

the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

Fully Alive The 2008 CrossFit Coast Challenge

Eric Devine

I didn't want to sign up; I had to. When you work at something (CrossFitting) for close to two years with the diligence of an apprentice, it becomes more than a hobby. The only sensible way to determine your capabilities, then, is to test yourself against others. So, I clicked "Register" back in March, and then knew I was in for it, come what may.

Saturday, May 31, 2008

The anticipation

Now, at 5:30 a.m., just hours before the first day of the East Coast Challenge is about to begin, I feel an overwhelming sense of dread and excitement, somewhat akin to how I initially felt waiting for the WOD to be posted when I first started CrossFitting. This time, I have some idea what's coming though: the CrossFit Total, a 5k race, and some sort of "Hopper" event. Yet I can take no solace from this knowledge. I still have to show up and put up. There's no backing out now. No, only a headlong plunge at the end of this interminable wait.

The Total

I arrive at 7:30 and the gym is hopping. People are standing outside the warm-up room, hedging on whether to go in, while those inside simply are already getting down to business. By 7:45 the hallway is littered with athletes stretching and strategizing and trying to trade trepidation for confidence. At 7:55 host Jason Ackerman has us corralled and speaks, like a god, from high above us on the observation deck. He marks our fated order with a flourish of blue strips of paper. Some count their order in the heat, while others simply avoid eye contact,



Online Video East Coast Challenge: CrossFit Total ←
http://media.crossfit.com/cf-video/CrossFitJournal_EastCoastChallengeCFT.wmv
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finally realizing that the time has come. With all the names read and heats listed, we file like so many doomed souls into the competition room.

The space throbs, much like our hearts as we cluster before our racks and size up one another. “My heart is beating out of my chest,” someone finally offers, expressing what we are all feeling; the thrum of competition. The air is dense, laced with humidity and anxiety and the very athletic aura of “Let’s do this!” So it begins.

Squats, damn low ones at that, lower than most of us ever get, are expected, and the red flag (ripped pink towel) goes flying. Merely parallel will not do. We consort and bounce numbers off one another. “At that depth, I’ll need to go 250 not 275.” “She’s hardcore with that flag; I won’t break 300.” We adjust and go as low as we can and swallow some pride along the way.

Finished with the heat, we return to the warm-up room to prepare for the press. We toy with hand placement and the elusive hip pop. The mental barrier of beginning has been surmounted and we have seen our competition. Now we need our mechanics. However, there is not much time, as the heats run no longer than 45 minutes. We find ourselves, like the toiling Sisyphus, shuffling back in to compete.

We stand before the rack again, chests lifted and elbows situated just so, and drive up the bar. Out comes the flag, again. Now, the finer points of just how leverage works are explained and, like scolded schoolchildren, we absorb our lesson and try to put it to use. “So I can go back, just not forward??” “Hell if I can figure it out.” One element becomes evident in spite of our confusion: camaraderie. Amidst the throes of our anxiety and trepidation and mechanical breakdown, we have jelled as a supportive network. The room now echoes with screams of “Push!” and “Get your head through!” followed by congratulatory claps on the back, punctuated by puffs of chalk dust. The heat presses on and we buckle down for the duration.

The deadlift is a bitch for most, but it’s also evident that some people are going to pull real big. Some of our measly first attempts at 325 are mere child’s play compared to others’ 500s. Regardless, we cajole and scream “Pull!” and “Finish it!” while coming to grips with our potential Total numbers. The heat ends, and with it,

our anxiety. No longer does the question *Can I do this?* hang over our heads. Regardless of whether we PR’d or not, we’ve succeeded at starting what we’ve come to finish. Therefore, like clockwork, at noon we shut down and set out for lunch, disbanding for a two-and-a-half hour reprieve. Outside, however, storm clouds are gathering, and we can only hope it is not an ominous sign of events to unfold.



The 5k

We wait in the lull before the race, sore and tired but with minds and hearts still charging, replaying what went well and what did not and mentally rehearsing what could happen in the upcoming run. After seeing our scores from the Total, we theorize about what we need to do

to save face, or just to forge on. Above us, the sky opens and unleashes dense raindrops. We laugh about getting wet and wonder just how fast the threat of lightning can make you run. “Seriously. It could improve my time.”



