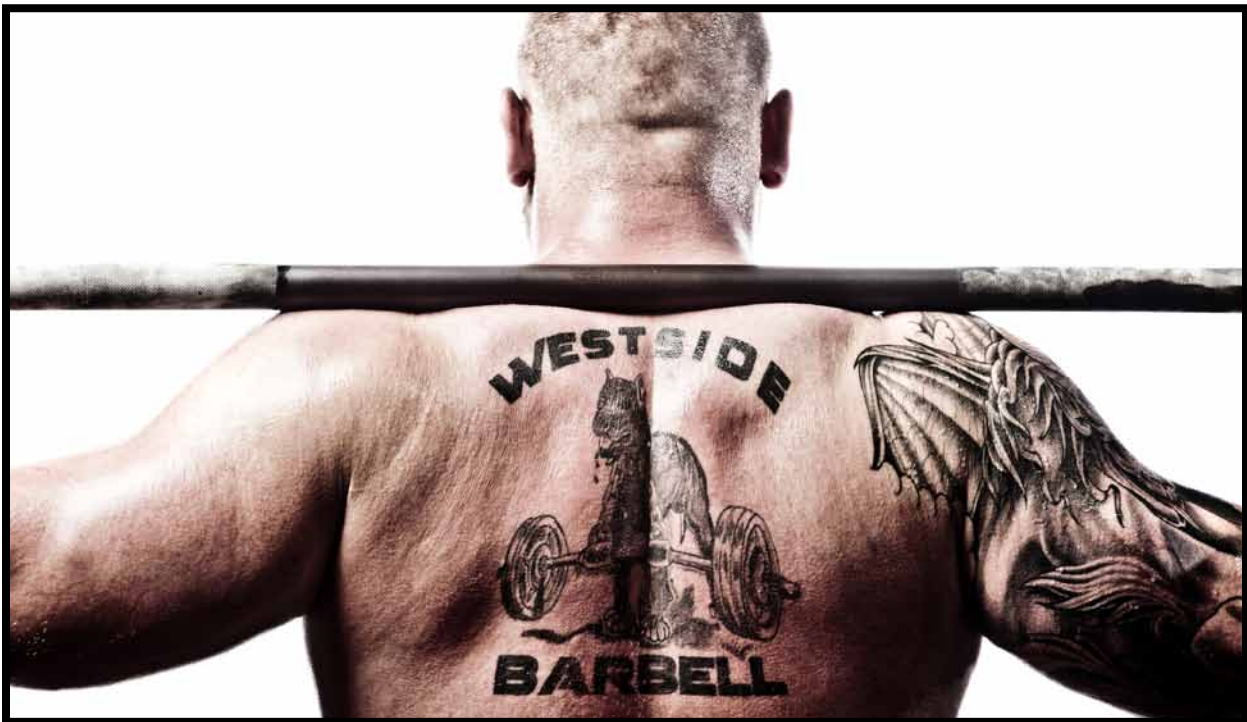

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

C2B for A.J.

A world record holder in powerlifting, A.J. Roberts started CrossFit to lose weight and get healthy. Now he has a bigger goal in mind: he wants to compete at the CrossFit Games. Hilary Achauer reports.

By Hilary Achauer

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All images: Rob Hammer Photography

There's a joke at Westside Barbell, the world-renowned powerlifting gym in Columbus, Ohio, about the curse of the Westside Barbell tattoo. The theory goes that once someone gets the Westside Barbell logo inked in their skin, their days at Louie Simmons' gym are numbered.

In March 2011, A.J. Roberts achieved a world record. Weighing 308 lb., he lifted a total of 2,825 lb. via a 1,140-lb. squat, an 870-lb. bench press and an 815-lb. deadlift. To commemorate his achievement, Roberts got the Westside logo tattooed across his back.

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A year later, after squatting 1,205 lb., the heaviest weight ever squatted by any Westside member, Roberts left the gym, retired from powerlifting and moved to San Diego.

He had achieved his goal of becoming the strongest. Now he wants to become the fittest.

