
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Strength of Character

Seventeen-year-old Darby Nelson has a huge deadlift—and a heart to match.

By Josh Bunch Practice CrossFit

April 2012



All images: Chris Worden

Recall for a second your adolescent years spent navigating high school. Most of us were self-conscious, overly critical and paranoid to say the least. For many of us, self-doubt was typically a rite of passage on the way to adulthood.

Darby Nelson, on the other hand, lives by a very different code.

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More than a rower, Nelson boasts an impressive deadlift well over 300 lb.

Nelson is a 17-year-old CrossFitter training at Hammer Down CrossFit in Fairfax, Va. She's been doing CrossFit since August 2010 and trains three or four times a week in season and about six times a week when not competing. Regularly, Nelson is found training early in the morning while her classmates are still sleeping.

More Than Rowing

Nelson's passion for rowing began when she was a freshman, and it was a passion that eventually led her to CrossFit.

"My sister was getting her car detailed, and I saw this CrossFit sign across the street. I had heard about it, so I figured why not?" Nelson says.

Nelson was initially confused by all the open space and sweaty humans, but she was quickly comforted when she saw her saving grace resting in the corner: a rowing machine.

"Immediately, I was more at ease, and after a few minutes talking to the community, I felt right at home—especially since I could teach everybody a thing or two when it came to rowing technique," Nelson says.

Nelson's crew career had improved over the season well before CrossFit, but her 2K time was stagnant. It turned out CrossFit was the injection Nelson was looking for to give her that extra push into the elite category.

In four short months of CrossFit, Nelson shaved nine seconds off her 2K time, bringing it to 7:24.

While CrossFitters always ask about Fran times, rowers are interested in your 2K time, Nelson explained. In four short months of CrossFit, Nelson shaved nine seconds off her 2K time, bringing it to 7:24. Apparently, in the crew community, this is virtually unheard of.

"This one effort moved me to a completely different tier. I am now considered elite. The only thing that doesn't match up is my height," Nelson says, explaining that her 5-foot-6-inch frame doesn't quite get the length in the water rowing coaches look for. "If I was taller, there is no telling where I would be."

Perhaps explaining the impressive improvement on the rower, CrossFit Kids has enabled Nelson to pursue and strengthen other areas that, prior to CrossFit, might have been foreign to her. While she loves the rower, she seems to love a challenge even more.

Early on, Nelson's CrossFit coach noticed her capacity for much more than endurance. Frequently, Nelson was found besting her older male counterparts when it came to feats of strength. In fact, when it comes to deadlifting in her age and weight class, she bested everybody. Less than one year ago, Nelson pulled a 335-lb. deadlift at a nationally sanctioned powerlifting competition, ranking her No. 1 in the nation. If the event had been sanctioned worldwide, it would have been a world record.

And what do others think of such accomplishments by an athlete who's only 17?

"Regular people (non-athletes) really don't get it. Even some of my crew team thinks my life is a little odd," Nelson says as she smiles, having clearly been asked this question before. "I don't need or want to be like everybody else. I like what I'm doing, and I do it for me."

She adds: "My friend asked me one day why I don't dress normal like the other kids ... I thought about it for a second and said, 'If I dressed normal, I would have to act normal.'"

"It seems like you get the most attention when you do what you should be doing anyway."

—Darby Nelson

Big deadlifts, fast rowing times and killer CrossFit workouts might be a big part of Nelson's story, but they don't tell the whole thing. In fact, her athletic accomplishments seem somehow pale in comparison to what she has planned: a lifetime of service to others and her country. When she graduates high school, she will enter the Naval Academy in hopes of becoming an officer, and she's supported by her family and friends

"9/11 was a huge part of my life growing up," Nelson explains. "All I can remember is those heroes helping victims, and I want to pay my respects by following in their footsteps and giving back to my country."

Darby Nelson is an example for the amazing products of CrossFit Kids, and her humble, genuine attitude is simply refreshing.

"This is just me—nothing to brag about or celebrate. It seems like you get the most attention when you do what you should be doing anyway," she says.

Snapshot From the Arnold

At the CrossFit Kids Gauntlet at the recent 2012 Arnold Classic in Columbus, Ohio, the third workout of the day was right up Nelson's alley: build to a heavy deadlift in 10 minutes.

"Good!" Nelson's judge screamed as the young athlete bested her deadlift record.

"I got 340 lb." Nelson said.

Then her judge leaned over and whispered, "Darby, that's 350 lb. You added wrong."

"Oh. Cool," she said with a smirk.



Courtesy of Josh Bunch/Practice CrossFit

About the Author

Josh Bunch is a longtime affiliate owner, the Reebok CrossFit Games Central East Regional media director, and a writer who ensures the CrossFit lifestyle has the potency of the pen and value of the word it so deserves.