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Won Two

Hilary Achauer gets to know Regional champs Azadeh Boroumand and Jon Pera, who have more in common than talent, determination and heart.

By Hilary Achauer

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B7Creative

Azadeh Boroumand was all Pat Sherwood and Rory McKernan could talk about in the CrossFit Games Update show at the end of the first weekend of Regionals.

The biggest story out of the South Central Regional was Boroumand, and Sherwood and McKernan delighted in pronouncing her name and reviewing her five first-place finishes.

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Going into the weekend Boroumand was relatively unknown. However, it wasn't her first time at Regionals—she competed on a team in 2010 and placed sixth in the individual competition in 2011—but this year Boroumand came to play.

She took second in Event 1, her lowest placing in the entire competition. Boroumand won every other event, earning her multiple shout-outs from Sherwood and McKernan.

Not that Boroumand watched her moment of fame on the Update show.

"I can't get too caught up in everything," Boroumand said. "I like being in my own world and staying under the radar."

It's safe to say that's no longer possible in the CrossFit world.



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Self-described late bloomer Azadeh Boroumand dominated the South Central Regional.

During the individual men's competition at the 2012 Southern California Regional, much of the attention was focused on Kenneth Leverich, Bill Grundler and Jeremy Kinnick. Meanwhile, Jon Pera spent the weekend putting in consistently strong performances and quietly took the first-place spot at the end of the competition.

"I thought there was no way a seven-minute workout would kick my butt."

—Azadeh Boroumand

"I stuck to the plan," Pera said. "There were no mysteries, no guessing."

Pera and Boroumand have something else in common besides their humble attitudes and impressive work ethic. Both are of Iranian heritage. Boroumand was born in Iran and moved to a small town in Canada when she was 3 years old. Pera was born in the United States, but his father came to the U.S. from Iran at age 6.

"He didn't speak English, his dad was a carpenter, and his mom worked in a factory," Pera said. "He ended up putting himself through medical school, practiced as a radiologist and is now the assistant dean of a medical school. He is living proof that anything is possible with hard work and dedication. He is my inspiration."

New in the Game

Boroumand didn't start to get serious about athletics until she was in ninth grade.

"I was always athletic," Boroumand said, "but I was a late bloomer."

When Boroumand became serious about volleyball, she took off. Her dad, a retired wrestling and P.E. coach, saw her potential.

"College and university scouts didn't come to our small town in Alberta, Canada, so my dad sent out videos of me playing volleyball," Boroumand said.



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Boroumand knocking out her double-unders during the snatch ladder.

Boroumand won a full scholarship to play volleyball at the University of Pittsburgh, where she made 1,336 assists in 2004, the most of any sophomore in the university's history. She won numerous athletic and academic awards, and after graduation she moved to Texas to coach volleyball at the University of Texas at El Paso.

Then, in 2009, some of the women Boroumand worked with at the athletic department told her she should try CrossFit. They told her it would last for seven or eight minutes and she would die.

When Boroumand walked into Get Lifted Gym in El Paso, Texas, she wasn't worried.

"I thought there was no way a seven-minute workout would kick my butt," Boroumand said. "I was arrogant because of my experience with volleyball."

Paul Smith, the affiliate owner and a former NFL player, took her through the baseline workout, which started with a 500-meter row. She rowed the 500 as hard as she could, and "I almost passed out," Boroumand said.

"After I finished the workout, I couldn't see. It was the worst experience of my life. I had to stay in the gym for two hours because I couldn't even drive. Talk about being humbled," she recalled.

Of course, Boroumand was hooked. She soon got her Level 1 Trainer Certificate, but it took her three attempts to pass the written test.

"It wasn't until I understood the reason behind every question that I was able to pass," Boroumand said.

In 2010, Boroumand left her job coaching volleyball and became a full-time coach at Get Lifted. This didn't sit well with her father.

"I come from a traditional Persian family," Boroumand said. While her father had always encouraged her athletics, he imagined she would eventually abandon it for a more academic career, like her epidemiologist sister.

Boroumand made her first appearance at the CrossFit Games in 2010 on the Get Lifted team.



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Boroumand nailed a 170-lb. snatch, which was just 5 lb. below the best score across all regions.

"We finished 38th," she said. "It was very humbling. It was an eye opener, and I knew I had some serious work to do."

In October 2010 Boroumand started doing two to three workouts a day. She made it to Regionals in the South Central region and placed sixth. Good, but not good enough for the Games.

"As soon as I left (Regionals) I knew I was not where I needed to be. I was 175 lb., and that made the gymnastics movements difficult for me. Moving that weight was hard," Boroumand said.

She focused on reducing her food portions, following the plan set out by the book *The Warrior Diet*, which advocates "under eating" during the day and "over eating" at night.

Boroumand got down to 150 lb., and saw her strength and overall performance improve. During the next year, Boroumand did two, three and sometimes four WODs a day five to six days a week. She worked on skill, strength and endurance, with everything programmed by Smith.

"I'm trying to catch up to girls who have been doing this for years. You have a year to catch up on skills so that everything becomes effortless," she said.

It was not an easy year.

"I would get so stressed out. So much of CrossFit is tough. You never know if you are ready. I just went crazy. I became obsessed," Boroumand said.

She placed first in five events and finished 28 points ahead of second-place Candice Ruiz. Not only did Boroumand dominate her region, but many of her scores also held up against women from other regions. Her time on Event 2, 12:07, was faster than Julie Foucher and Kristan Clever. She also snatched more than those women and bested Clever's time on Event 3.

