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Never Stop, Never Doubt

Lisa Mikkelsen, winner of the 45-49 Masters Division at the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games, talks about fitness over age 45. Hilary Achauer reports.

By Hilary Achauer

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When Lisa Mikkelsen stepped onto the competition floor as part of the CrossFit New England team at the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games, Anne Sargent took notice. Mikkelsen, who wears her long gray hair back in a ponytail, was 45 years old, twice the age of most of her competitors.

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Mikkelsen completed 12 muscle-ups in two minutes at this year's CrossFit Games.

Sargent watched as Mikkelsen started the winner-take-all final event by taking on Elizabeth: 21-15-9, 95-lb. cleans and ring dips. Ring dips are not an easy movement for most women. The woman from Rocklin CrossFit, another team competing that day, got stuck on the dips, failing rep after rep and growing increasingly frustrated.

Mikkelsen had no trouble. She worked through Elizabeth quickly and steadily. Her performance helped her team come in first in the event and win the Affiliate Cup. After the Games, Sargent was so impressed by Mikkelsen she sent a message to her through Facebook.

"She said I inspired her when she watched me do Elizabeth," Mikkelsen said, "She is my age, and we have sons who are exactly the same age. She told me that if I could do it, then she could do it, too."

Not a Normal Family

This year, Mikkelsen did not compete on the Affiliate Cup team but rather entered the 45-49 Master's Division. She won five of the seven events and beat the second-place finisher by 41 points to stand atop the podium.

Mikkelsen admits that she is not an average 46-year-old. But for her, being active and athletic is just a part of who she is.

"My parents were always active when I was growing up," Mikkelsen said, "and it's always been a consistent part of my life. I never stopped."

Mikkelsen admits that she is not an average 46-year-old.

Mikkelsen's lifetime of athletics began at a young age. The youngest of four kids, Mikkelsen said the attitude in her family was that if one of the kids was going to do an activity, they were all going to do it. So she started swimming competitively at age 5 and made it to the Junior Olympics in swimming. Mikkelsen started running after college. She swam around Key West, qualified for the Ironman Triathlon in Hawaii and did a 200-mile relay with her husband, an ultra-runner.

"My husband couldn't come to the Games this year because he was running across Tennessee," Mikkelsen said. "We do not have a normal family."

A Winning Team

Most people seek out CrossFit, but in Mikkelsen's case, CrossFit found her. In 2009 Mikkelsen was running the U.S. operations and distribution for Inov-8, one of the original minimalist running-shoe companies. Brian MacKenzie, of CrossFit Endurance, contacted Mikkelsen because he was looking for shoes for his CrossFit athletes.

MacKenzie thought someone from Inov-8 should try CrossFit. Mikkelsen volunteered, and before she knew it she was in Atlanta attending a Level 1 Seminar. MacKenzie then put Mikkelsen in touch with Heather Bergeron, one of the owners of CrossFit New England. Bergeron told Mikkelsen to get her butt into the gym.



Mikkelsen's lack of weaknesses made her an important part of CrossFit New England's Affiliate Cup-winning team in 2011.

Mikkelsen nervously went to a 9:30 a.m. class “with all the moms.”

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“I was so scared to do pull-ups,” she said. “And do you know what my first WOD was? One hundred pull-ups for time. I could not put my arms above my head afterward,” Mikkelsen said. “But I liked it.”

Soon, Mikkelsen was a regular at CrossFit New England.

“It’s such a crazy environment, but I thought they were normal,” Mikkelsen laughed.

She kept running, and in the fall of 2009, Mikkelsen won the USA Track and Field New England six-hour championship in Warwick, R.I., running 37 miles to claim both the masters and open titles.

It was around this time that CrossFit New England started putting together their affiliate team for the 2010 Games, and Ben Bergeron asked Mikkelsen if she would join. She added in extra CrossFit workouts and trained with the team.

In addition to working full-time with Inov-8, raising her 8-year-old son and training with the CFNE team, Mikkelsen started running 200- and 400-meter races. In the spring of 2010, Mikkelsen entered the USATF National Masters Indoor Track and Field Championships, competing against past Olympians and world champions.

