
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

In Search of a Programming God

To find the perfect blend of programming, mentality and diet for an aspiring Games athlete, Emily Beers looks at the approach of four 2011 competitors.

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December 2011



All images: Staff/CrossFit Journal

It was the spring of 2009. I was a varsity rower at the University of Western Ontario. When it came to training, there were very few surprises.

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Every Sunday night, my coach emailed my team our training plan for the week. After just a quick glance, I'd be able to estimate exactly how many kilometers, exactly how many strokes I would row in the next six days. It was so predictable. So boring.

It's no wonder I was drawn to CrossFit in 2009, when a teammate took me to her boyfriend's box, CrossFit London.

I continued to row for the next few months, but I rapidly began to fall out of love with rowing and in love with CrossFit. There I was, still paddling away on the water, but I couldn't put my boat away fast enough; all I could think about was sprinting across the city, where I had no idea what kind of workout, what kind of movements, what kind of pain was in store for me. This unpredictability was one of the main reasons my love affair began.

At the time, I didn't know my max deadlift or my Cindy score. I didn't even know the CrossFit Games existed.

Two Years Later

Like thousands of other CrossFitters around the world, I have openly proclaimed my desire to qualify for the CrossFit Games as an individual in 2012. I've competed at the Home Depot Center twice with CrossFit Vancouver, but I haven't let go of the individual dream.

At the elite level, it seems CrossFit has pretty much become a professional sport.

At the elite level, it seems CrossFit has pretty much become a professional sport. It's not uncommon for top athletes to hire multiple coaches—strength coaches, Olympic-weightlifting coaches, swimming coaches, running coaches and gymnastics coaches, not to mention nutritionists and dieticians.

As for these CrossFit coaches, it seems every month there's a new alleged programming expert who takes the stand on the soapbox, loudly shouting to the CrossFit masses about the best way to train. CrossFitters listen to these experts for a while, until a new one comes along with even more expertise, creating a fickle but continuous cycle.



To reach the highest ranks of our sport, elite athletes must carefully consider their programming.

In the process of figuring out how to train for the Games, I have met elite CrossFitters who train three times a day five or six days a week (I used to be one of them), athletes who cut out even the slightest sip of alcohol for months at a time, athletes who meticulously weigh and measure their food, and athletes who put their careers on hold for a chance to compete at the Games.

I'm torn. I don't want to devote my entire life, dawn to dusk, to CrossFit. However, as an aspiring Games competitor, I wonder whether this devotion is a mandatory sacrifice. I often feel lazy that I'm resistant to this lifestyle in the first place.

In light of this, I decided to talk to some 2011 individual Games athletes to find out what exactly they're doing to prepare for 2012.

Ashleigh Moe Training

Ashleigh "Mighty" Moe is a two-time Games competitor who placed 33rd at this year's competition.

The cardio queen now is focusing on strength after the 21 155-lb. front squats in the Games' Killer Kage event almost crushed her, she said.

"It was a real eye-opener that I need to get stronger," she said.

She's enlisted the help of Kurtis Bowler from Rainier CrossFit. "He has helped me a lot and has me doing a lot of heavy lifts, trying to get all my maxes up," she said.

As for the rest of her training, Moe said she doesn't follow a specific program.

"If there's a group of people who comes in and does a workout, I'll usually drop what I was planning on doing and hit the workout with them," said Moe, who would much rather train with others than alone.

"I think I was extremely over-trained in 2010. I did long met-con after long met-con leading up to those Games. I was constantly sore and burnt out."

—Ashleigh Moe

She even travels around her home state of Washington to train with people on a regular basis. Once or twice a week, she drives to Marysville to work with Games competitor Noah Pester and often meets up with a group of local female CrossFitters in the Seattle area. When she does stay at her own affiliate, she either does the regular group classes or a WOD with her husband, Matt.

Moe's rest days aren't set in stone either.

"I play it by ear. Sometimes I go three days on, one off, but other times I'll just do two on, one off. I do find it hard to take a day off, though. Sometimes I end up doing a workout on my supposed day off," she said. "I think we should all be taking more time off than we are, but it's tough sometimes."

