

The Chink in My Armor

One of CrossFit's top athletes learns a tough lesson when his poor command of double-unders costs him a trip to the Games.

What happened after that is the real story.

Greg Amundson

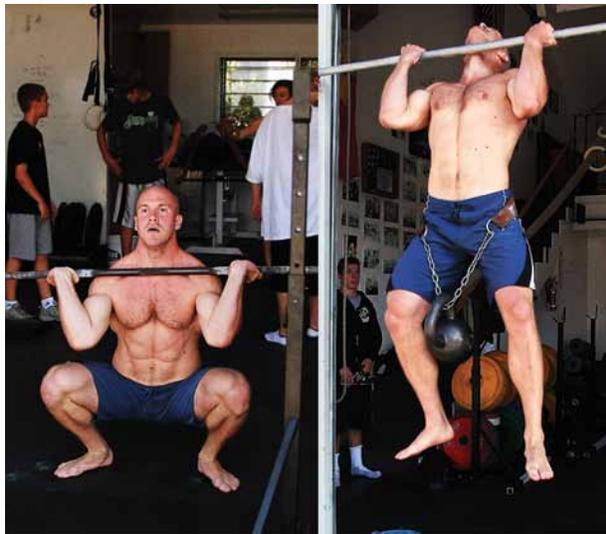


Courtesy of Greg Amundson

Paul Szoldra, the active-duty Marine who videotaped my failed attempt to get to the CrossFit Games via the Last Chance Qualifier, may have summed up the whole thing best. As I lay on the floor gasping for breath and thinking I was about to die, Paul offered these kind words: "That'll teach ya not to practice double-unders!"

Thus began my journey of self-discovery into the skill of the double-under.

Staff/CrossFit Journal



Greg Amundson is well known as the original CrossFit firebreather—but even Greg found out he has a goat.

Staff/CrossFit Journal



Deciding to Compete

But let's back up. I had been fairly adamant in my decision not to compete in the 2009 CrossFit Games. Military and law-enforcement duties had kept me away from previous editions, and my desire for public competition had declined significantly since my first introduction to CrossFit nearly nine years earlier at CrossFit Santa Cruz.

Then I got a phone call from CrossFit Games Director Dave Castro, who offered a special guest invitation from Coach Glassman to compete in 2009. I was deeply honored by the gracious offer, but I decided after much soul-searching that I would compete only if I could actually qualify like the other athletes.

Editor's note: Greg is an extremely popular figure in the CrossFit community but has recently been out of public view. Coach Glassman agreed with the suggestion to see how CrossFit's original firebreather would do in today's competition.

The invitation and a visit to the Southern California Regional Qualifier rekindled my inner competitive instincts. The decision was made: I would attempt the Last Chance Online Qualifier.

It was clear to everyone except for me—that I was avoiding the *constantly varied* component of CrossFit programming that is so critical to elite human performance.

If I was going to attempt the video qualifier, I could think of no better CrossFit facility to use than The Warehouse at [CrossFit Camp Pendleton](http://www.crossfit.com/camp-pendleton). Although The Warehouse is a four-hour drive away, it holds a special place in my heart. The facility is home to the original CrossFit Headquarters gym equipment and magically maintains the energy of the first CrossFit gym. Attempting the qualifier with the equipment I had trained so hard and diligently on during the early years of my CrossFit experience seemed the best way to capture the spirit of the event.



Courtesy of Greg Amundson

Amundson ripped through the weightlifting portion of the deadlift/double-under WOD but lost a lot of time when he picked up the rope.

Training and Workouts

I have always been a true believer in the benefit of following the CrossFit main-site WODs. Sort of. Many of the CrossFit Santa Cruz athletes, such as Tony Budding, would often call me out for cherry-picking from the famous “girls.” It was common practice for me to test myself against the list of standard girls (such as Fran, Helen and Diana) on a weekly basis. I improved steadily in these specific workouts. However, it was clear to everyone—except for me—that I was avoiding the constantly varied component of CrossFit programming that is so critical to elite human performance. There was no way for me to find the chinks in my armor because I spent too much time in the comfort zone of my preferred CrossFit stimuli.