Mikkelsen won silver medals in both the 400 and 200 events, setting PRs in both. Then in the summer of 2010, she was a member of CrossFit New England's Affiliate Cup team. The 2010 competition lit a fire under the team.

"When we got back (after the 2010 Games) we wanted to win. It got crazy," Mikkelsen said. She kept running track and trained with the affiliate team. At the New England Championships, a track competition that took place before the 2011 Regionals, Mikkelsen won her age group with a 400-meter time of 59.92, but during the race she hurt her Achilles tendon.

Never one to let anything slow her down, Mikkelsen carried on. She competed with the CrossFit New England team at the 2011 North East Regional. The squad dominated the three-day competition and won every single event on its way to punching a ticket to the CrossFit Games. On the deadlift/box-jump workout, Mikkelsen was fired up and blazed through the reps.

"It was the most exciting event," Mikkelsen said. She pushed herself hard through the heavy deadlifts and box jumps. Her performance helped her team win that event, but Mikkelsen could feel her Achilles injury starting to bother her.

"On the last round of box jumps I was not rebounding," Mikkelsen said.

She was in so much pain after the workout that she did the final event of Regionals on one foot. Mikkelsen would later find out she suffered a partial tear of her Achilles tendon. She wore a boot on her foot leading up to the Games and rested it as much as she could.

Despite this injury, Mikkelsen competed at the 2011 Games, helping CrossFit New England take home the coveted Affiliate Cup.

Once she returned home from Los Angeles, Mikkelsen realized her body had been compensating for the Achilles injury, and she developed tendonitis in her soleus. Even though her box asked her to be on the 2012 Affiliate Cup team, Mikkelsen was worried about her injury and decided to make the move to the 45-49 Masters Division.



In 2012, Mikkelsen moved from the stadium to the Masters area and dominated the 45-49 age group.

Becoming a Master

Mikkelsen admits it was a tough transition to go from Affiliate Cup champion to Masters champion in one year.

"The team win was so much sweeter," Mikkelsen said, comparing last year's win with her first-place finish this year in the Masters division. "All your teammates are watching you when you compete on the team, and there's someone to share it with."

Constantly competing against—and beating—men and women half her age means that Mikkelsen often forgets how old she is.

"Well, you aren't looking at yourself," Mikkelsen said, which is especially true in the mirror-free CrossFit environment. "My hair is gray, but I don't see it."

Although Mikkelsen felt a little strange about being with the “old people in the parking lot,” she admits that the vibe over in the Masters area was special.

What often slows Mikkelsen down are not physical limitations but the responsibilities that often come with age.

“The Masters are so nurturing,” Mikkelsen said. “I didn’t hear any ill feeling. Everyone was helping each other out, and it was really a cool thing.”

Among the women who competed with Mikkelsen in the 45-49 division was Anne Sargent—the woman who was inspired to compete after watching Mikkelsen’s performance at the Games in 2011. Mikkelsen showed Sargent that a woman in her 40s could compete alongside 20-year-olds, and it was her example that led Sargent to qualify and compete at the Games.

What often slows Mikkelsen down are not physical limitations but the responsibilities that often come with age. Mikkelsen is married, she has a school-age child, and she runs a business. She can’t spend hours in the gym working on her mobility or refining technique. So, like many a working mom, she has learned to multi-task.

“I do mobility work at home after dinner,” Mikkelsen said. She does her physical therapy for her tendonitis while she brushes her teeth.

Despite her busy schedule and the number on her driver’s license, Mikkelsen is not slowing down anytime soon. She plans to compete in a national track competition in March, hoping to beat her PR of 59:12 in the 400-meter dash. After that, she thinks she’ll compete in the CrossFit Games Open in 2013.

Part of Mikkelsen’s success is that she doesn’t see anything remarkable about what she does. She is matter-of-fact and straightforward about her athletic achievements; they are all in a day’s work. The name of Mikkelsen’s new affiliate—which is focused on training ultra-runners and endurance athletes—says it all: CrossFit Never Doubt.

That, in a nutshell, is the secret of Mikkelsen’s success. No matter your age, your gender or the weight of your responsibilities—never doubt.



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.*