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The Extraordinary Vijai Raj

At Sri Ram Ashram, a CrossFitting teen leads by example.
Jesse O'Brien reports.

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Rashmi Cole

This January I was fortunate enough to travel to India for 10 days. The trip was sponsored by my gym, Westlake CrossFit in Austin, Texas, through fundraising, donations and the efforts of [Leadership as Rx'D](#), an organization that promotes leadership through fitness.

It was the journey of a lifetime

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I joined three members of CrossFit Calgary, including 2007 CrossFit Games second-place finisher Brett Marshall; Yasmin Dean, associate professor of social work at Mount Royal University in Calgary, Alta.; and Amy Lafleche, an entrepreneur.

We were on a CrossFit mission laden with Dynamax medicine balls, a supply of chalk, lacrosse balls for mobility, clips for barbells—and even a GHD machine that CrossFit Calgary disassembled into multiple pieces, crammed into three luggage bags weighing in at 72 lb. and checked on an international flight to New Delhi.

But the purpose of this article is not to focus on the camaraderie and support of my affiliate that sent me on this trip or the incredible, organically grown CrossFit affiliate that is CrossFit Sri Ram Ashram in Hardiwar, India. The focus is rather on an extraordinary individual named Vijai Raj.



Rashmi Cole

Brett Marshall shows Raj the finer points of scaling a rope.

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Meeting Vijai Raj

When I first started CrossFit, I remember reading one of my first *CrossFit Journal* articles. [The article](#) resonated so much with me that I still have the original printout beside me as I'm writing this. It was about Sri Ram Ashram in India and a woman by the name of Rashmi Cole, who every year dedicates 10 months of her life to the Sri Ram Ashram orphanage, which also houses a school and a medical clinic. Halfway around the world, she was running a grass-roots CrossFit facility that has developed so much more than the young residents' physical fitness. The older kids who opted to participate in CrossFit WODs with Rashmi began to deepen their relationships, a new camaraderie developed among the group, the kids learned how to navigate the Internet in search of the WOD, and they also became more confident in speaking English to guests of the ashram.

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When I arrived in Hardiwar, I instantly recognized Vijai from that initial article and could tell after talking with Rashmi and a few of the young residents that Vijai had something special. He was a fitness fanatic. But more than that, he had a spark: a fierce determination; strong, genuine character; and a kind soul.

On our first full day at the ashram, Brett started teaching the kids about rope climbs. Of course, Vijai was one of the first kids there and was front-and-center attentive to every detail that came out of Brett's mouth. I would later find out that Vijai was actually past primary school—he's 19 years old—and had moved several hours away to attend college on scholarship because of his superior cricket skills. For Vijai and his peers at the ashram, CrossFit athletes like Brett Marshall are like LeBron James or Michael Jordan. Chris Spealler, Jason Khalipa and Mikko Salo are universally revered at the ashram.

The kids who participate intimately know the athletes' CrossFit statistics, and they idealize their CrossFit heroes and eagerly work each day to try to become the next CrossFit superstar.

It was clear to me after the first day that Vijai possessed this quality in spades. He had an intimate understanding of and curiosity about physical movement, he would stay later to help the others understand the movements, and he was happy doing it.

The second day I was at the ashram, Brett put the older, more advanced boys through a pretty grueling 5-round WOD that included 10 handstand push-ups. I was amazed at Vijai as he seamlessly worked his way through the workout, resting only briefly before he kicked up against the wall in the vacant carport that was the go-to area for handstand push-ups. He cruised through the workout at a pace none of the other boys could match, and it was at this moment that I had a revelation. If Vijai, halfway around the world from the States, could develop such an impressive level of fitness with hardly any of the support many CrossFitters have, he could do anything. It really

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drove home the age-old wisdom that nothing trumps hard work, a passionate attitude and determination. Vijai inherently possesses all of these qualities in relation to CrossFit.

As a CrossFitter myself, it is easy to get wrapped up in the latest trend—suing up in your \$100 Skins compression pants, followed by your trendy Inov-8 shoes, with wristbands to match and fashion accoutrements. It's easy to think some product or service will take you to the next level. No amount of specialized training, supplements, recovery gimmicks or optimized nutrition will ever replace the hungry and humble like Vijai. He has a 32-round Cindy and a 220-lb. clean and jerk at a bodyweight of 135 lb.



Rashmi Cole

Raj's character is impressive, but so is his fitness.

Vijai taught me an important lesson that I will try to live up to as he pushed his body to the limit of the workout Brett programmed: if Vijai can develop his fitness on a vegetarian diet in the middle of remote northern India, coming from a broken past, then what is holding me back not only in CrossFit but in the rest of my life? Why do I allow myself excuses? There is no doubt in my mind that Vijai will be a superstar. Whether he becomes a Games-level athlete, a CrossFit coach or even a Bollywood star, he will be somebody.

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Beyond CrossFit

Surprisingly, Vijai's CrossFit abilities are trumped by his life outside of the box.