At 7 a.m. on the day of the Last Chance Qualifier, my wife Mallee woke me up and said, “Honey, do you know how to double-under?” At that moment, I couldn’t think of the last time I had even held a jump rope in my hands, but I was confident I could perform the skill at a competitive pace. How hard could it be? All it would take would be some warm-up and a little practice. I had a recent Fran time of 2:30, a Helen of 7:10, and my Diana was at 3:05—all at a body weight of 200 lb. I was in the best shape of my life and ready for any challenge.

But I was about to discover how wrong I was!

Off to a Good Start

The Last Chance Qualifier required three workouts to be completed within 24 hours. First up was Jackie. It played to my strengths and consisted of a 1000-meter row, 50 thrusters with 45 pounds and 30 pull-ups. I finished in 5:55. So far, so good—but not for long.

During my rest before the next workout, I started to practice the double-under. I discovered very quickly that I had absolutely no competence in the skill. I sent a humorous text message to Dave Castro and asked if he could meet me at The Warehouse and teach me how to jump rope! Mallee and I dug into the web and found an excellent [double-under instructional video](#) by Jon Gilson of Again Faster. Armed with some basic cues and progressions, I spent the next hour practicing the skill. By the end of my session, I was barely able to perform 10 double-unders in a row.

The next workout I attempted was the 10-to-one triplet of cleans, chest-to-bar pull-ups and kettlebell swings. This was a tough WOD that completely taxed me. Although I had never attempted the workout before, it tended to play to my areas of strength in CrossFit conditioning. I finished in 11:36. I decided to spend the next two hours practicing the double-under before attempting the final workout.

Going After the Goat

At 6 p.m., I stood over a bar loaded with 275 lb. and took a deep breath. The final workout was upon me. Up to this point, I was looking good for a chance at making it through the qualifier and on to the 2009 CrossFit Games. Only one workout stood between me and Aromas. With the standard announcement of, "3, 2, 1... go!" I was off to the races on the final workout, which I have since named "G3" for my third Games online qualifier attempt. You can watch Paul Szoldra's video of the WOD [here](#).

I ripped through the deadlifts without any problems and then picked up the jump rope. I stumbled through the first 10 double-unders in a row before getting tripped up and missing a revolution. With a deep breath, I attempted to focus myself before starting on repetition 11. Then something amazing happened that astonished me, Mallee and Paul: I performed 33 double-unders in a row. That was 23 more than I had ever done before.

Then all hell broke loose. As I started my attempt for repetition 44, I failed. I tried again and failed. This continued for a painstaking full minute. It got to the point that I was unable to perform even a single accurate jump. It was horrible. I simply lacked the neurological connectors to get my body to co-ordinate the timing needed to achieve the skill. Perhaps through sheer luck, I was finally able to perform the remaining seven double-unders in a row.

As I lifted the barbell for my second set of 10 deadlifts, it felt like the weight had tripled. I struggled through the remaining two rounds of double-unders by forcing myself

to alternate between singles and doubles. Finally, after seven minutes and 20 seconds of sheer agony, I finished the workout.

Over dinner that night, Mallee, Paul and I agreed the final workout left me with no hope of qualifying. I decided Mallee and I would set our alarm for 4 a.m. the following morning and give the double-under workout one last attempt. In the covered parking lot of the Hampton Inn in San Clemente, I poured my heart and soul into the workout that had nearly killed me.

