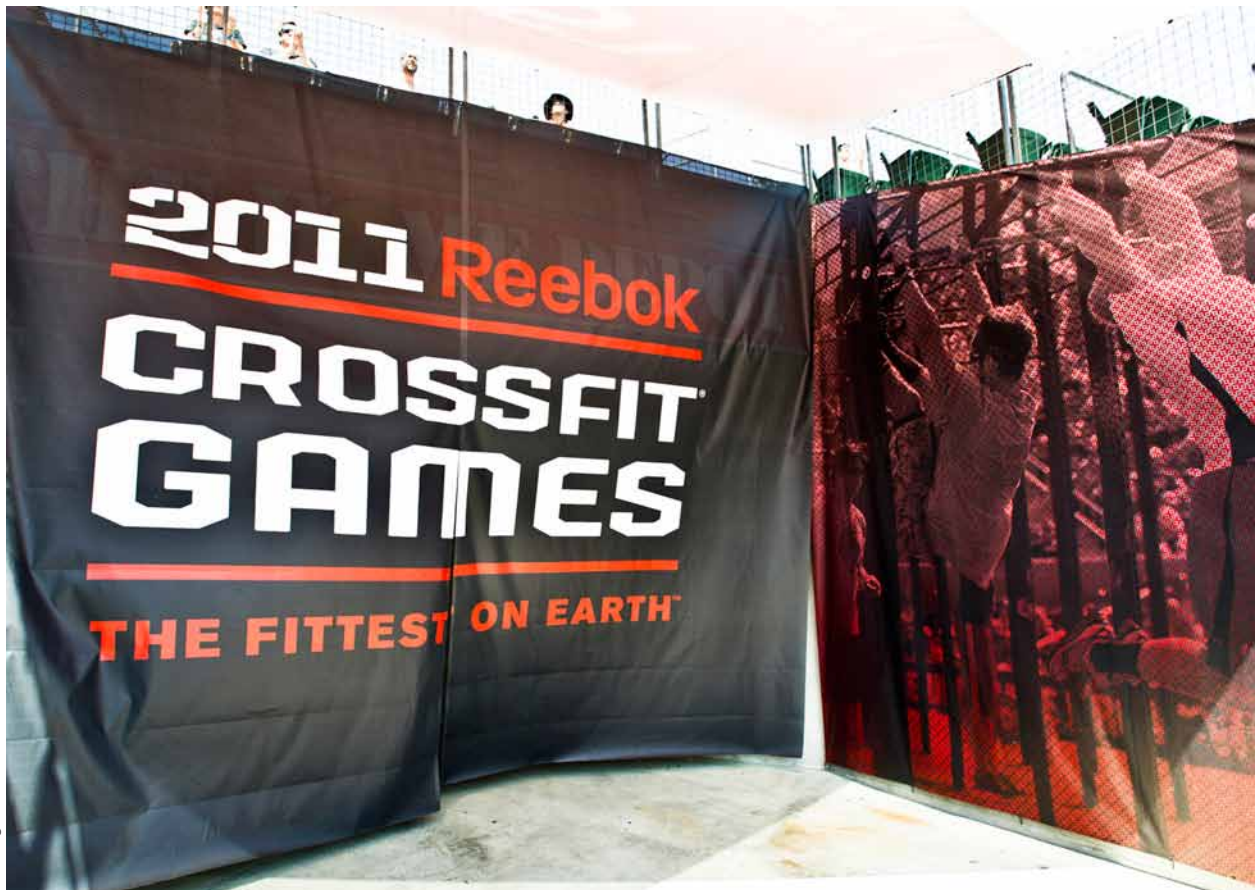

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Finding the Fittest: Programming the Games

How the athletes ended up swimming in the ocean, throwing a softball and flying across monkey bars in 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games.

By Hilary Achauer

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All images: Staff/CrossFit Journal

The idea came to Dave Castro when he was doing Murph (a 1-mile run, 100 pull-ups, 200 push-ups, 300 squats and another 1-mile run) on the beach with the Santa Monica Police Department as part of its SWAT test.

Castro had never been to the Santa Monica Pier, and as he ran up and down the beach, an idea started to form.

After the workout was over, Castro called Tony Budding and said, "We have to do something at the Santa Monica Pier for the Games."

