
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Beyond the CrossFit Games: Part 2

Jesse French suffers a severe hand injury but still finds a way to stay competitive in the CrossFit Games Open.

By **Emily Beers** CrossFit Vancouver

May 2011



All images courtesy of Titanium CrossFit/Jesse French

He has an uncharacteristic way of modifying workouts: he tapes one hand to the skipping rope during Annie. He tapes his left hand to the ring when he does muscle-ups. He lifts weights wearing a powerlifting glove with a piece of doweling slapped on the end of it.

You might, too, if you were missing four fingers.

1 of 5



Jesse French has decided his injury won't stand in the way of his training.

Twenty-three-year-old Jesse French may be short four fingers, but that didn't stop him from competing in the Reebok CrossFit Games Open. And not only did he compete, but he also finished in the top 60 in Canada West and earned a spot in the regional competition. Not bad considering a year ago at this time French couldn't work out. He couldn't even cut his own apple or tie his own shoes.

The Accident and the Recovery

It was March of last year when his world was turned upside down. French was working in a mill. One of his colleagues was struggling with a pedal-driven saw, so French went over to lend a hand.

"Somehow a safety nut was disconnected," French said. "I tried to block it with my hand," he said. But as he tried to block the pivoting saw, the 40-inch blade whipped around and took his fingers with it.

French was quickly airlifted to the hospital and underwent 12 hours of surgery to reattach all five of his fingers on his left hand. But one by one the fingers died. His middle and index fingers were removed 15 days after their reattachment, "when they turned all black and nasty," said French. Then, in early August 2010, his pointer finger was finally removed.

"There was just too much damage," he said.

What remains of his left hand today are a thumb whose mobility is somewhat limited and a pinky finger that's no more than a stub.

French's coach, Marc Mazzocchi, owner of Titanium CrossFit, vividly remembers the day of the accident.

"I was coaching at the time, and I got this phone call saying there had been an accident at the mill and Jesse was hurt really badly," said the 34-year-old Mazzocchi, who was then informed that French's fingers had been cut off. "My heart stopped. It was absolutely heartbreaking. I immediately kicked everyone out of the gym and headed over to see Jesse.

"When I got there, I'll never forget it: there was Jesse helping the paramedics out, holding a baggy with his fingers in it. He wasn't even on painkillers yet, but he was just sitting there calmly," he continued.

In fact, French appeared more relaxed than the paramedics. A first-aid attendant started "freaking out" when she arrived at the scene.

"Jesse directed them. He told them, 'Go find my fingers and put them in a baggy with water and ice.' Jesse pretty much did first aid on himself that day," said Mazzocchi.

Since that day last March, the past year has been full of many challenging days for French.

"You don't realize how much you use your hand (until it's gone)," said French. "You lose your self-purpose," he continued. "It has been a real eye-opener. I used to take so much for granted ... simple things like being able to tie my shoe and like carrying a grocery bag in one hand while holding my girlfriend's hand in the other ... I can't do that anymore," he said.

The other thing French lost was his dream of becoming a firefighter.

"It's just too competitive. There are just too many firefighters out there with two hands," he said.

Although his life was totally turned upside down after the accident, bit by bit he's been piecing it back together.

"I have learned to make small progressions, to put things on a bigger spectrum, to get enjoyment out of small things," French said. "I basically couldn't go any further into the negative, so I had to think positively. My options were either to try or not to try."

French chose to try, and it has paid off. He currently works as a volunteer firefighter in Cumberland, B.C.

The other place he has seen massive progress is as a CrossFitter.

In the first couple of months after the accident, his wrist was totally fused, so he couldn't do much. And because his blood pressure was too low, it wasn't safe for him to exert himself physically. But soon he found himself back in the gym, learning new ways of training. He did things like tape his hand to the skipping rope, and then eventually he learned how to hold the rope with what's left of his pinky finger.

**French can clean 245 lb.
without any assistance gear,
and he can deadlift 450
with a lifting strap.**



***Competition has always been important for French,
and his injury didn't change that.***

He started doing one-armed jumping pull-ups and then tried ring rows. Soon he was doing pull-ups with a hook. Little by little, his strength came back. And before he knew it, he was stringing pull-ups together again, mostly using one hand.

"They would totally burn me out, but it was worth the effort," French said.

He can now do butterfly pull-ups again—"Without assistance," he said. "And, I got my bar muscle-up back."

French's lifts are a similar story. He started by working his way back up to the female RX'd weight. When he accomplished that, he kept going. He remembers the day he did a 165-lb. squat clean again. Today, French can clean 245 lb. without any assistance gear, and he can deadlift 450 with a lifting strap.

Progress aside, he admits it's been a tough year.

"It is frustrating at times. You know what you used to be able to do. You try to do it but you can't," he said. "And it's hard hearing what other people tell you. I was told I would never compete or be a firefighter again by rehab doctors," he said.

To get through it all, he has turned to CrossFit for hope.

"CrossFit was something I could do, something I could try to do. It has given me a sense of achievement I couldn't get elsewhere."

—Jesse French

"It's been an outlet. It keeps me sane. There was a lot of worry about depression, about giving up, but CrossFit was something I could do, something I could try to do. It has given me a sense of achievement I couldn't get elsewhere," he said.

