



Redeeming a Bad Run

Jason Khalipa finished 72nd in the first workout at the CrossFit Games. Over the next seven WODs, he clawed his way back into contention and earned the respect of the CrossFit community.

Mike Warkentin



Last year Jason Khalipa was the CrossFit Games champion.

One workout into the 2009 Games, he was in 72nd place—third to last.

At one point, he was in danger of not finishing the first WOD: a brutal 7.1 kilometer trail run up and down the viciously steep hills of Aromas, California.

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"Jason was sort of stumbling, and it took me a second to realize that he was disoriented," Tony Budding of CrossFit HQ recalled. "He basically ran right into me, and I had to push him, because if he had gone straight he would have gone off the course. I just had to push him to my left in the direction of the exit to the road. He took my push and he kept going, and then I heard people yelling for a medic about maybe 20 or 30 seconds later. I turned around and there was a guy down, and I thought, 'That can't be Jason.'"

It was. Khalipa was collapsed on the ground just outside the Stadium.

"He must have been down for I would say a couple of minutes," Budding said, "and then he got up and finished. It was extraordinary. People were talking about him cramping up. It was more than cramping up. I don't know if he actually went unconscious, but he was definitely disoriented."

After the Games concluded, Khalipa explained what had happened.

"There were cramps," Khalipa said. "My calves cramped up really bad and I was dry-heaving in my mouth. It was just a bad situation all around."

When the medical team got to him, he had a decision to make.

"They were asking me, 'What's going on?' I was like, 'I think I'm going to die. I feel like my calves are really bad.' They just asked me, 'Hey, do you want to keep going?' I thought about it and I was like, 'Fuck, yeah—I'm going to keep going.' I decided to chill out for a second and have some water and get my mind right, and then I just walked for a while. It was really my calves. They were insanely cramped up. I couldn't run. I just had to walk."

In 2008, Khalipa was totally unknown. In *Every Second Counts*, Sevan Matossian's story of the event, all cameras were focused on Josh Everett when Khalipa won the last WOD and the overall title. Games Director Dave Castro admitted that in the pre-workout briefing to the top 10 competitors, he thought Khalipa was in the wrong room. But the brawny athlete from CrossFit Santa Clara flew under the radar and claimed the title.

In 2009, all eyes were on the defending champion.

"I had lots of pressure going in," Khalipa said. "In the week before the games, I had hives and shit. Everything



just kind of came up on me and I had all this pressure for the Games, and then it all went away after I got 72nd on the run.”

He continued: “You can’t fear injury when you’re doing this kind of stuff, because then you second-guess everything you do. And when you second-guess stuff, that’s when you actually get injured. I second-guessed the run. I second-guessed everything I was doing. I had all this pressure, and look what happened: I choked.”

It wasn’t just the pressure of the Games themselves. Khalipa has actually been dealing with intense scrutiny ever since he was named World’s Fittest Man one year ago.

“I had a lot of build-up over the year from all this pressure: ‘Hey, Jason Khalipa, World’s Fittest Man.’ Fuck, that’s a lot of load on your shoulders...,” he said. “I’m just this regular guy just trying to run a gym and have some fun. So I had all this pressure and went out on the run and it all got to me. Mentally and physically, I just broke down 100 percent due to that combination of things. And it was a hard run. I’m not trying to make excuses. Ultimately that thing kicked my ass and I was playing catch-up the whole time.”

With the pressure off and the focus on subsequent overall leaders such as Chris Spealler, J.C. Nessa, Moe Kelsey and Tommy Hackenbruck, Khalipa did what he did last year: he quietly crushed workouts and clawed his way back into contention.

“When I went home (after Day 1), I was just thinking in my head, ‘Look: I started off in first place and went all the way down to the end.’ All I could do is go up from there, right? So I just took it with that approach. I just took it easy and I just had fun with it. All the expectations were off after that first run, so it was awesome because I could just go out there and have a good time.”

Khalipa’s results in the last seven workouts are stunning:

- WOD 2: 1st
- WOD 3: 13th
- WOD 4: 13th
- WOD 5: 1st
- WOD 6: 2nd
- WOD 7: 2nd
- WOD 8: 2nd



In the final standings, Khalipa was fifth. But if he had managed to knock just under nine minutes off his WOD 1 time, he would have finished 43rd and won the overall title. Khalipa says he earned something special at the 2009 Games even if he was unsuccessful in defending his title.

"I think after this weekend's performances I legitimized in my head that I deserve to be in the top people in CrossFit," he said. "To be there based on my performance last year, I feel like everybody had these second guesses: 'Who is this guy? He came out of nowhere and he won.'

"I just couldn't get it out of my head that when I showed up at these places people are always thinking, 'You know he's not really that good. He's just some guy that got lucky.' I think after this weekend and all the workouts I went through, I proved to myself and I proved to others that I've trained really, really hard for where I'm at."

When the Games closed on the evening of July 12, Castro recounted Khalipa's gritty performance to the spectators gathered in the stands. The Games director joked that when he saw Khalipa on the ground his first response was to make sure a camera crew got everything on video. Castro then explained how Khalipa's tenacity and toughness are a testament to the will power of CrossFit athletes around the world.

Khalipa received the Spirit of the Games Award for his tenacity—and earning it might mean just as much to him as winning the 2008 Games.



About The Author

Mike Warkentin is the staff writer for the CrossFit Journal. His desk is made of bumper plates.