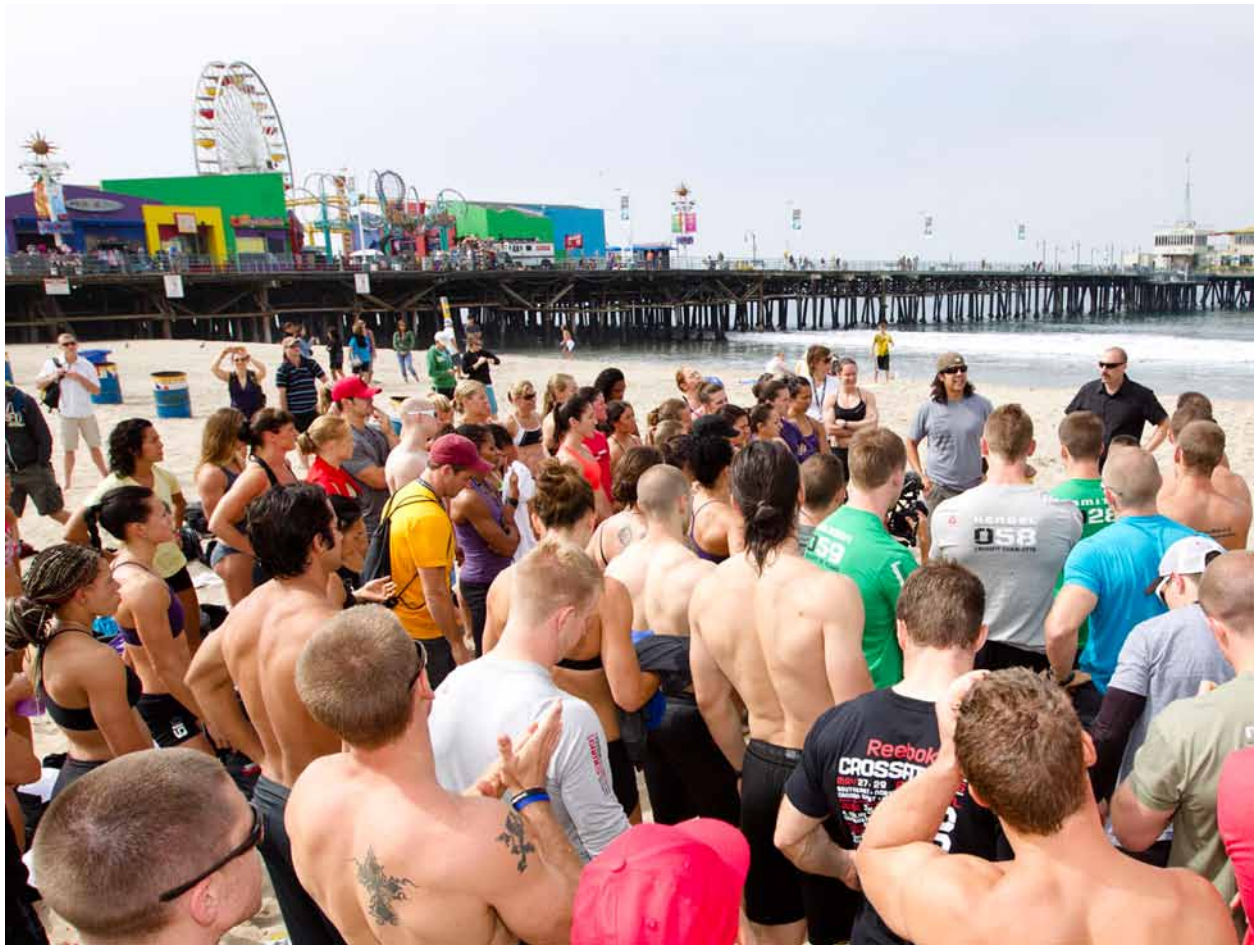
CrossFit founder and CEO Greg Glassman was consulted, and from there the workout evolved to the event everyone watched on the first day of the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games: an ocean swim followed by a soft-sand run, pull-ups, push-ups, squats and another soft-sand run.

The journey from an initial idea to the final workout is a long one involving many people. There are obvious practical considerations—for the beach workout, the Games team had to involve the city of Santa Monica—and the workout must fit within the context of the Games as

a whole. It has to be a fair and rigorous test of fitness and align with the CrossFit philosophy. It needs to be exciting and a little surprising, and it should be spectator friendly.

And it must be kept a secret from all but a few until the last minute.

