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## Rookie Rally

Does experience count for anything at the CrossFit Games? Hilary Achauer explores how rookies Jenny LaBaw and Brick CrossFit came out of nowhere and stormed their way into the top 10.

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By Hilary Achauer

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All images: Staff/CrossFit Journal

This year's CrossFit Games included some superhuman performances and unexpected workouts—from ocean swimming to a softball throw for distance—but the first-place finishers were not surprising. In many eyes, Rich Froning Jr., Annie Thorisdottir and CrossFit New England were the favorites to win from the beginning.

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*Jenny LaBaw used her athletic ability to quickly learn the CrossFit movements and finish sixth overall at the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games.*

That doesn't mean the weekend wasn't without its surprises.

The sixth-place female finisher, Jenny LaBaw, started training for CrossFit in January 2011, and she had a lot to learn in a short time. She learned Olympic lifting during the Reebok CrossFit Games Open, and she did 70 percent of her Games training by herself, with no coach or training partner.

Nine-month-old Brick CrossFit finished fifth overall with a team they put together during the Open. Only two of the teammates had ever competed in CrossFit before, and they were one of the smallest teams—in weight and stature—in the competition.

### **Talent, Strategy, and Heart**

Jenny LaBaw has been an athlete all her life. She played soccer in college, and after graduating she ran endurance races ranging from 5Ks to marathons. She took a CrossFit

Level 1 Seminar in January 2010. A trainer at NorCal Strength & Conditioning, LaBaw was coaxed into a strength challenge in October 2010, and she only started focusing on CrossFit in January 2011. She entered the Open on a whim, placing third in her region. She then surprised herself and the community at the Northern California Regional by placing second, in front of third-place finisher and CrossFit vet Annie Sakamoto.

The NorCal Regional did highlight one weakness.

"The Amanda workout was a disaster. I was only able get four muscle-ups in the entire workout and didn't finish," LaBaw said. "It was as much a mental problem as a physical one. I was freaked out."

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## LaBaw's goal going into the Games was to make the top 10: "Why do it if you aren't going to shoot for the top?"

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Two weeks after regionals, LaBaw made an appointment with Carl Paoli, the well-known elite gymnast based out of San Francisco CrossFit. LaBaw saw Paoli twice and used his advice to improve her muscle-ups in the weeks leading up to the Games.

LaBaw's mission going into the Games was to make the top 10, which she says was "a super-lofty goal." But, "why do it if you aren't going to shoot for the top?" she asked.



*After the Killer Cage, LaBaw was in third overall and poised to medal.*

In the first event, which started with an ocean swim and soft-sand run, LaBaw, a former competitive runner, was right next to Annie Thorisdottir at the end of the first run. She finished that workout in 10<sup>th</sup> place—in front of eventual medalists Kristan Clever and Rebecca Voigt of Valley CrossFit. By the end of Day 1, LaBaw had placed in the top 10 in each of the three workouts.

It was Event 4, the first workout on Saturday, that would truly test LaBaw. The Triplet Sprint included the dreaded muscle-ups that had caused her so much trouble at regionals.

"I felt confident (going into the workout)," she said. "It was my boyfriend who was making me nervous. He kept saying, 'Don't be nervous,' and finally I said, 'Marcus, you are freaking me out!'"

LaBaw started off strong and didn't miss one muscle-up, breaking the 5-muscle-up sets into blocks of 2 and 3 and finishing in 11:04, 19<sup>th</sup> overall.

LaBaw continued her strong showing in the Skills 2 workout, where she managed a 50-lb. chest-to-bar pull-up—the same weight as Clever and Voigt. Her one-rep-max snatch was 125 lb. (keep in mind she has only been Olympic lifting since March), and she carried the weighted jug further than Clever and Voigt. LaBaw's seventh-place finish in the final workout on Saturday, the Killer Cage, put her in third place overall.

As her boyfriend, Marcus Brown, put it, "Her mental state changed. All of a sudden she had a shot at the podium. That drives an athlete."

After the first workout on Sunday, called "Dog-Sled," LaBaw was tied for fifth place. "I knew then that I had a chance at the top three," she said.

Looking back, LaBaw thinks she pushed too hard on The End 1 and The End 2 and had nothing left for the last workout.

"The hardest for me was the wall-ball," she said. "I had a lot of missed reps because I was used to hitting a wall, and here we had to hit the middle of the target."