While talking with Rashmi one afternoon, it was brought to my attention that Vijai was also on scholarship for cricket. She told me how he attempted to walk onto the cricket team when he went to college his first year. Because he had never been formally coached, played competitively or even seen a stadium before, it was a huge surprise that he not only made the team but was also the only freshman to do so. During his second year, he received a scholarship merely based on his athletic abilities. This was an achievement in its own right, but what I heard next astonished me: cricket is the football of India. People follow it religiously and are immersed in the sport. It's a national pastime, and as you meander through the congested highways of India, you will often see people playing for the sheer love of the game in open fields, abandoned lots and even dirt tracts with obstructions. It seems the whole country is cricket crazy.

Calgary to India

Amy Lafleche of CrossFit Calgary was one of the people who was with Jesse O'Brien at Sri Ram Ashram. What follows is a short excerpt from an article she wrote about the experience. You can read the full text at AmyLafleche.com.

We arrived at the Sri Ram Ashram orphanage at night, completely exhausted but somehow filled with joy and energy. Surrounded by over 60 excited kids, how could you not be? We immediately headed over to the gym—which is more of a storage room. The ashram is blessed to have their real gym outside—a few bars, a rope in a tree, and a ton of wide-open space. Quite honestly, if I didn't live in Canada, it would be my dream gym! We pulled out the med-balls and the GHD. The kids were excited, more about the med-balls than the pieces of metal that didn't really look like much of anything yet.



Calgary to India continued ...

When Rashmi told me Vijai did not continue his cricket career because he felt his teammates didn't work hard enough, I really came to respect him. Vijai said each teammate would bat a few pitches, hang out with his teammates, field a few runs over the course of a few hours and call it a day. After two years of CrossFit under his belt, Vijai wanted to work toward excellence, and he knew pursuing cricket was not going to fulfill that desire. Unfortunately, there is no CrossFit box or a weightlifting gym conducive to CrossFitting, but rather than stopping there and giving up, Vijai started pursuing Olympic weightlifting and recently completed a 100-kilogram clean and jerk in the 61-kilogram weight class. This placed him second in the Chandigarh State under-20 weightlifting championships. Considering his background, this is a stellar achievement.

It is my belief that when such noble behavior is recognized in life, it should become a model for others to follow. That is why I would love to see Vijai supported in his CrossFit pursuits. Vijai would love to be a CrossFit coach, but with the small CrossFit market in India, that goal might be difficult, if not impossible. Recently, Rashmi has been working on getting Vijai a passport, which is a huge bureaucratic effort in India. Surprisingly enough, he was recently issued a passport. Now CrossFit Calgary and the Leadership as Rx'D Team are sponsoring Vijai, pending his visa application, to attend the Level 1 CrossFit course, as well as a 10-day tour in and around Canada visiting other CrossFit gyms. Vijai deserves this. I feel like the entire CrossFit community can learn a great deal from how he has developed not only his CrossFitting but also his powerful influence on the environment at the ashram.

What started as a small group of Indian orphans—following in the footsteps of Rashmi and learning from her CrossFit knowledge—has mushroomed into a transformative community. "Ashram," which can be interpreted as "home" in Hindi, is what members of the Leadership as Rx'D team really noticed when we were there. The children all seemed to be happy. They were always playing games around the ashram and hanging out in large groups. There never seemed to be too much unsupervised time. It was like a hotel resort for children who had overcome visceral hardships. They took care of and genuinely expressed empathy for one another. They were confident. They spoke English to foreigners. There was camaraderie and high morale among their group, and there seemed to be no age barriers. Every child was kind and friendly to each of his or her "brothers" and "sisters."

Calgary to India continued ...

It was late and bedtime for most of the kids so we got settled in our rooms and drank chai while Rashmi gave us the rundown of the ashram.

The rest of the week was a whirlwind of CrossFit classes. Sri Ram Ashram has classes for each age group, and so instruction ranged from the more complex movements and exercises to CrossFit baseball and leap frog races. What I saw in these kids was truly incredible. Their dedication to perfect form, the effort and the leadership that comes through these kids was unmatched to anything I've ever seen.

The week went by way too fast and before we knew it, we had one full day left.

—Amy Lafleche



Rashmi Cole



Rashmi Cole

Brett Marshall: dance star?

On our last night there, we were bestowed the highest honor that the ashram could give. It was a night filled with bittersweet emotions and highlighted by a choreographed ensemble of dances accompanied by ceremonial music. It was a night I will never forget, and at the end it turned into a raucous, exotic dance party under the Indian moonlight punctuated by Indian techno beats. Vijai and one of his peers had planned the entire production.

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About the Author

Jesse O'Brien is a Level 1 CrossFit trainer at [Westlake CrossFit](#) in Austin, Texas. He also is founder of [ActiveATX.com](#), which promotes an active and healthy lifestyle through advertising Austin fitness events, wholesome Austin venues, and other activities and arenas that promote the physical well-being of Austin residents. Jesse is a 2009 graduate of the Neeley School of Business at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth.



Courtesy of Jesse O'Brien