If you've ever thrown a surprise party, you know how difficult it is to bring all the pieces together while keeping it a secret. Now imagine if you had to keep the details of the party a secret not only from the guest of honor but also from the caterer, the bartender and the guests. Oh, and you've got film the whole thing, maintain a constantly updated website and broadcast it on ESPN3.com. Multiply that tenfold, and you've got a small sense of what it might be like to plan and manage the CrossFit Games.



The first workout of the 2011 Games was the first event ever held away from the main venue and presented a host of logistical challenges for organizers.

That something like the CrossFit Games can take place with the main part of the competition secret from all but a few is a remarkable feat of planning, discipline and secrecy mixed in with a bit of insanity.

Sounds like CrossFit.

The Planning Process

I asked Tony Budding, director of media and co-director of the CrossFit Games, when he and the team started working on the Games programming. He laughed and said, "It never stops. It's in the back of your mind at all times. It's a very organic process that is constantly changing."

Although programming the Games is a monumental task, no one person is entirely responsible for the events, and the team did have it a bit easier in 2011.

"We knew the venue, which was a huge relief," Castro said. "We knew what worked well there. Also, the regionals really set the tone for the entire season. It gave us confidence that we could create programming in advance and it would still be exciting."

Although the main-site programming at CrossFit.com is not designed to prepare athletes for the Games, Budding said that it helps immensely in the process of creating the Games workouts.

"Every year, we are privy to over 1,000 workout tests," Budding said. "We can see how long the workouts take and what they do to the athletes. But even with that, you never know."

He continued, "We consult with head judges, top seminar trainers and outstanding athletes. Ideas come from all different places and many different people. This is the premiere time when programming is in the spotlight. It has to be as good as it can be."

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—Dave Castro



Games organizers and HQ staff members Tony Budding (right), Justin Bergh (in blue) and Dave Castro (in red) confer at the Home Depot Center.

Leading up to the Games, many people use the main site as an oracle. I overheard people in my gym wondering if swimming and handstand walks would be in the Games because the movements kept popping up on Crossfit.com. Budding said it isn't that calculated.

"Main-site programming is not designed to prepare people for the Games," he said. "The purpose of running programming for the main site is not to be Games-oriented. It's for forging elite fitness. The reason why we do the movements is because they are the best way to test fitness."

"There have been times when we threw something out as a tease," Budding admitted, but he said that most of the workouts on the main site stand alone, independent of the Games.

The Games events also have to take into consideration factors that don't come into play on the main site.

"The workout has to be a good test of fitness," said Budding, "but it also has to be fair, able to be judged reasonably and easily, fun to watch, and able to be conveyed on camera."

"You have to think about what you can pull off logistically," said Adrian Bozman, a trainer with CrossFit Headquarters and the head judge at the Games. "You can't have a 50-minute workout (in the Games)."

The team knew that the Friday-night event needed to be exciting, spectator friendly and short enough so they could get through all the heats in time. Although it was the third workout of the day, the Friday-night workout is the ceremonial start of the Games. It's usually the first workout in the stadium, and it follows the opening ceremonies.

Castro initially wanted to have a footless rope climb, a favorite of his. He went to the gym to try it out, and after climbing the rope 5 times without using his feet, then cleaning 135 lb. 5 times, he went back to the rope and found he had nothing left in his arms. Castro called Budding and Glassman and said, "You guys were right. They need to be able to use their feet." After a bit more adjusting they ended up with Event 3—the Rope-Clean.

When planning the skills portion of the Games, the team wanted to find a way to test fitness that didn't favor a specialist. Budding said their challenge was to find a way to test skills but not unfairly influence the overall scores.



Rogue was tasked with coming up with the implements that would test elite fitness at the Games.

Their solution was to have three elements in each of the two skill events. The score in each event was then a combination of the three skills. "It was unlikely that the same person would be a specialist in each of the three elements," said Budding. "And the results showed that. The people who did better at the skills did better at the competition. The results weren't aberrant."

A result of combining the one-rep-max snatch with the weighted pull-up and the jug carry was that the importance of a classic Olympic lift, the snatch, was devalued. In previous years the deadlift and the push jerk were scored as individual events, but in 2011 the snatch was combined with the weighted pull-up and the jug carry, giving a single skill less importance.

When picking the specific skills they would test, Budding said they wanted to assess fitness, play with the unknown and unknowable, and also find things that would be fun.