Still, Moe does less volume than she did in 2010.

"I think I was extremely over-trained in 2010," she said. "I did long met-con after long met-con leading up to those Games. I was constantly sore and burnt out."

For the 2011 Games, she took the less-is-more approach, and this year she's busier than ever as a teacher. She coaches a couple of classes at 5:30 a.m. before school, then heads to work, where she currently teaches fifth grade.

"I'm way busier with fifth graders than the young kids," she said. "I can't just put stickers on things anymore," she laughed.

Overall, Moe's training is a work in progress.

"There are so many different philosophies on programming," she said. "We don't necessarily know what the best method of training is."

For now, gaining strength is her absolute priority.

"I don't think I'll be able to make it back to the Games unless I get stronger," she said.

Mentality

Moe admits balance is something she sometimes overlooks.

"It's really easy to get consumed," she said. "I feel like I definitely think about it every day, more on some days when I start to think about certain numbers I want to hit."

Her husband agreed that CrossFit has had the tendency to stress out his wife, especially last year during the months between the Open competition and the Games.

"She was on that computer checking scores every two minutes," he said. "It was a stressful time."

"There are so many different philosophies on programming. We don't necessarily know what the best method of training is."

—Ashleigh Moe

One thing that has helped Moe mentally is the fact that she works as a teacher, so during the day her focus is on the children instead of how she's going to get stronger.

"I've been able to push it out of my mind during the school day now, which is better for myself and for the kids," she said. "But it's definitely always on my mind."

Diet

Recently, Moe and her husband made a conscious effort to stick to a strict Paleo diet.

"We're weighing and measuring right now. He's more enthusiastic about it than I am, so at first I was kind of getting dragged along. Now I'm getting more excited about it," she said.

The couple isn't eating grains or dairy and is restricting fruit to two days a week.

"I'm definitely a meat-atarian. I have no trouble eating a 20-ounce steak," said Moe, who has been trying to reduce the amount of meat and nuts she eats.

Switching her diet has already led to changes. Moe said she has more energy and lost 7 lb. in a month while maintaining strength. She's hoping the dialed-in diet will give her an edge heading into the 2012 season.



Blair Morrison takes rest seriously, following a three-weeks-on, one-week-off schedule.

Blair Morrison Training

Blair Morrison, who finished fifth at the 2011 Games, isn't your stereotypical CrossFit volume whore. The 29-year-old trains three weeks on, one week off.

**"Training less is a hard thing
to get your head around."**

—Blair Morrison

"The reason I do it is it gives my joints and connective tissues time off. Muscle can heal in 36 to 48 hours. Tendons take longer," he explained. "I don't get injured. I don't have chronic injuries. Taking that week off to recover helps put things back to where they should be."

Morrison said he might go rock climbing or swimming "so I still get my blood flowing" but doesn't do any max efforts.

And he programs for himself—no coaches.

"I do a morning session that is all skill based—no intensity whatsoever," Morrison said. "I target gymnastics, mostly. Then the afternoon session is a strength session, and in the evening I do metabolic conditioning."

He added: "I can go really hard in all those workouts because I know I have the next day as a rest day."

Morrison trains on Monday, Wednesday and Friday during his training weeks.

"I never get burnt out," he said.

Likewise, he said he felt "really good" at competitions last year.

"I felt fresh the whole time. It wasn't an issue of whether or not I could handle more than one day in a row. My body knew what it was going to be like," Morrison said. "Once you do something once, you know what to expect. Your body remembers."

Conversely, he said many people over-train simply because they like being in the gym.

"Just because you like being in the gym, I don't think that's the best way to peak your performance," Morrison said.

He continued: "The biggest issue I see with CrossFit is that most people think they need to be lying around in a puddle of sweat and vomit every single time they work out. They think they didn't get a workout if they did 5 sets of 5 squats. Training less is a hard thing to get your head around."

Mentality

To keep perspective and balance and avoid getting too consumed with CrossFit, Morrison said he tries to get out of the gym as much as possible.

"I do a lot of outdoor WODs. It helps me not get burnt out," Morrison said. "And it takes the pressure off trying to get top scores all the time."