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‘Look at these idiots!’
I didn’t understand CrossFit.”**

– A.J. Roberts

Getting Big, Lifting Big

When Roberts first heard about CrossFit, he was not impressed. Roberts said that the first CrossFit videos he saw “looked ridiculous.”

He added: “I said to myself, ‘Look at these idiots!’ I didn’t understand CrossFit.”

That was in 2008, and Roberts was deeply involved in pursuing powerlifting world records. He spent his time pushing his body to the limit in the pursuit of a single goal—to be the strongest man in the world.

Roberts grew up in Southampton, England, and he still maintains traces of a British accent. He came to the United States as an exchange student when he was 16 years old, weighing just 170 lb. He began lifting, and by the time he graduated from high school he weighed 210 lb. and boasted a 400-lb. squat, a 205-lb. bench press and a 540-lb. deadlift.

Roberts attended the University of Idaho on a basketball scholarship, and after he graduated in 2007 he began training at Westside Barbell under the eye of Simmons, the godfather of U.S. powerlifting. Soon, Roberts was squatting 1,000 lb. and bench-pressing 705 lb. But he didn’t just want to be strong. He wanted to be world-record strong. In order to get a world record, Roberts knew that in addition to getting stronger, he needed to gain some weight.

“I have a degree in sport science, and I’ve studied the human body,” Roberts said.



Strength will not be a problem, but years of powerlifting mean Roberts will have to work through some mobility issues.



Roberts sacrificed everything, including his health and lifespan, in the pursuit of strength.

He added: "I had to shorten levers. My body weight had to go up."

He started to eat way more food to help him gain weight, which Roberts said quickly became a chore.

"You have to force-feed yourself," he said. "You eat until you feel like you're going to throw up, and then an hour later you eat more."

Roberts kept training, and by 2012 he had achieved a 1,205-lb. squat, a 910-lb. bench press and an 815-lb. deadlift at a body weight of 308 lb. His best lifts added up to 2,930 lb.

Twenty-five-year-old Roberts was so heavy he couldn't sleep through the night, got winded walking up a flight of stairs and couldn't bend down to tie his shoes.

"I pushed my body weight to an unhealthy limit," Roberts said. "I sacrificed my health and my lifespan."

Still, the world record was an important goal, and it represented countless hours in the gym and a single-minded dedication. Roberts' Westside Barbell tattoo commemorates that commitment and his extraordinary accomplishment. But once the tattoo was inked on his skin and his world-record high wore off, Roberts took stock of his life and realized he wasn't happy.

"The world record didn't change anything," Roberts said.

Within a year after his record, Roberts ended his marriage, quit his job and moved to San Diego. He had changed everything else in his life. It was time to transform his body.

CrossFit Is a Sport

Roberts had changed his mind about CrossFit over the years after helping teach CrossFit's Powerlifting Seminars. Before Simmons became involved in CrossFit, the word among powerlifters was that CrossFit made the men skinny and weak and the women big and bulky.

But when Roberts started working with CrossFit athletes, he quickly saw that this wasn't true.

"At first I thought, 'Why can't these people pick one thing?' but then I realized CrossFit was a lot like mixed martial arts. They started to blow me away. I realized they were trying to raise all these different energy levels," he said.

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Roberts had followed Simmons' conjugate method of training, which varies the stimulus placed on the body by performing variations of the traditional powerlifts. For example, if you want to increase your bench press, you wouldn't just bench press over and over. You'd cycle through floor presses, narrow-grip bench presses, board presses and more to constantly vary the stimulus placed on the body. Constant variation fends off the overtraining and nervous-system fatigue that can come with relentlessly maxing out the same lifts.

Simmons' methods include discovering weak areas that are limiting lifting, then bringing them up to par. The program also includes general physical preparedness to ensure lifters have the work capacity to handle the huge volume that comes with training to squat 1,000 lb.

Roberts began to see the similarities between CrossFit and the conjugate method.

"I understood varied exercise, and I saw that there was a way to structure training in a chaotic manner. I saw that there was more to CrossFit than the WODs. I could easily apply what I had learned at Westside to CrossFit," Roberts said.

