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Ones to Watch

Dark horses make the Reebok CrossFit Games Open a great race. Hilary Achauer talks to two of many who are hoping to get to the regional level.

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Skeleton racing is a sport that involves hurtling headfirst down an icy track at speeds of more than 70 miles per hour with no steering or braking mechanism. It's something nobody in his or her right mind would do.

When Ryan Fischer heard about an open call for a spot on the Olympic skeleton team in 2007, he signed up to try out right away.

Fischer spent his high-school years playing lacrosse and football, running track and cross-country, and competing as a world-ranked BMX racer. After high school, he decided he wanted to fly helicopters, and he was finishing up helicopter-pilot school in Hawaii when he heard about the tryouts for the skeleton team.

After easily passing the recruiter's test, Fischer moved to Utah to start practicing the sport. He made it to the Olympic trials for both skeleton and bobsleigh in 2010. He also found time to fit in competing in the national championships for Olympic weightlifting, a sport he did in the summer.

Fischer kept getting hurt with skeleton and bobsleigh racing, tearing his hamstring and later his ACL, so in 2010 he was looking for something new when he wandered into Ute CrossFit, Tommy and Bobby Jo Hackenbruck's gym in Salt Lake City, Utah. Given Fischer's Olympic-weightlifting background, it wasn't long before he was coaching and then competing.

Fischer had big hopes for regionals in 2011 and even had thoughts of competing at the Games. He placed 38th in the Southwest region in the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games Open and went on to compete at regionals. However, as many new CrossFit athletes discover, doing a workout on the competition floor is a very different experience from working out at a gym.

Fischer was intimidated by the well-known, experienced CrossFit athletes competing next to him.

"The big stage didn't work in my favor," Fischer said. "I was really nervous, and my game plan went out the window."

Fischer placed 31st at the Southwest Regional and went back to the gym to build up his strength and experience.

A Natural

Like many successful CrossFit athletes, 31-year-old Tiffany Hendrickson has a background in gymnastics. She earned a full-ride gymnastics scholarship to Boise State. She was the Big West champion on the floor in 1999 and 2000 and holds records at Boise State for the balance beam and floor exercise. After college, Hendrickson moved to England for four years with her husband, where she focused on raising her three children, who are now 8, 6 and 3 years old.

Hendrickson remained active with rock climbing and cycling, but nothing fueled her competitive fire until she saw a CrossFit gym near her home in Utah in February 2010. Hendrickson didn't know anybody who did CrossFit, but she was immediately hooked.

"I was never satisfied (with a sport) until I found CrossFit. I feel like it tapped into my strength and my muscle memory from gymnastics," Hendrickson said.

Hendrickson got a certificate and started teaching classes, balancing CrossFit with her responsibilities as a full-time mom of three. She has always been drawn to competition, so when the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games Open came around, she was excited to throw her hat in the ring.



Fischer has learned how to stick to his game plan in the heat of competition, something he had trouble doing last year.

She made such a splash—finishing seventh in her region—that the CrossFit Games site filmed a profile on her, calling her an athlete to watch. Concerned that she wasn't at the level of some of the other individual athletes, Hendrickson decided to compete on the Wasatch CrossFit affiliate team. Her team started strong but came out too fast and faltered on the team Amanda workout.

Hendrickson had quarter-sized rips in her hands going into that workout, and she couldn't do the muscle-ups, hurting her team's progress. They finished in 10th place, not good enough to earn a spot at the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games.

After regionals, Hendrickson took a short break and then dove headfirst into training, her eyes on 2012.



Who says you can't do CrossFit in a skirt?

Welcome to 2012

I met Fischer when he walked into the box where I train, CrossFit Pacific Beach in San Diego, Calif. He had just moved to California and was looking for a job as a full-time CrossFit trainer. Fischer didn't know anyone at the gym, and perhaps feeling like he had something to prove, he started throwing out talk of a close-to-two-minute Fran time. The owners of the gym raised their eyebrows and looked doubtful.

Everyone kept a close eye on Fischer over the next few weeks and came to realize that he was exactly as good as he said. It wasn't long before Fischer won everyone over with his enthusiasm for CrossFit, his goofy sense of humor, and his seemingly endless capacity for hard work.

One day, after a workout, Fischer decided to go for a run.

"I started running, and pretty soon I realized I had run 15 miles," he said. "I decided to keep going and make it a marathon, and I finished in under 3:40."

Fischer later moved to L.A. and started working there as a trainer in early 2012.

Fischer proved himself even further when he qualified for the OC Throwdown, where Games athletes including Blair Morrison, Tommy Hackenbruck, Gabe Subry, Peter Egyed, Taylor Richards-Lindsay, Kristan Clever, Rebecca Voigt, Lindsay Valenzuela and Katie Hogan were invited to compete.

Around this time, Hendrickson competed in a local competition in Utah and earned first place overall. Impressed by her performance, Tommy Hackenbruck invited her to compete in California.

At first, Hendrickson had difficulty getting used to seeing her name next to CrossFit stars like Clever, Voigt and Hogan, a feeling that intensified when she checked in and there was a problem with her registration.

"Are you sure you're elite?" asked the person checking her in, trying to find her name.

"I was really anxious," said Hendrickson. "I saw all of those big names, and I wondered if I belonged there." Eventually everything was sorted out, and Hendrickson got ready to compete.



Hendrickson puts her gymnastics background to good use on the pull-up bar.

At the end of the first day, Fischer was in third place, while Hendrickson was in eighth. Both went to bed that night knowing they had to perform exceptionally well the next day to move up in the ranks.

Next Stop: The Reebok CrossFit Games Open

Hendrickson caught my eye on Sunday, when I watched her blow through handstand push-ups, overhead squats and pull-ups while wearing a bright purple skirt. Hendrickson, at 5 foot 3 and 120 lb., is small and quick but surprisingly strong. She moves with grace and confidence.

As I watched her work, I overheard someone next to me say, "You've got to be good if you're going compete in a skirt."

And indeed she was good. She finished fourth overall, while Fischer placed second. Both Hendrickson and Fischer are focused on the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games Open, then regionals, and then the Games.

"I am trying to be consistent with my programming," Hendrickson said, "and trust my coach. I am increasing my strength training and overtraining on purpose. I'm going to ride the overtraining wave, and then dial back as we get closer to regionals."

Hendrickson typically works out two times a day. Sometimes she does intervals at the track, and some days are more gymnastics-based. She reserves Wednesday for active recovery—a run, bike or easy row.

Fischer trains between two and five times a day. He said he won't change his schedule leading up to regionals.

"Last year I took it easy before regionals, and I wasn't in my groove," Fischer said. "The day before the OC Throwdown I did a triple—three workouts in a day—and I felt great."

Keep an eye on Hendrickson and Fischer throughout the Open, which starts Feb. 22, 2012.



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.