Accuracy problems aside, LaBaw performed very well.

"I got second in my heat in Event 2, and I have no regrets," she continued. "But when I found out I ended up in sixth place, I started crying."

Just making it to the Games, much less finishing in sixth place, is an astonishing accomplishment for an athlete so new to the sport. Most of the individual athletes who made it to the last day spent the last year living CrossFit, and many athletes had competed in previous CrossFit Games. Many had multiple coaches helping them refine their skills, and many of them worked out with fellow Games-bound athletes.

After taking a break to go mountain biking and hiking, LaBaw says she's going to find a coach and start training for next year.

As Brown says, "She's ready to start going. Look out."

### **L.A. Story: Every Rep Counts**

Early Saturday evening, just after the last heat of the final team workout of the day, the Killer Kage, there was a commotion by the scoreboards near Lot 17. The Brick CrossFit crew was gathered around the scoreboard tower, waiting to see where they stood as the updates came in.

In a twist from previous years, the teams' cumulative scores from the first two days would be wiped clean on Sunday, meaning that whichever team came in first in the last event would win the Affiliate Cup.

As the scores from the final Day 2 team event came in, the stakes were high. Only the top six would go on to compete in the final workout on Sunday, and each team would have a shot at the cup.

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**When the scoreboard flipped over to show the top six teams, the Brick crew erupted in screams and shouts of joy.**

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*Solid work in the first two days of competition earned the Bricks a spot in the final team event, a winner-take-all one-workout showdown.*

Brick had competed in the second-to-last heat in the Killer Kage, a workout involving shoulders-to-overheads, box jumps, a monkey-bar traverse, double-unders and a ride on a Wattbike. The Bricks knew they had a shot at the final going into the event, but it was not a lock. They had placed fifth in the Sandbags and the Triplet Sprint events but 22<sup>nd</sup> in the Rope and 12<sup>th</sup> in the Clean events.

Whatever happened, it was going to be close.

When the scoreboard flipped over to show the top six teams, the Brick crew erupted in screams and shouts of joy. Brick had made the top six over Diablo CrossFit by one point, which they later found out came down to a mere 4 reps. One team member was so overwhelmed she put her face in her hands and started sobbing.

Brick CrossFit will be the first to tell you they are very L.A. Jarett Perelmutter, the team's captain and owner of the affiliate, said their biggest obstacle was "planning around Sylvia's schedule, since she's the only one with a job. Everyone else on our team is an aspiring actor who pays the bills working as a personal trainer."

"Sylvia" is Sylvia Galindo, who was joined at the Games by Perelmutter, David Page, Blake Hood, Israel Wright, Maddy Curley, Andrea Ager and Holly Holton.

Brick CrossFit earned second place in the Southern California Regional, but they knew the Games would be a whole new level of competition. Only two of their team members had ever competed in CrossFit before, and the gym had only been open for nine months. Added to that, the Brick team was smaller than most of their competitors. Two of the women weigh less than 120 lb., and Perelmutter only weighs 150 lb.

"We knew what we were up against," Perelmutter said. "We just didn't want to be last."

Brick did have a few tricks up its sleeve. Perelmutter has been involved in martial arts for 25 years, and his kickboxing experience includes over 140 undefeated fights. He currently holds six U.S. and international titles.

The Brick team used their home-court advantage to the fullest. Once they heard about the first workout—which involved moving 15 sandbags 200 yards with a log obstacle and a 4-foot wall in the way—they went back to the gym to strategize. They guessed how much the sandbags would each weigh, practiced with different loads and figured out the maximum each one of them could carry.

### Diablo's Story

For every triumph there is a defeat. At the same time that Brick CrossFit was celebrating the sixth-place finish that earned the crew a spot in the final day's showdown, the Diablo CrossFit team was in tears.

Diablo CrossFit, located in Northern California, placed third in the Northern California Regional competition, and they came into the Games with a solid strategy that took advantage of their well-rounded team. Led by their coach, Jeremy Jones, Diablo got second place in the Sandbags and Triplet Sprint events at the Games.

Going into the final workout Saturday, the Diablo team used a strategy that had earned them a first-place finish in the last regional event. Rather than loading all their fastest athletes at the beginning of the event, they decided to put the two women in the middle, giving their "engine"—the fastest male athlete—time to rest.