His time outside helps him enjoy sweating for the sake of sweating, he said.

"You can't always be competing. And when I work out outside, it's just me. It's not comparable to any other workouts people are doing," Morrison said.

"It's simply for the experience of the workout, rather than competing to beat a time or performance as your main goal," he said. "It helps me remember exercise is about something other than the CrossFit Games."

Diet

Morrison follows a relatively Paleo diet, with exceptions here and there.

**"I'm not very strict Paleo.
I still eat cheese and one or
two sandwiches a week."**

—Blair Morrison

"I'm not very strict Paleo. I still eat cheese and one or two sandwiches a week," said Morrison, who also said he doesn't notice a huge difference when he eats gluten.

His other vice is potatoes.

"I know you're only supposed to eat a bit of starch, but I eat a lot of starch," he said. "I'm starving all the time if I don't eat them. I need them to feel full."

Before competitions, however, Morrison cleans up his diet, if nothing else than for the psychological advantage it gives him, he said.

He added: "And to make sure there's no acidity in my system."

Lucas Parker

Training

Lucas Parker, known as "Teen Wolf," won this year's Canada West Regional. He finished 26th at the Games.

Training is a solitary endeavor for the 22-year-old, a former rugby player from Victoria, B.C. Likewise, he does his own programming.

"I pretty much knew what I'd be doing from the week after the Games until January 2012," said Parker, a kinesiology student at the University of Victoria.



Lucas Parker does all his own programming and trains alone.

"I start macro and go micro, prioritizing my layers of training. So right now, my priority is Olympic weightlifting. I establish this layer first. Then I add in gymnastics programming around my lifting program. The third layer is metabolic conditioning."

In addition to Olympic lifting and gymnastics five days a week, Parker also tries to squeeze in rock climbing, cycling and swimming once a week.

Despite his planning, Parker said he's not bored.

"Competing is awesome, but the thing I really enjoy is experimenting with my training," he said. "I use myself as a lab rat, and I experiment and adapt."

Following the Games, Parker said he focused on deadlifts and push presses for six weeks.

"I put myself on the Russian squat cycle, which is based on the principles of hormonal fluctuation," he said. "But I did it with deadlifts and push presses instead of squats."

"Competing is awesome, but the thing I really enjoy is experimenting with my training. I use myself as a lab rat, and I experiment and adapt."

—Lucas Parker

The volume, Parker said, is something he needs.

"I feel that intensity comes from me, but volume comes from the program," he said. "And the main site isn't enough volume for me."

He added: "Training for me is like putting money in the bank. If I put money in the bank during a training session, then that's a success. As long as I'm making investments every day, that's what really matters."

Mentality

In July, Parker posted the following status update on his Facebook page:

"Friends. Just got settled in California. On Friday I'll be competing in the CrossFit Games, which claims to be the test for the fittest man and woman on the planet. The last fourteen months of my life have essentially revolved around this. My apologies to all the close friends I neglected to hang out with as much as I should. We'll have some beer in August."

"I just sort of assume that I'll succeed. I don't have fear of failure in my results, just fear of improper process."

—Lucas Parker

Nonetheless, he said he maintains a healthy life balance.

"My philosophy is that human beings exist in two realms: the intellectual and the physical realm. So balance means you need to balance these two realms," he said.

"Most people live their entire lives in the intellectual realm and they don't fully maximize their physical existence. I do spend a lot of time at CrossFit, which is my physical side, but the rest of my life—everything else I do every day—is the intellectual realm. So I think I am kind of balanced, more balanced than most people."

At the 2012 Games, he can crack the top 12, he said. By 2013, he hopes to be in the top five.

"I just sort of assume that I'll succeed. I don't have fear of failure in my results, just fear of improper process."

Diet

Parker's diet isn't like his meticulous programming. He indulges in McDonald's Quarter Pounders, his favorite fast-food joint (A&W) and ice cream almost every day.

"It comes down to effort-to-reward ratio," he said. "I could put 100 percent effort into my nutrition and score a 10 out of 10, or I could put in zero effort and still get a seven or eight out of 10."