Then Roberts attended the 2012 Central East CrossFit Games Regionals in Ohio. He went as an observer, never thinking that he would actually want to do CrossFit. That all changed after he watched elite CrossFitters Rich Froning, Dan Bailey and Graham Holmberg compete.

"I realized this was a sport, not just a fitness movement. Real athletes were doing this. I started to think, 'Maybe I could do this,'" Roberts said.

In CrossFit, fitness is defined as competence across the 10 recognized general physical skills: strength, agility, flexibility, power, speed, stamina, accuracy, balance, endurance and coordination. Roberts had sacrificed everything in the pursuit of just one skill: strength. As he watched Froning, Bailey and Holmberg, Roberts wanted to be like them.

Roberts knows he won't get as far as he'd like to without a specific goal. His goal is simple. He wants to go to the CrossFit Games.

But with a body weight of over 300 lb., where would he begin?

The Training Begins

Roberts didn't start CrossFit when he first moved to San Diego. He lost some weight right away but found himself getting sucked back into the powerlifting world. He didn't feel ready to start CrossFit.



When Roberts first started CrossFit, his body couldn't handle a WOD longer than eight minutes.

"I thought I needed to get in better shape before even starting CrossFit," Roberts admitted.

CrossFit's Director of Training, Dave Castro, and his wife invited Roberts to a San Diego Padres game, and Roberts started telling them about how he wanted to lose more weight and then maybe he would start CrossFit.

"Castro's wife basically said that's the dumbest thing she'd ever heard," Roberts said. "She told me CrossFit was the best way lose weight. I started the next day."

First, Roberts worked out with Dave Lipson at CrossFit Invictus and then visited CrossFit Pacific Beach, where he worked out with owners Bryan Boorstein and Anders Varner.

"After we worked out, we sat in the gym and talked about his training philosophy," Varner said about Roberts. "He's been at the top of his sport, and he knows the level of commitment that it requires. He told us he was here to train, and he didn't want to be babied."



Already strong, Roberts is working on the flexibility and speed he needs for the more explosive Olympic lifts.

Boorstein added: "He understands the concept of hard work. He knows it's a long process."

Roberts doesn't do things halfway.

"I instantly knew I had to compete," Roberts said of his commitment to CrossFit training.

While his ultimate aim is to get into shape and improve his health, Roberts knows he won't get as far as he'd like to without a specific goal. His goal is simple. He wants to go to the CrossFit Games.

It's not every day a trainer gets to work with one of the strongest men in the world. After watching Roberts easily muscle snatch 195 lb. and muscle clean 275 lb., Boorstein got excited to program some heavy workouts for Roberts.

"We started off really heavy," Boorstein said, "I should have realized this sooner, but about two weeks in we quickly learned his level of strength exceeded his joint

mobilization. He could move the weight, but his joints couldn't take it."

Roberts began experiencing joint pain in his wrists, so Boorstein and Varner took a step back and reevaluated their programming. Most CrossFit athletes improve their joint mobility along with their strength as they practice explosive Olympic lifts along with powerlifts. Roberts had spent years focusing exclusively on strength, while all the other aspects of fitness had fallen behind.

"For most people, we see that conditioning is not a problem. They really just need to build up strength. It was opposite with A.J.," Varner said.

"I took my body beyond most powerlifters," Roberts said. "I didn't need flexibility and mobility. In powerlifting, you move with the bar. It's an down-and-up motion."

Not so with Olympic lifting.

"There are three parts to the Olympic lifts," Roberts said. "You move your body with the bar."

He added: "The technicality of the lifts is so much more important. You can't manipulate the bar. You can't muscle stuff up," he said.

Rapid Improvement

Roberts now has a new routine. Every day except for Thursday, his rest day, he heads to the gym around 2 p.m. After working on his mobility, he typically starts off with high reps of relatively light weight, like 3 sets of 5 touch-and-go reps of a 155 lb. snatch. That's usually followed by some every-minute-on-the-minute work, then a few met-cons. He starts off with a met-con about 12 minutes long, then rests for three to six minutes and finishes with a shorter, five-minute workout.