"The softball throw was the wild card," he said. "But people have been throwing things for as long as there have been people. We picked a softball because it's something the athletes would have less experience with, and also so they wouldn't hurt themselves," Budding said. "We are always looking for the best test of fitness."

That's the beauty of CrossFit. Fitness is not just running or moving a barbell. It's also throwing and holding your body in a strange position. Fitness is everywhere and in everything.

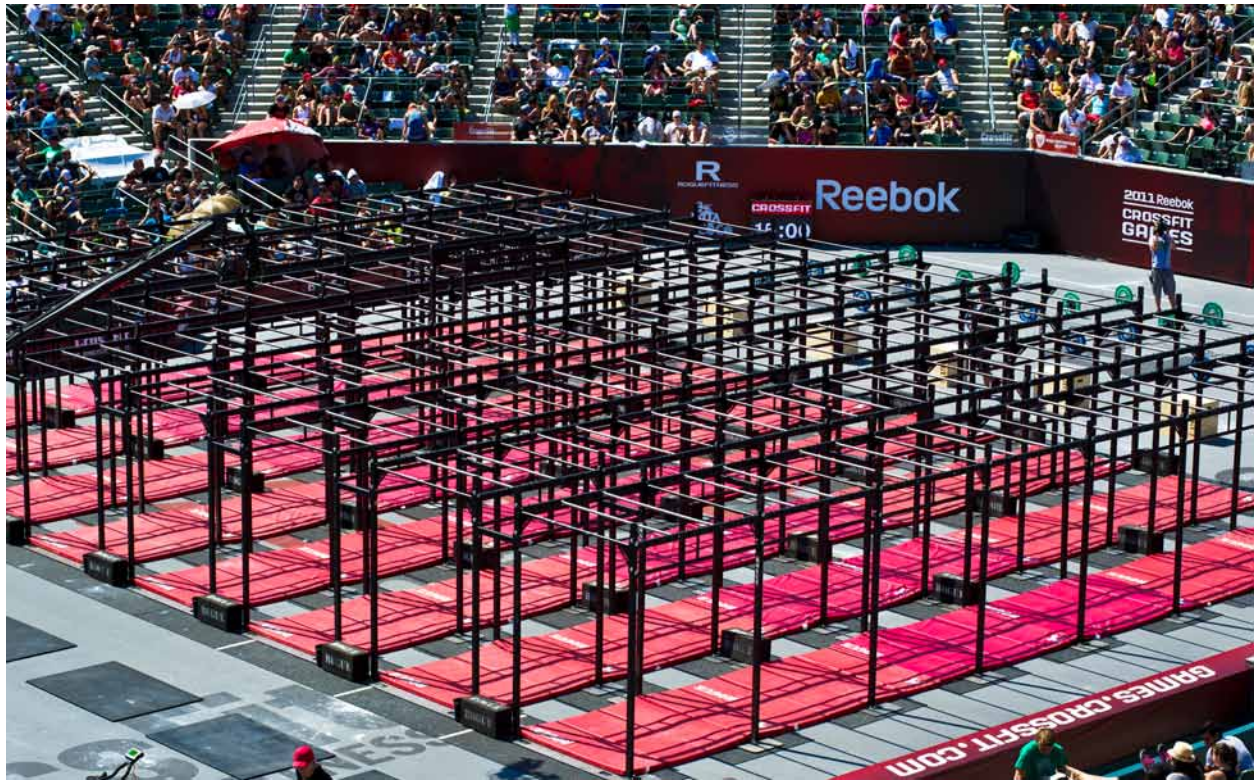
Last-Minute Testing

Even with all the testing and experimenting, the workouts at the Games are still tweaked and refined right up until the last minute.

When Bozman arrived in Carson, Calif., the Monday before the Games started, he was put to work right away.

"Rogue had a tent in the back lot," he said. When they wanted to test the workouts, they kicked everyone out. Bozman, along with a group of judges and volunteers—including Miranda Oldroyd and Pat Sherwood—ran through the workouts.

"We test the workout, the time frame and how they will fit within the schedule," said Bozman. "There's no set formula. Dave and Tony had done some preliminary stuff, but they were always making adjustments."



The Killer Cage was built overnight on July 29 and featured on Day 2 of the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games.