Mother Nature has her way of giving and taking, and now she has offered a window. At 2:15 the rain ceases and the sky lightens. However, in the same turn the cool breeze fades and the humidity rises. By the time we gather at the pavilion for the start, everyone is twitchy. The stretching doesn't feel like it loosened anything enough, and the short warm-up laps we run feel more like slogging around in our skin, everything saturated and out of joint. In short, we want this 5k over with.

Jason and the race organizer sense our anxiety and put us at the start ahead of schedule. At just after 3:00, we stand in the open field and bark questions about the course's direction. We are collectively irritated by the start signal, the standard “On your mark, get set...” We want ours: “3, 2, 1...Go!” And in that crush of sore muscles and steaming heat we bust loose at a rampant pace, hell bent after some unseen foe across the field. It turns out that we are only fighting ourselves, as we bottleneck on a footbridge and then are teased by the cool shade of the woods, only to be drawn out again into the swelter and some not-so-gentle gradients.

When mile 1 is done, the packs have formed and not much maneuvering has occurred. Some fall back or bolster slightly forward, but most ride on others' hips or keep pace by watching backs, thinking, *just stay with him*. In our tight-limbed, manic bodies, we hurl ourselves onward past the second mile marker (finally!), and through more woods and slopes toward the finish and finally past it, where we fall to the earth and writhe. The race organizers watch with concern, but we soon rise, the pain slightly abated, and we cheer the rest through, until the very last runner has staggered in. We are now happy as drugged post-op patients, not yet feeling the painful recovery ahead. We snag water bottles and bandage blistered feet and then immediately check our stats as they are posted to the pavilion.

We congratulate and console each other and are glad for day 1 to be over. The clouds darken overhead and thunder rolls. We walk back to the gym in a concealing curtain of rain, a gentle and not-so-subtle reminder of the mystery of what remains for tomorrow—the Hopper, with all its uncertainty, except one: it will hurt.

Sunday, June 1

The Hopper

It's 7 a.m. and I must leave in an hour. I am tired, despite having gone to bed at 9:30 last night. My left trap is in a painful knot and my stomach is as disturbed as it was yesterday, my breakfast resting heavy in my gut. I debate a second cup of coffee as I tease out what the Hopper events could be. We spent a good portion of yesterday between sets and heats scrutinizing the equipment and space available, trying to deduce what may be. Still, it is a void that lies so tantalizingly close, yet so out of reach.

However, I do know from talk around the barbeque last night, where we devoured chicken and ribs with animalistic zeal, that the time limit is set at twenty minutes. I am thankful that I don't need to prepare for a marathon day like yesterday, and won't need to keep up my energy for eight hours. No, I just need to thrive for twenty minutes—twenty very intense minutes. Everything after is inconsequential. Today is a matter of pride and a true display of CrossFit standards. The Hopper is a true enigma, the embodiment of our mantra: constantly varied, functional movements executed at high intensity. I skip the second coffee, gather my gear, and head out the door.

“Has to be rowing, he's got ten.”

“No pull-ups because there aren't enough bars.”

“Shitload of kettle and barbells.”

“Yeah, that means thrusters.”



Online Video

East Coast Challenge: Hopper ←

http://media.crossfit.com/cf-video/CrossFitGames_AlbanyHopper.wmv

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Nervous strategizing fills the air as we attempt to calm our nerves while waiting restlessly for Jason to arrive. Only he has the answers. He rolls in at precisely 9:00 and simply lays it out for us: 1000-meter row, followed by five rounds of 21 sumo deadlift high pulls (95 pounds for men, 65 for women), 15 burpees, and 9 thrusters (95/65 pounds). The cap is 20 minutes. Quickly the calculations begin. “On average that leaves you 16 minutes for the five rounds, which means a little over three minutes per round.” “No one's finishing all five.” Yeah, we're in panic mode, looking at each other as if someone might pull an answer out of the air that somehow makes this effort seem more manageable. But of course no one does, and Jason lists the contestants in the first heat. Around the room stomachs drop and faces go white. Time to set up and warm up and then begin.