Boroumand said she didn't expect to do so well.

"The outcome was surprising to me," she said. "I tend to doubt myself."

Now that she's focused on training for the Games, Boroumand says her biggest challenge is to remain calm. "I want to keep having fun," she said. "I'm not going to change too much, just brush up on things like muscle-ups."

Like any serious athlete, Boroumand's goal is the podium. She plans to go as hard as she can, but if she doesn't make it, "I won't let that define me or ruin my dreams," Boroumand said. "I'm still new in the game."

Low Profile

Jon Pera is a family man. So much so that when I called Pera for this article, his 5-year-old daughter answered. She commandeered his phone, and I had several sweet but confusing conversations with her until Pera finally retrieved the phone and called me back, chuckling.

**"I thought I was in shape—
I jogged and lifted weights—
but this was what I was
looking for."**

—Jon Pera

Pera is not new to CrossFit competitions, but he's made a career out of keeping a low profile.

Pera grew in Eureka, Calif., where he played football, basketball, baseball and track and field. After high school, Pera got his degree at Azusa Pacific University. Unlike many elite CrossFit athletes, Pera did not play sports in college, other than intramural sports.



CrossFit Rancho Cucamonga

Pera took first place at the 2011/2012 Next Level Invitational, a three-event series in Southern Calif.

After graduating, Pera joined the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, where he has worked full time for the past five years as a deputy. He first heard about CrossFit from a co-worker in 2009, who told him the goal was to "try to do the workout as fast as possible."

"It didn't make sense to me," Pera said of his first workout, but he loved it. "I thought I was in shape—I jogged and lifted weights—but this was what I was looking for."

Pera started doing CrossFit workouts in the gym at work, which had very limited equipment. Then, in February 2010, when he was taking his daughter to gymnastics, he saw the word "CrossFit" on a building across the street.

"I had never seen a CrossFit gym before," Pera said. "It was pretty cool."

Pera walked into the affiliate, CrossFit Rancho Cucamonga, and asked for more information. When he found out the price, he was a bit taken aback. His wife encouraged him to go for it, so he went right back and signed up.

He had only been doing CrossFit for about a month when the 2010 Sectionals came around. The owners of Pera's affiliate encouraged him to compete, but he said no at first because he was so new to the sport. About two weeks before the competition, Pera changed his mind. He finished 27th even though he had never done a double-under before. Pera joined the team for the 2010 Regionals, and they placed 11th.

That's all it took—Pera was hooked. He competed in the Next Level Invitational in August 2010 and took eighth place. Then came the 2011 CrossFit Games Open. Pera, who had been doing CrossFit only a year, placed 10th.

Going into the Southern California Regional, "I didn't have any expectations," Pera said. "I was still kinda new."

Pera placed second.

"I was surprised," Pera said. "I didn't think we'd end up there."



CrossFit Rancho Cucamonga

To his surprise, Pera placed second at the 2011 SoCal Regional.



CrossFit Rancho Cucamonga

Pera fits CrossFit training in between his full-time job and his responsibilities as a father of three young children.

Then life threw a slight—but happy—curveball to Pera. His wife gave birth to their son two weeks before the 2011 CrossFit Games.

“I got three hours of sleep before the swim workout,” Pera said. “I was concerned about my wife, and that took a toll. I was not as focused as I wanted to be, but family always comes first.”

Pera finished 41st overall, but that experience just made him hungrier for this year.

“I took care of the important thing, and I was so happy to be there. It was a great learning experience,” Pera said.

Since the 2011 Games, Pera has kept a strict training schedule. He started out with a strength phase, then moved on to an Olympic-lifting phase and then a met-con phase.

When the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games Open came around, Pera tried not to let the Open workouts disrupt his training schedule. He did most of the workouts only once and finished the Open in third place in the SoCal Region.

At the Regional, Pera was disappointed with his performance on Event 1, Diane.

“I think it was the nerves, but I had done it 35 seconds faster in practice,” Pera said. He took seventh place in that event but quickly pulled it together—that was the lowest he would place all weekend.

“I didn’t let the first event affect me,” Pera said. He went on to get second place in events 2 and 3, and third place in Event 4.

Event 5 was the snatch ladder, and it all came down to a battle between Pera and Kenneth Leverich. They worked their way down the bars, snatching 235 lb., then 245, then 255. Leverich moved on to 265 and missed the lift. Pera easily snatched 255 and then looked over to his coach, Dan Mielke, before moving on to the next bar.

His coach said, “Double-unders,” so Pera deadlifted the bar, then picked up his rope and did 36 double-unders, giving him first place in that event. Pera said it’s moments like that when it is so important to have a coach. As an athlete, his instinct would have been to attempt to lift the weight. But his coach knew that if he missed, Pera would have tied with Leverich. The double-unders gave him the advantage he needed to win.

Going into the last event, Pera knew he needed to get fifth place to hold onto first overall, and that's exactly what he did, earning a spot at the Games again this year.

Unlike many Games athletes who work at a CrossFit gym and can fit in training throughout the day, Pera has a full-time job, as well as a family. He says his wife is very supportive of his training.

"It's a team effort," Pera said. "She does a lot for me."

Pera's family also allows him to achieve a healthy balance in life.

"Whenever you have balance, your attitude is in the right place," Pera said.

Pera's goal for the 2012 Games is to make it to the last day.

"We'll see what gets thrown at us," he said. "I don't know what's going to happen, so I'm going to keep training like I've been doing."



Nicko Kazadzis

Pera with his wife and two of his three children after winning the 2012 SoCal Regional.



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.*