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A Hippie Lifts Heavy

By matching strongman Rob Orlando in the thruster ladder, T.J. O'Neill helped the CrossFit Southie team place fourth at the Northeast Regional.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

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On the second day of the Reebok CrossFit Games Northeast Regional, T.J. O'Neill walked into the venue wearing a green, yellow and red Rasta hat, a fabric anklet, and sandals.

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On the third day of the event, the CrossFit Southie team athlete walked onto the outdoor competition floor wearing an American-flag bandana with part of his shoulder-length hair pulled into a ponytail atop his head. He sported black Converse high-tops that looked like they had seen better days, and he had a toothpick in his mouth.

But what might be most important to mention is O'Neill's first day at the regional. That's when he became the only person to match Rob Orlando in the thruster-ladder workout at 275 lb.

“I honestly think that if he really wanted to, he could win the CrossFit Games.”

—Amy Ferro

The 6'2", 225-lb. former linebacker and defensive end for The College of William & Mary only started CrossFitting three months before the regional, held June 17-19 at Reebok International's world headquarters in Canton, Mass.

Twenty-six-year-old O'Neill, who looks like he wrestles mountain lions and "is a complete hippie," has the potential to be the world's fittest man, said CrossFit Southie co-owner Amy Ferro.

"I honestly think that if he really wanted to, he could win the CrossFit Games," she said.

“I heard you guys got bumper plates”

The first time O'Neill showed up at CrossFit Southie, he was noticed.

"T.J. is pretty hard to miss. He's pretty striking. He was 250 or so pounds at the time," Ferro said. "I was thinking, 'Who is this guy? I need to have him at my gym.' He looked like a professional athlete. Who wouldn't want that type of athlete at their gym? He was literally the biggest person I've ever seen."



Strongest hippie ever?

That day's workout was Fight Gone Bad: 3 or 5 rounds of 1 minute at each of the following five stations, with 1 minute of rest between rounds:

Wall-ball (20 lb., 10-ft. target)

Sumo deadlift high-pull (75 lb.)

Box jump (20")

Push press (75 lb.)

Row (calories)

In Fight Gone Bad, the clock is continuous until all exercises are completed in the round. Athletes' scores are based on reps—one point for each rep, except on the rower, where each calorie is one point.

"He ended up putting up 385 as his total," Ferro said. "We were like, 'That's just crazy! He was able to move his body weight. He did everything correctly ... He killed it.'"

She added: "We had done Fight Gone Bad probably the first or second week we were open, so we had all the scores up on the whiteboard, and he tied the second (place) person. We had people who had been doing (CrossFit) for three years, and T.J. comes in and he's enormous and he has one of the highest scores."

O'Neill remembered it a bit differently.

"It definitely kicked my butt," he said.

With that, he was sold, said the native of Duxbury, Mass.

"He was literally the biggest person I've ever seen."

—Amy Ferro

Since his college-football days, O'Neill craved competition, he said. During O'Neill's time at William & Mary, strength-and-conditioning coach John Sauer introduced O'Neill to Olympic weightlifting, which was a regular part of the football team's programming, O'Neill said.

"We clean, we snatch, we push-jerk ... for the reason that those are the exercises that are found to be for the powerful, explosive athlete," said Sauer, who has been in his position at the college for 24 years.

Those movements also require coordination and balance—"that's going to apply to every sport, I feel," he added.

Through a friend, O'Neill heard of CrossFit.

"The only thing I really knew about it is they had bumper plates," O'Neill said.

So when he heard about CrossFit Southie, which opened in late September, he stopped by.



O'Neill attempts to rip handle from rower during the Northeast Regional.

He walked in and said, “I heard you guys got bumper plates; I’d like to work out,” O’Neill recounted. “Chris Gosler, who owns the box that I work out at ... was like, ‘We got a little bit more going on than workouts and bumper plates.’”

And so O’Neill was competing once more.

At first, he was competing with others in the same class, then with others on the whiteboard, then with the box’s top performers.

“It’s not just the competition but the camaraderie. It’s really what drew me into it all,” O’Neill said. “It was definitely something missing in the last couple years in my life—something that was challenging but I still found fun.”

A Regional Competitor

CrossFit Southie finished in fourth place at the Northeast Regional, bested by CrossFit Fenway, which finished the competition with two fewer points and, thus, a spot at this year’s CrossFit Games.



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“I wish I could have been prepared a teeny bit more,” said O’Neill, who became part of the CrossFit Southie team a week before the regional. “But I was really happy with how I performed with being there for the first time.”

Originally, O’Neill was an alternate on CrossFit Southie’s team. He finished the Open in 1,728th place.

“It was definitely something missing in the last couple years in my life—something that was challenging but I still found fun.”

—T.J. O’Neill

But things changed a little more than seven days before the competition.

“We were training for three weeks before regionals, and that last week before we did a one-rep-max jerk ... and he put up 375 for the jerk,” Ferro said of O’Neill. “It was the most beautiful jerk. He made it look like it was 135 lb. It was ridiculous.”

Mark Urso, who finished the Open in 1,183rd place and who was on the team, wrote Ferro an email explaining why he thought O’Neill should compete on the team in his place.

And so O’Neill became a regional competitor.

“He just came and he just dominated,” said Ferro, captain of the affiliate team.

“Now he’s becoming more interested in all the gymnastics work. ... I just hope that he grows as an athlete.”

Sauer described O’Neill as strong, powerful and explosive and said he “could run like crazy.”

“By the time he graduated, he was quite ... a physical specimen, I would say,” Sauer said. “T.J.’s a hard-working kid, and I don’t have any doubt in the world that he’s going to be successful in this competition (CrossFit). He’s got the ability to do very, very well at it and the mentality to do very, very well at it.”

Finding the Common Bond

O'Neill, who is a coach at CrossFit Southie, said he hopes to improve high-skill movements, such as muscle-ups, and looks forward to future challenges.

"I've always been a person who does better in competition. I don't shy away. I absolutely want to try to compete more. It's kind of my nature once I start something," he said. "I'm really an all-or-nothing person ... balls to the wall or I'm not going to do it at all."

O'Neill added: "With that being said, after seeing what CrossFit's all about ... it's definitely affected me in a positive way. I'm eating healthier, feeling better."

He was struck, he said, by the friendliness of fellow regional competitors.

"I was really impressed by the entire scene. I thought it was really cool to see all these people that had worked so hard and this is where they can see the fruits of their labor, but everyone's got time for everyone else."

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—T.J. O'Neill

He saw competitors warming up together, sharing a bar, talking about where they were from, the next competition.

"You really feel that community aspect to it—people going out of their way to connect with other people vs. other competitions, where people are sizing each other up," O'Neill said. "They work hard and (they want to) win, but at the same time they're not getting so caught up in it. It's the common bond of CrossFit."

And O'Neill seems to fit right in.

"He's just so cool," Ferro said. "Every girl wants to be with him. Every guy wants to hang out with him."

"At regionals, he made so many friends in, like, five minutes," she continued. "He remembers details. He's not playing Mr. Cool. He really cares. He's just a really good guy. The fact that (he) can lift heavy shit is just a bonus."



Courtesy of Andréa Maria Cecil

About the Author

*Andréa Maria Cecil, 32, is managing editor at the **Central Penn Business Journal** in Harrisburg, Pa. Andréa is a native of New Orleans who lives in York County, Pa. There, she's been doing CrossFit since 2008 at [CrossFit York](#). She dedicates three days a week to training in Olympic weightlifting at [McKenna's Gym](#).*