
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

CrossFitter Signs With Steelers

After missing a post-college shot at the NFL because of the 2011 lockout, Will Johnson became determined to make it to the big league. CrossFit, he says, made the difference. Andréa Maria Cecil reports.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

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Don Friend

In most ways, Will Johnson is a quintessential CrossFitter.

After just two weeks, he started to see results, got addicted and had to be instructed to take rest days.

But there's one difference, a big one: in late March, the 23-year-old was signed by the Pittsburgh Steelers.

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University of West Virginia

Johnson was initially skeptical of CrossFit, but he saw improvement within a few weeks.

Johnson credited the CrossFit training methodology for making his career dream a reality.

"All my numbers just drastically increased," said the 6-foot-2, 242-lb. athlete. "And all that has to do with CrossFit."

The numbers on key football tests:

- 30 reps of a 225-lb. bench press vs. 26 reps before CrossFit.
- A 4.49-second 40-yard dash vs. 4.69-second before CrossFit.
- A 36.5-inch vertical jump vs. 33.5 before CrossFit.
- A 4.01 short-shuttle run vs. 4.29 before CrossFit.

Those feats were tested March 16 during West Virginia University's annual Pro Day. Dozens of National Football League scouts—and sometimes coaches and

managers—put NFL hopefuls through a series of tests that day.

"What makes my case so special is they allowed me to come back and participate," Johnson said.

The Dayton, Ohio, native graduated from WVU in 2011—the year of the NFL lockout.

Johnson participated in that year's Pro Day and caught some eyes. But once the lockout was over, the college receiver and tight end was no longer at the top of anyone's list.

"He wasn't a draftable athlete, so he was a free agent," said Andy Hendel, owner and head coach at North Carolina's

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—Will Johnson

CrossFit Charlotte, where Johnson started CrossFitting. "I went through the NFL strike back in ... '87. I was a free-agent type of guy—that hurts you."

Hendel, father of perennial CrossFit Games competitor Spencer Hendel, was a special-teams-leading tackler/short-yardage specialist and linebacker with the Miami Dolphins.

Despite the situation last year, Johnson wasn't disheartened.

"I made up my mind that, 'You know what? I didn't get picked up, but I'm going to put everything in and give it a shot,'" he said.

After College

After graduating with a degree in multi-disciplinary studies, Johnson moved to his fiancée's native state of North Carolina and took odd jobs: interior landscaping, working in a shipping warehouse, helping install lights. In early December, he quit working to focus on training.

"That's what led me to CrossFit," Johnson said. "A buddy of mine kept suggesting it."

Johnson was skeptical at first, but after an hour-long conversation with Hendel, Johnson agreed to come into the affiliate.

"I did the WODs. He kind of tweaked them here and there, and I did a lot of extra stuff afterward," he said.

In two weeks, Johnson started seeing results. He was hooked, showing up to train Monday through Saturday.

"If (Hendel) didn't tell me to take a day off, I was there," Johnson said. "I was willing to do whatever it took. When you're seeing results like that, it's kind of hard to back away."

When Hendel began working with Johnson, he focused on achieving full range of motion and proper form.

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—Will Johnson

"I said, 'Listen: the reason you're not playing on an NFL team ... isn't because you're not strong enough,'" Hendel recounted. "'You don't have to squat 500 lb. to play on Sunday afternoons. You want capacity in other areas.'"

Afterward, Hendel put Johnson through a "gasser" or two—sprints over and back twice the length of a football field—and a 500-meter sled push with 110 lb. Johnson could handle more weight than "us mere mortals," he said.

"He's like Rich Froning, but 6 inches bigger, 6 inches taller and 50 lb. heavier," Hendel said. "I wish I could have had him on an affiliate team."

Johnson completed the first three workouts in the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games Open and finished 15th in his region in Event 12.2, a 7-minute workout featuring snatches at increasing weights.

For the rest of Johnson's training, Hendel also employed exercises from legendary powerlifter Louie Simmons, as well as Tabata workouts and sprints. Other than those "extras," Johnson stuck to Hendel's CrossFit programming.

"I'm a big believer that there's really nothing sport-specific about power sports," Hendel said. "What we do at

"He's like Rich Froning, but 6 inches bigger, 6 inches taller and 50 lb. heavier."

—Andy Hendel

CrossFit ... to me, you just get so much more out of it."

CrossFit provides "a suitcase full of skills," Hendel added. "You can get specific in practice."

"I Can't Give up CrossFit"

After his Pro Day performance impressed Steelers head coach Mike Tomlin and general manager Kevin Colbert, Johnson signed with the team shortly after. Johnson and his fiancée moved to the Pittsburgh area on April 14. Two days later, he started training with the team.

In addition to doing the Steelers' workouts, Johnson will continue to do CrossFit, he said.



Johnson is hooked—he'll continue doing CrossFit in addition to training with the Steelers.

"Yeah, I can't give up CrossFit," he said with laugh. "I definitely can't go back to the normal."

And so he'll be making regular visits to CrossFit Pittsburgh.

Johnson added: "I talked to (the Steelers) strength coach and he said that would be perfectly fine to go do my own thing as well."

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**—Will Johnson
on CrossFit**

CrossFit, Johnson said, has a high correlation with football because of the explosion required.

"It puts me in the best position to being game ready, and by that I mean game shape," he explained. "It dramatically helped improve my power and strength."

For his part, Hendel said he would like to see Johnson get quality rest—in addition to quality workouts—and clean up his diet.

"When he finds out that nutrition plays the role that it plays, he'll get better," he said.

Johnson said he's "excited to get started" with the Steelers, and he'll be fighting to make the team once training camp starts in summer.

"I hope that my story can motivate anyone," he said. "Hard work definitely pays off."



Courtesy of Andrea Maria Cecil

About the Author

*Andréa Maria Cecil is the North East Regional Media Director for the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games. She spent nearly 13 years as a professional journalist, most recently as managing editor of the **Central Penn Business Journal** in Harrisburg, Pa. The 33-year-old is a native of New Orleans who lives in York County, Pa. There, she's been doing CrossFit since 2008 at **CrossFit York**. Additionally, she dedicates three days a week to training in Olympic weightlifting at **McKenna's Gym**.*