Distracted by a full day of events and the excitement and noise of the Games, Jones and his team didn't realize that they only needed to place 36<sup>th</sup> or better in the final event to make it to the final. They went in it to win.

Diablo also didn't take time to monitor the team's nutrition throughout the day. Shannon Murphy, an experienced athlete who qualified for the Southwest Regional in 2010, got so caught up in the watching her team in the morning that she forgot about her nutrition, eating only a small amount of protein in the a.m.

Murphy was second in line in the Killer Kage event, which started off with 20 shoulders-to-overheads—135 lb. for the men and 95 lb. for the women. That's normally an easy weight for Murphy, but when she stepped up to the barbell she couldn't get the weight overhead. Lacking the proper nutrition, her body faltered, and she struggled, failing over and over.

*Diablo continued...*

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***Diablo CrossFit missed the final by only one point despite finishing no lower than 12th in four of five preliminary events.***

*Diablo continued...*

By the time Murphy got through the 20 reps, the team had fallen behind. The rest of the team tried their best to catch up, but Diablo finished in 37<sup>th</sup> place, missing the top six by 1 point.

The team was devastated. "That first hour, everyone quit CrossFit," said Craig Howard, one of the owners of Diablo CrossFit. "There was anger and resentment."

"As a team, we failed," said Howard. "We should have considered where we were ranked going into this event, and we should have made sure everyone on the team had the proper nutrition."

The Diablo tent was next to Front Range CrossFit's area, and Howard said his team had initially scoffed at Front Range's elaborate set-up.

"They had multiple pop-up tents and four ice baths of their own," said Howard. "The athletes didn't have to share an ice bath, and they had room to rest in between events."

Looking back, Howard says Diablo learned some important lessons about how to approach the Games.

"Now that it is so competitive, we need to approach the Games like a Tour de France team," said Howard. "We need to have a nutrition coach who makes sure the athletes have all the food they need, both leading up to the Games and during the weekend of competition. We also need a logistics coach in charge of scheduling and scoring."

By the time the Diablo CrossFit team got back in the van to drive home, everyone had recommitted to CrossFit. They were in good spirits and ready to get back to the gym and start training. They plan to put together a team as soon as possible and start training for the 2012 Games. And they'll most likely invest in some tents and ice baths.

—Hilary Achauer

The teams didn't know in advance how the logs would be stacked, but Curley had an idea.

"What if they were in a pyramid?" she guessed. So the team set up boxes in a pyramid shape and practiced getting over them with different weights. Curley's guess turned out to be correct, and this preparation and strategizing helped Brick take fifth in the first workout.

Perelmutter also coached his team members to stay in the moment. He told them they couldn't let one negative performance ruin their focus. They had to shake it off and move forward. He also wanted them to appreciate the experience.

"I told them to take in everything that was going on, all the people supporting them. Don't take it for granted," he said.

The Brick crew certainly had a lot of supporters. Every day over 200 members showed up at the Home Depot Center to cheer on the local team.

Consistent performances and three top-six finishes earned Brick CrossFit a spot in Sunday's showdown. But only barely. Diablo CrossFit finished second in two workouts and looked poised to secure a spot in the final. When the devils from Pleasant Hill, Calif., took 37<sup>th</sup> on the Killer Kage, Brick CrossFit's sixth-place finish gave the crew a one-point lead and chance at the Affiliate Cup.

When the team learned about the workout, a brutal mash-up of Elizabeth, Fran, Isabel, Grace, Diane and Karen, they thought they had a 50-50 shot at getting to the podium.

"CrossFit New England has so many strong individuals," said Perelmutter. "It's really about who could do it the fastest."

Curley, a former competitive gymnast who appeared in the Disney movie *Stick It*, started off with Elizabeth: 21, 15 and 9 reps of a 95-lb. clean and ring dips. She finished second, right after CrossFit New England. That put Galindo against Mel Ockerby, an athlete who narrowly missed qualifying as an individual at the Games. Ockerby's Fran was unbelievably fast, and CFNE pulled ahead, where they would stay for the rest of the event

Behind the East Coast box, the rest of the Brick team moved steadily through the workouts, finishing about two-and-a-half minutes after defending champion CrossFit Fort Vancouver to secure fifth place. That's a huge accomplishment for a gym that opened less than a year ago.

"We have no regrets," said Perelmutter. "We just opened the gym in November, and we are fifth in the world."

He paused: "I'm living the dream, man."



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](http://HilaryAchauer.com).