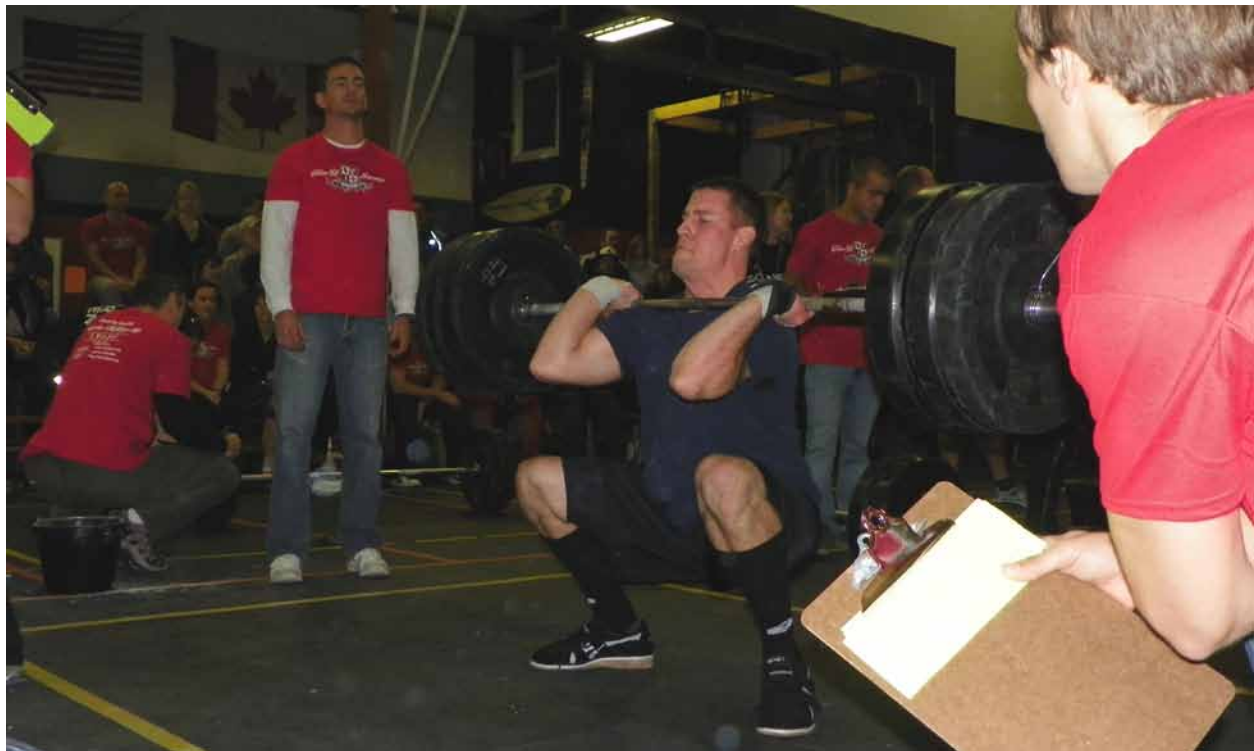
He continued: "I mean, a year ago, my girlfriend had to cut an apple for me."

According to French, the support of his girlfriend, Jennifer Rouleau, has been integral in helping him believe in himself again.

"My girlfriend, Marc and lots of guys at the firehall, they never lost faith in me," French said. "And my times have actually improved since before my accident. I have better technique and I work out a lot smarter."

Mazzocchi explains that it's been easy to believe in French.

"He's the most determined person I've ever met in my life. He finds something he wants to do, and he has a one-track mind. He'll kill himself trying to do it," said Mazzocchi.



After earning a spot in the Canada West Regional, French will have a chance to compete on home turf in B.C.

Nearly killing himself trying is exactly what French has done in the last year to get to where he is today.

"That lifting hook hurts like hell. He'll hang off the bar using this thing, and you just sit there watching his hand turn purple," Mazzocchi said about French's tireless efforts.

Tireless efforts aside, French still has goals he'd like to accomplish.

"I'd like to be able to do a handstand walk properly," he said in an interview during the Open. "And I hope to get to regionals."

Regardless of how French does at regionals, Mazzocchi is nothing short of amazed by the guy he thinks of as his little brother.

"I'm so proud of this guy. He has inspired so many people to keep going. One lady in our gym smacked her hand on the box doing box jumps the other day and broke her hand. But it didn't stop her. 'Jesse came in after he cut his fingers off; people told her,'" said Mazzocchi.

He continued: "People in our gym, their mantra is, 'Well, Jesse did it.'"



About the Author



CrossFit Vancouver

Emily Beers finished a master's degree in journalism at the University of Western Ontario in the spring of 2009. Upon graduation, she worked as a sportswriter at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games, where she covered figure skating and short-track speed skating. Currently, she hosts Bathroom Graffiti, a not-always-PG publication of the CrossFit Vancouver School of Fitness.

As an athlete and CrossFitter, Beers started out as a gymnast, competing to the national level. After growing too tall for gymnastics, she played NCAA Division 1 basketball for the University of Idaho, then returned home and played for the University of British Columbia. After three years of playing basketball, she started rowing, competing at the varsity level at the University of Western Ontario for two years. While trying to make the National Rowing Team in 2009, she discovered CrossFit and became utterly addicted. Soon, CrossFit was meant to be a way to cross-train for rowing but became her greatest passion. She moved back to Vancouver in September 2009 and found CrossFit Vancouver, where she now both trains and works as an apprentice coach.

In her first season competing in CrossFit she won the B.C. Sectional competition in 2010. Regionals were less kind to her, but that's only made her more determined to get to the Games. She had her sights set on 2011 but ruptured her Achilles tendon in December 2010. Recovering from Achilles surgery has given her more time to pursue her passion for journalism. It has also allowed her to be a part of the 2011 CrossFit Games in a different capacity: she is the Canada West media director for CrossFit HQ.