One of these changes was in the Killer Cage, the event that combined heavy front squats with 700-meter Wattbike rides and 100-foot monkey-bar traverses. The CrossFit team tested out monkey-bar traverses before the Games, but not on the scale allowed by the impressive structure built by Rogue Fitness. After the huge rack was constructed on Friday night, some of the team tested out the traverse and immediately knew they had to make some changes.

"We initially had more traversing," said Budding, "but we got worried about hand damage."

The team reduced the workout from 5 rounds to 3, which proved to be a good call, because even with 3 rounds of a 100-foot traverse, athletes were leaving blood and skin on the bars, which volunteers quickly wiped off between heats.

The workout was initially an AMRAP, but knowing it would be broadcast on ESPN3, the team changed it to a timed event. Not everything is geared toward the spectators, however.

"The cycle is a dead spot in the workout," Castro said, "We know that. But it's a good test of fitness. We're not willing to sacrifice everything for the visual."

That same workout included 7 reps of a 155-lb. front squat for the individual females, a weight that caused trouble for many of the competitors, most notably Michelle Kinney. I asked Budding if, looking back, he thought the weight was too heavy.

"A lot of women had no trouble with it," he said. "The variation in women (athletes) is greater than a variation in men."

In 2010, one of the events combined handstand push-ups and 3 reps of a 135-lb. clean for the women.

"That was too light," Budding said.

The other workouts that changed quite a bit were the final three events on Sunday, titled "The End 1," "The End 2" and "The End 3."

“We put Pat Sherwood through the reduced version (of The End), and I thought I broke him.”

—Adrian Bozman

“In the original workout, the final rep scheme was much more aggressive,” said Bozman. Knowing they had a schedule, and taking into account the state of the athletes, the team decided to reduce the number of reps.

“We put Pat Sherwood through the reduced version, and I thought I broke him,” said Bozman with a laugh.

Budding said you never really know how a workout is going to shake out in the stadium, with the crowds, after the athletes have been performing for days. Two things he thinks they got exactly right, however, were the sled pull and the push.

“We got both of those loads correct,” he said. “They were really hard.”

“I loved the Dog Sled workout,” said Bozman. “It was spectator-friendly, with the giant race it created, and it was great from a judging perspective.”

“You could be eating a hot dog, walk into the stadium and know who was winning (the Dog Sled),” said Castro.

Bozman said the biggest challenge for the judges was the first workout of the Games, the beach event. The speed and the sheer number of reps on the squats and push-ups made that event the most difficult for the team of judges.



Races like this one between Julie Foucher (background) and Annie Thorisdottir made the Dog-Sled workout one of the most exciting events of the Games.

In the midst of refining the workouts at the last minute, Budding and his team were also keeping the details under wraps from the judges, the scoring people, and the videographers and photographers. In the weeks leading up to the Games, Budding knew he would need a photographer with waterproof camera gear to capture the beach workout. To keep the photographer off track, Budding told him he would need the waterproof gear to photograph CrossFit Sports Series paddleboarding demonstrations. The photographer learned he would actually be covering the beach workout when it was announced to the public.

"When any of us would tell anybody about the events in advance, we would remind them they never know who is listening. It would ruin the Games if someone found out," Budding said.

To avoid that occurrence, the team's strategy was to minimize the number of people who know the complete picture.

"Almost nobody knew everything (in advance)," said Budding.

The workouts are kept secret partly for what Castro calls "the mental mind-fuck," but partly because in the past, "We didn't know what we were doing," said Castro.

The hopper, which randomly chose one workout in the first CrossFit Games, set the tone, and from there the tradition of secrecy continued.

Can The Secrecy Be Maintained?

I was describing the Games to a friend who had never heard of CrossFit, and I could see her lose interest when I talked about Olympic weightlifting and pull-ups.

"The other thing is that the workouts are kept a secret from everyone—including the athletes," I said.

**"We've invented a sport.
Nobody has expertise
in this sport."**

—Tony Budding

She leaned forward, her eyes widening in surprise, and said, "Really? Wow."

CrossFit is growing rapidly all across the globe. A recent [Fast Company](#) article reported that CrossFit-affiliate growth went from 500 worldwide in 2008 to 2,800 today.

The Games have experienced similar growth, and the question is this: can the element of surprise be maintained as the Games grow larger? Nobody knows, but the CrossFit team is going to try.

As Budding said, "We've invented a sport. Nobody has expertise in this sport."

"I'm already programming the 2012 Games," Castro said. "It started before the 2011 Games ended."



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.