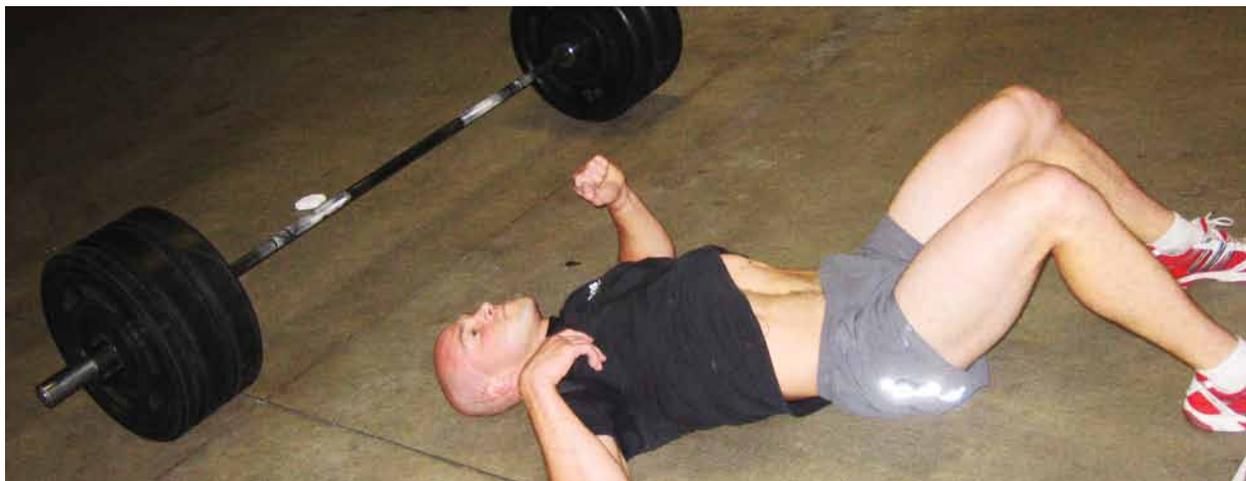
"That'll teach ya not to practice double-unders!"

— Paul Szoldra

One More Shot

My strategy was to alternate between singles and doubles. I knew it would take a long time to get through, but I hoped this strategy would allow me to perform the jumps consistently and minimize missed attempts. My plan didn't work. Although my technique had slightly improved from the night before, my overall time was 10 seconds slower.

Courtesy of Greg Amundson



After struggling with the deadlift/double-under WOD, Amundson tackled it one more time in a San Clemente parking lot at about 4:30 a.m. His time was 10 seconds slower than his previous attempt, ensuring he would not be competing in Aromas.

As I lay on the cement ground of the parking structure, Mallee and I could only laugh and reflect on the past 24 hours. I knew there was no chance I was going to the Games. However, I was grateful I had tried. I knew as an athlete I would learn more from the failed attempt than if I had actually qualified. But at the time, my heart was heavy as Mallee and I started our long drive back home.

Time to Practice

The first thing I did when I got home was purchase a new jump rope. Then I set off to learn how to double-under. It was a slow and frustrating process. Double-unders posed a different kind of challenge than hitting muscle failure on a max set of pull-ups. No amount of strength would help me now. It was evident that I had failed to venture into the critical fitness domains of accuracy, co-ordination, agility and balance. These fitness domains would require diligent practice and an awakening of a part of my brain and body that I had not yet explored. I was eager to learn the skill and excited about my potential to improve in areas of my fitness that had been dormant for years.

After four weeks of diligent practice, I took nearly three minutes off of my time. I made it through the workout with consistent double-unders and only four missed attempts.

I decided to do five sets of 10 double-unders a day for a week. Mallee would videotape my attempts so I could compare my form and technique to the Jon Gilson video. I noticed that I jumped incredibly high and that my arms would start to move away from my hips. This would inevitably lead to a missed attempt and a soaring heart rate.

I needed to learn to relax through the skill, minimize the height of my jump and keep my hands close to my sides. My self-imposed rule was 10 double-unders in a row. If I missed an attempt, I would start over from the beginning. My first week averaged 15 minutes to complete five sets

of 10. It was mentally and physically exhausting and downright discouraging, but I felt myself making progress and started to gradually piece together the skill in my mind.

The jump rope was my constant companion. I added 10 jumps a week for three weeks. By my third week I was gaining a lot of confidence in the skill. I was able to consistently average 20 jumps in a row before I had a missed attempt.

I realized one day while practicing the skill that I had gone as far as I would physically. Further improvement would now depend on my mind and my ability to visualize success. For three days, I put the jump rope away and “performed” three sets of 50 double-unders in a row in my mind. The image was crystal clear, and I ensured my technique was perfect. With increased confidence, I then repeated the G3 workout that had cost me a trip to Aromas.

After four weeks of diligent practice, I took nearly three minutes off of my time. I made it through the workout with consistent double-unders and only four missed attempts. My time was 4:35. I was overjoyed at how far I had come, and I was determined to improve further.

