grandpa,” and watching the girls do cartwheels of joy in the stands.

“It was incredible to watch both of my parents compete in the Games,” said Jennifer, Becky and Greg’s daughter.

“What a roller coaster of emotions,” Jennifer said of watching her parents compete. “One moment I was screaming my head off for them; the next minute I was getting goosebumps watching them do WODs many people my age would struggle through.”

“They are my role models, my inspiration. When I grow up, I want to be just like them.”

**—Jennifer Lawrence
on her parents**

“To have my girls there with me, watching their young-hearted grandparents breathe their own kind of fire, it can’t help but light a spark of inspiration in so many ways. I’m their biggest fan. They are my role models, my inspiration. When I grow up, I want to be just like them.”



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.