Although Parker does make biweekly trips to fast food joints, he said he prefers relatively healthy food: eggs cooked in coconut oil for breakfast, for example.

"And then right before they're ready, I throw in a few table-spoons of butter," he said.

What Parker said he cares about is supporting his training volume.

"Training at a high intensity and frequently, the main concern is getting enough calories into my body," he said.

Angie Pye Training

Angie Pye placed 10th at this year's Games. Her programming: CrossFit's main site.

In fact, her entire box, CrossFit Taranis in Victoria, B.C., follows the main site for daily programming.

The 36-year-old was one of two Taranis women who competed at the 2011 Games as individuals. Alicia Connors was the other. Taranis placed third in the Affiliate Cup.

"I followed dot-com religiously last year. Three days on, one day off, and maybe the odd session where I worked on Olympic lifting," Pye said.



Angie Pye follows the main site for her programming, adding in extra gymnastics training in preparation for the 2012 Games.

"I can't handle more than that. I know a lot of athletes are doing crazy volume. Maybe it's my age, but sometimes I'm destroyed for two days after those three WOD days."

"We've got it good. This is what we do for fun."

—Angie Pye

Pye plans to continue following the main site this year but also wants to find a way to add in extra gymnastics training.

"My thing is I'm decent at everything, but not awesome at anything. I think to be super competitive, you have to have a few awesome cards in your back pocket," she said.

"And on top of the daily WODs, I still think you need to work on your weaknesses, which I'm trying to do this year."

Mentality

To keep relaxed, Pye said she keeps it in perspective.

"We've got it good. This is what we do for fun," she said. "If I feel myself getting stressed out, I think to myself, 'If the biggest stress in my day is how am I going to make myself a better athlete, then I have it pretty good.' This probably means I'm healthy, my kids are healthy."

But Pye admits she wasn't always able to think this way.

"In my 20s, when I was competing in rugby at the national level, it got to me a lot more—the stress," she said. "Now I realize this CrossFit thing is just a quick ride—it's just another chapter in my life, but it's not defining my whole life."

The other aspect of her life that helps Pye stay relaxed is her family.

"My kids definitely come first. If one of them gets sick, then obviously CrossFit gets thrown out the window," she said. "I simply can't be as selfish as other athletes when I'm a mom."

Although she can't devote her life to her training, Pye said she believes CrossFit is a healthy distraction for her.

"I don't think you have to stop having goals and dreams of your own just because you're a mom. I think it's healthy for me," she said.

Diet

Looking at Pye's lean, ultra-ripped physique, it's hard to believe she ever pops a piece of sugar or bread in her mouth. But she admitted even she has her cheats—like ice cream and chocolate.

"I don't think you have to stop having goals and dreams of your own just because you're a mom. I think it's healthy for me."

—Angie Pye

Most of the time, however, her diet is clean, she said, though she's never been the weighing-and-measuring type.

One challenge for Pye is feeding her children, whom she calls "carboholics."

"We definitely have milk and cheese in the house," she added, "but I do try to keep myself and my children away from processed food as much as I can."

A Quick Comparison

Moe, Morrison, Parker and Pye are four of the fittest men and women on the planet. That's about where their similarities end.

Moe in Washington regularly seeks out training buddies in the area to compete against. She can be found weighing and measuring her food to ensure she's fueling her body correctly.

In California, Morrison's mowing down biweekly sandwiches, pounding potatoes, climbing random hills and mountains, and taking weeks off at a time to make sure he's well rested. Unlike Pye, who regularly tests herself with traditional CrossFit milestone workouts that the main site programs, Morrison prefers to hit unique metabolic workouts he'll probably never do again—just for the sake of sweating.



Pye doesn't weigh and measure her food, but she does stay away from processed food as much as possible.

The Teen Wolf in British Columbia sometimes works out three times a day, alone, meticulously breaking down each movement like a mad scientist working in a laboratory.

Down the street from him, Pye is doing one-third of Parker's volume but spends more time dialing in her diet; you won't find her sharing a root beer and Papa Burger with him at the local A&W.