At 9:30 we're all out on the parking lot where the Hopper is set up. A line of rowers sits placidly in the morning sun, flanked by weighted bars and depth-gauge medicine balls. We assess our hands against the blacktop and nod in agreement: “That ground's going to tear us up.” The first heat are warming up and the rest of us grab PVC pipes or stretch. We need to see and study what transpires before it's our turn. The athletes of the first heat seem so much like sacrificial lambs, heading off to be slaughtered for some unknown crime against the CF powers, and all we can do is watch.

At 9:45 every competitor is in place, paired off with a scorekeeper. Jason stands astride the center rower and calls out, “Ready? Three, two, one...Go!” The athletes crank and undulate out and back methodically, warming into this sufferfest. The first complete the row and break for the bars, nervously clutching and pulling. Pacing is going to be vital. Most manage seven to ten sumo deadlift high pulls (SDHPs) before breaking the set, and then pull some more. On to the burpees. Someone gets wise and rips off a shirt and throws it down like a mat, the only cushion offered today. The tedium of the up, down, up, down takes hold and then it's on to the thrusters, but not nearly so fast as expected. The weights go up and overhead and some immediately come crashing down. The heats are reverse-ordered, so this is not unexpected. Still, the comment comes: “This is going to fucking break someone.” We watch and consider our attempts. How many, how fast, what can be strategized? There is little time for error. The heat ends and only one person has completed three full

rounds, and he is bloody and sweat-drenched and fully, honorably spent. Expletives fill the air and we prepare for the second heat.

From 10:15 until 1:00 the heats rage on. The most consistent element is the sprawl at the end. The *I'm-dead-I-actually-fucking-killed-myself-this-time* prone postures become more abundant, and when the last heat ends the asphalt looks like a post-battle field. Essentially, the Hopper burns our legs and saps our lungs with the row, so that the SDHPs become torturous pulls that lack the hip-drive assistance they should have, followed by burpees, where vertical jumps are limited by the feeling that we are wearing cement boots, and then finishing with thrusters that feel like blows to the torso. Then there is silence. The lung-searing deep-tissue pain settles over us like a shroud, and we lie prostrate, not yet euphoric over having finished, having survived, but faintly aware of our success as we lie in the pebbled dirt.

The aftermath

The Challenge was raw beauty. Limits were tested, barriers were broken, and camaraderie was forged through shared experience and pain. It was evidence that CrossFit is like no other sport. This isn't a simple game where you or your team stand alone and prey on the challenger. No, we bolster each other along because there is only betterment of the self through this pursuit, and we all realize that we cannot get there alone, that it is only with community that we succeed and excel. Therefore, the awards at the awards ceremony were nominal. Rather, it was a perfect opportunity for us to bask in our success and replenish ourselves with good food and beer, while applauding those who rose above the rest. In the end, as we hobbled out to cars and exchanged e-mail addresses, it was as a group where the best performance and the best attempt were equal.

Tomorrow will bring another workout and another challenge. That is the point and the purpose. What is life without tests, without times when we are measured against the standards of our community? CrossFit aims to help us endure and exceed the expectations of such. We come together with our own regulations and our own standards, as our own society to say, "This matters, and that is why we do such damage to ourselves." Thoreau said that "Most men lead lives of quiet desperation." But we do not. Thoreau went to



the woods to "live deliberately, to suck the marrow out of life" because he did not want to find, at the end of his days, that he had not "truly lived." All of us who competed in the East Coast Challenge can say that we have lived, if only in that moment of the Total, the 5k or the Hopper. We know this in our hearts, in the depths of our souls, in that quiet secret we keep about why we do this. We are CrossFitters, regardless of skill or ability. Clearly, it's more than just a workout program or we wouldn't be so devoted.

Therefore, to all—to the CrossFit community at large and, especially, to the consortium of beautiful people who gathered in Albany this weekend—I salute you. I know I will never forget the details of our time, and I fully intend to add another chapter next year. Until then, go. Bust your asses. Feel that superlative splendor of a life truly lived.

Eric Devine is a high school English teacher, has experience in football, track, and mountain biking, and has been CrossFitting for the past two years. He trains at home, at the high school's gym, and as a drop-in at [Albany CrossFit](#), the hosts of the 2008 East Coast Challenge. His students and much of his family are convinced that he's crazy, but his wife is beginning to come around. He posts on the WOD blog on CrossFit.com as "edevine."