Varnier and Boorstein have been working with Roberts for just a few months, and they've already seen drastic improvement.

"When he started, he would wheeze intensely while doing burpees," Boorstein said. "I couldn't program anything over eight minutes."

Roberts had been going to CrossFit Pacific Beach for about three weeks when Boorstein had him do 50 burpees with a one-foot jump at the top for time. It took Roberts six and a half minutes to do all 50 burpees.

"His body is starting to run like a machine."

**– Anders Varnier
on A.J. Roberts**

Two weeks later, Roberts did Grace and took 1:19 off his time, finishing with a personal best of 2:48. Then he rested for five minutes before doing 50 burpees. He improved his time by more than a minute in just two weeks, finishing in less than five and a half minutes.

"His body is starting to run like a machine," Varnier said.

Roberts still has a long road ahead.



After training to become a master of three lifts, Roberts is now working on the many movements in CrossFit.

"After multiple years of walking around at over 300 lb., he instantly has arthritis," Varnier said. "He can't maintain proper positioning in the overhead squat with anything heavier than a PVC pipe. His lats are too tight, and his thoracic spine is destroyed from too many 800 lb. deadlifts."

But Roberts is as committed to improving his mobility as he is to losing weight. Varnier said that the first time Roberts mashed a lacrosse ball in his back he experienced unbelievable pain.

"He doesn't complain," Varnier said. "He's just so dedicated."

A New Passion

Despite the pain, Roberts is basking in the thrill of a new passion. While he used to spend hours reading powerlifting articles, now he devours everything he can about CrossFit, scouring articles and videos on the *CrossFit Journal*.

"All I did was watch powerlifting videos," Roberts said, "And now everything I look at is CrossFit."

"It's humbling and frustrating," Roberts said of starting a new sport after achieving such success in powerlifting. "I see things that don't look that hard, like a muscle-up, and

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it's just something I can't do. I have to have patience."

The other side of the coin is that Roberts is experiencing rapid gains.

"There's a lot of euphoria," he said about setting new PRs. "I feel like I'm achieving something."

Roberts has also seen changes outside the gym.

"I have way more energy," he said. He has lost 53 lb. and is more than halfway to his goal weight of 220 lb. "I don't need to nap every day. I can walk up stairs, and I can easily get in and out of my car. I don't snore, and I recover much quicker."

It's not just fat that Roberts has to lose. In order to be a competitive CrossFit athlete, he needs to be smaller.

"He has 200 lb. of muscle on him," Varner said. "He's got crazy abs under there. He has to lose muscle. In CrossFit, you don't need to squat 800 lb. We need to teach him to move like an athlete, and he needs to be half as strong.

"It's been great to coach someone who is 100 percent the best at what they do. Who else has world records in a sport? We know he'll do whatever it takes. He's like a 250 lb. ball of clay," Varner said.

A Long-Term Goal

"I let them control everything," Roberts said of his new trainers. "CrossFit has continually pushed me and motivated me. I haven't missed a workout since I started." Roberts said his new goal has given him renewed focus and energy.

"I haven't had that in eight years," he said.

"He is 100 percent in," Varner said of Roberts. "He understands the physics and what he has to do. Our job is to get him there."

"It's a long process," Boorstein said. "He knows he can't do this in the short term."

Roberts would like to make it to Regionals in 2013 but knows the met-con workouts in the CrossFit Games Open might not work in his favor. However, Boorstein and Varner know Roberts will do everything he can in the pursuit of his goal.

"We never doubt him. We never think, 'Oh, he's hammering a pizza right now,'" Varner said. "It's the best coach and athlete relationship. We have unconditioned trust."

*In Part 2, the **CrossFit Journal** will catch up with Roberts after he's been through several months of CrossFit training.*



Gary Allard

About the Author

*Hilary Achauer is a freelance writer and editor specializing in health and wellness content. In addition to writing websites, brochures, blogs and newsletters, Hilary is an editor and writer for the **CrossFit Journal** and contributes to the CrossFit Games site. She lives in San Diego and coaches and trains at CrossFit Pacific Beach. To contact her, visit HilaryAchauer.com*