There Is No Programming God

When it comes to training volume, periodization, training-program specifics, rest, diet and mental approach to the sport, there is colossal variation from Games athlete to Games athlete.

The only real similarities between the way many Games athletes seem to train go back to the foundation that CrossFit was built on: they all train their weaknesses, and they all perform various functional movements at high intensity.

I started this story thinking I might discover the overarching best way to train to get to the Games, kind of hoping I might find the Ultimate Programming God.

I've come to believe that when it comes to finding a Programming God, I'm an atheist.

Part of me assumed CrossFitters must all train the same way because this is the case in most sports at the elite level. A top American gymnast, for example, trains a similar amount of hours each week, does a similar number of beam routines and similar conditioning exercises, as the top Russian gymnasts.



Unlike other elite athletes, CrossFit athletes vary wildly in their programming, volume and diet.

But CrossFit isn't like other sports. I've come to believe that when it comes to finding a Programming God, I'm an atheist.

I would argue that programming (and diet) is an art, not a science. It's almost like dating: so much of it is just in your mind. Your so-called perfect match might not be an objectively perfect human being, but as the saying goes, you believe he's perfect for you.

A Perfect Match

Talking to these elite athletes has only convinced me I can have it both ways. I can train hard and smart, all the while finding my own enjoyable path to becoming a better athlete.

I'm now convinced I don't need to hire multiple coaches or follow a specific training program that lays out my workouts for weeks in advance to get to the Games.

This means that when a fellow CrossFitter arrives at my box as I'm on a break between clients and asks, "Emily, want to hit Zoe with me in 10 minutes?" I don't have to have to say, "I can't do Zoe with you. I'm following a training plan and I don't think I should stray from it."

I love hitting an unplanned Zoe on a Tuesday afternoon. I love meeting up with people at the beach on the weekend to put ourselves through an intense ocean-swimming and drywall-pail-carrying WOD. And I love joining in on regular group classes at my box; they keep the fun alive for me.

I can train hard and smart, all the while finding my own enjoyable path to becoming a better athlete.

After talking to these Games athletes, I'm convinced I don't need to call up my nutritionist for diet advice every week, which is good because at this point the closest thing I have to a dietician are my fellow coaches at CrossFit Vancouver, who tell me, "Eunice (my nickname), you have to stop pounding the sugar."

I'm wholeheartedly convinced I don't have to treat CrossFit like a professional sport, that I don't have to weigh and measure my food or cut chocolate from my diet. And I'm convinced I can continue to go out on Friday nights and drink too much and still be competitive at regionals this year.

I'm not saying this is the only way. It's simply what I see as my perfect match.

I'm not a lazy person. I enjoy eating healthy food. I love the feeling of crushing my body as much as the next borderline-obsessed CrossFitter.

But I know what's good for my life. And what's good for me is to CrossFit because it adds to my life, as opposed to living a life devoted to CrossFit.



About the Author

Emily Beers has a master's degree in journalism from the University of Western Ontario. She worked as a sportswriter at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games, where she covered figure skating and short-track speed skating. Beers now hosts [WOD HOG](#), a not-always-PG publication featuring Canada West's CrossFit community.

As an athlete and CrossFitter, Beers started as a gymnast, competing at the national level. After growing too tall for gymnastics, she played NCAA Division 1 basketball for the University of Idaho, then returned home and played for the University of British Columbia. After three years of playing basketball, she started rowing, competing at the varsity level at the University of Western Ontario for two years. While trying to make the National Rowing Team in 2009, she discovered CrossFit and became utterly addicted. Soon, CrossFit was meant to be a way to cross-train for rowing but became her greatest passion. She moved back to Vancouver in September 2009 and found CrossFit Vancouver, where she now trains and works as an apprentice coach.

In her first season competing in CrossFit, she won the British Columbia Sectional competition in 2010. Regionals were less kind to her, but that's only made her more determined to get to the Games. She ruptured her Achilles tendon in December 2010 and served as the Canada West Regional media director while recovering from surgery. She competed in the 2011 CrossFit Games with CrossFit Vancouver, finishing 19th.