Along the way I decided on two sub-goals that would help improve my double-under: I wanted to make 100 double-unders in a row and 150 in less than two minutes. I accomplished both goals on the same attempt, six weeks after my failed Games qualifier. I made 105 double-unders in a row and finished the remaining 45 on only one missed attempt. My time for the entire 150 was 1:45.

The time had come to repeat my last workout from The Warehouse. It was time to face off with G3 once again.

The Final Attempt

On a hot midday afternoon in August, Mallee and I set up the workout in our garage gym and positioned the video camera to capture the event. With a joint countdown of, “3, 2, 1... go!” I forged ahead into the workout. Two minutes 59 seconds later I was done. I had taken 4:21 off my first recorded time. You can watch the video of that attempt [here](#).

Was I stronger, faster and more physically fit? Using CrossFit's definition of power and fitness, I had increased by a measure that I had never experienced before. But the change was more mental and neurological than it was physical. Something had changed in my body and mind. I noticed that my reaction time and cycle speed in other skills had greatly improved:

- My max box jumps in one minute to a 24-inch box had increased from 35 to 51.
- My 400-meter sprint had finally dropped to under a minute—58 seconds flat. (Both the box jump and sprint were skills I had not seen improvements on for over a year.)
- Also interesting to note was my improvement in firearms accuracy and manipulation. I was shooting faster and with more accuracy than I had ever experienced before. I attribute these seemingly unrelated improvements to my practice and eventual competency in the double-under.

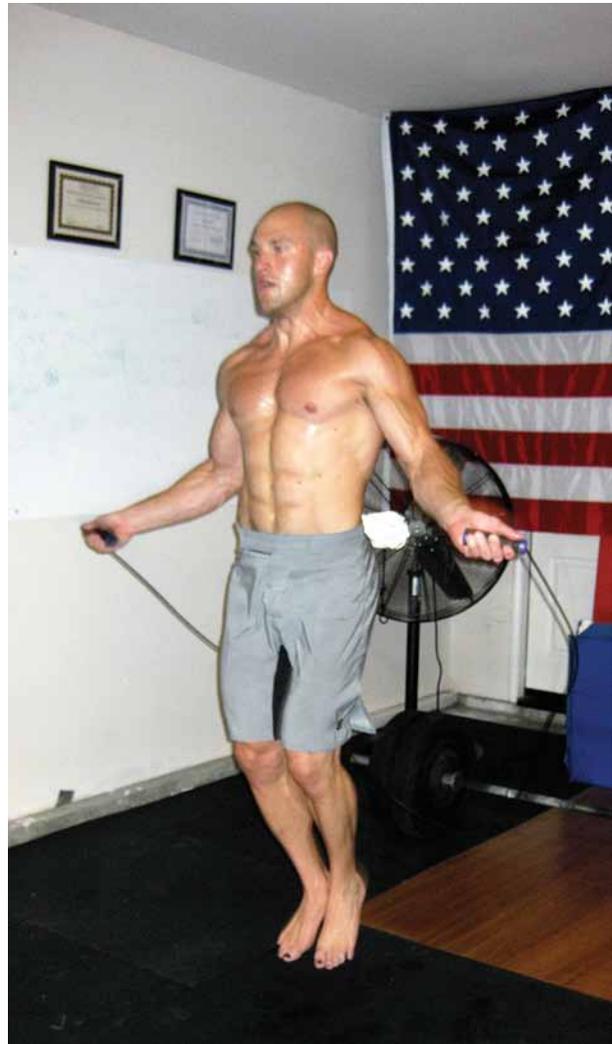
The lesson I learned from the approximately 15 minutes of despair during my first two attempts at the double-under workout was immense. By diving headfirst into my weakness, I was able to see substantial improvement not only in the substandard skill, but also in fitness domains and job-related skills that had otherwise seen the ceiling of improvement.

I also learned that having the courage to step outside of a predetermined comfort zone and tackle chinks in the armor is the best way to improve fitness at any level in the game.



About the Author

Greg Amundson works in federal law enforcement and is a well-known CrossFit certification trainer. Described by his peers as the original CrossFit firebreather, Greg has been coaching and training in CrossFit since 2002.



Courtesy of Greg Amundson

Unwilling to give up, Amundson spent the next four weeks practicing double-unders. When he tackled the troublesome WOD again, he finished in 2:59.