

CrossFit Europe

Part I: Adaptation to a world without “boxes.”

CrossFit Games competitor Blair Morrison is living in Europe and trying to stay fit on a continent that’s just discovering CrossFit.

Blair Morrison



Courtesy of Blair Morrison

Earlier this year, I accepted the enrollment offer of the Leiden/Paris/Oxford Europaeum Programme, which will see me traveling across the continent and studying the respective histories of various European countries and their civilizations. I'll emerge with a master's degree next September.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Blair Morrison placed seventh at the 2009 CrossFit Games. After traveling across The Pond, he discovered the CrossFit revolution had yet to take hold in the Netherlands.

While my acceptance into the program marked the beginning of an incredible opportunity, it also signified the impending end of a physical lifestyle that had embedded itself in my personality and identity. As I prepared to leave, I was eager for the coming adventure, but my emotions were somewhat bittersweet.

Home Is Where the Hard Work Is

I had spent the better part of three years coaching and training at a truly incredible fitness facility, Balance Gym in Washington, D.C. It was a CrossFit box, but bigger. It was stocked with tractor tires and sandbags, rings and ropes, balls and bands, kettlebells, barbells, dumbbells, and bumper plates. It was a playground for the creative mind and the able body.

More importantly, it existed without the pretense, ego, and singularity of focus that so many gyms chronically suffer from. On the contrary, there were individuals of the highest quality and substance, all open-minded and willing to share knowledge, learn from each other and contribute toward goals worth reaching. There I learned countless skills like keg pressing, muscle-ups, butterfly kips, Turkish get-ups and GHD sit-ups. There I reached strength benchmarks in both Olympic lifts and virtually every other power movement. It was there that I truly started CrossFitting.

Over the past three years, the training environment at Balance encouraged me to enter and win three area off-road trail races, to complete the Marine Corps Marathon in 3:18, and, ultimately, to qualify, compete and place seventh in the 2009 CrossFit Games. The variety of styles of training to which I was exposed helped me develop a philosophy of training founded on principles of variability, intensity and creativity. I've based my programming on that foundation ever since. Virtually all of this growth and success can be credited to the availability and concentration of material and human resources I found at Balance. Stepping on a plane knowing I was to leave such a place behind was, to put it mildly, difficult to accept.

I knew that if I was to maintain the level of physical existence I had grown accustomed to, it was going to be under far less favorable conditions. From the experience of others, I was loosely aware of the fitness culture in Europe. I understood that gyms were a relatively rare commodity—even rarer when considering the type of gym I was used to. A quick Google search confirmed this fact. CrossFit, despite the impact of Europeans at the Games this year,

was still largely a non-European phenomenon. Still, upon my departure, I think I anticipated entering a world that was not all that unlike the one back home.

Now that I am here, I can say with certainty that the two worlds are hardly comparable. Food, language, travel, operating hours, cultural acceptability—all these things are very different. Nothing is simple. My new lifestyle has forced me to adapt to cultural norms (both nutritionally and socially), search out fitness resources where they are sparse, and, when necessary, pursue physical outlets by non-traditional means. While challenging, to be sure, this experience has also served to broaden my view of the world and of fitness. I have made some great friends, seen some incredible sights and been forced to reflect on many things once taken for granted.

In early September, I started a blog, [FitQuest](#), with the intention of detailing how these challenges impacted my life and how I stayed fit in spite of them. From these

documentarian beginnings, the blog has grown into a full-blown fitness quest. I've begun actively seeking the next challenge rather than simply managing the ones imposed. I've trained in medieval fortresses, ancient cities, beaches and vineyards. I've sought out CrossFit affiliates across Europe, traveled to them, connected with them personally and done WODs at their sites. During this experience, my training philosophy has necessarily grown, simultaneously enhancing and refining its original character through adaptation.

Drawing on my blog posts for its content, this article is intended to be a window into that adaptation. It spans the first two months of my experience, a multitude of locations, a myriad of cultural and personal reflections, and some pretty atypical training methods. The underlying message is that obstacles are always inevitable but never insurmountable. They simply necessitate the right response.



Courtesy of Blair Morrison

To the author, the Segesta Temple in Italy represents the sort of achievement fit, active humans are capable of.

Cultural Experience

The term “culture shock” gets overused a lot, but it’s the best phrase I can think of to describe what I’ve experienced thus far in Europe. People’s mannerisms, their schedules, the food they eat, what they view as important—all contribute to a different “feel” from the United States. Getting comfortable with this has been a challenge that has certainly affected my lifestyle and impressed my views on health and fitness.

Sept. 10, 2009, in Leiden, Netherlands

Nutrition

Eating healthy for cheap in Leiden—this has been more of a process than I had anticipated. Honestly, coming in, finding food was the least of my concerns. But as soon as I moved into my place I knew it was an oversight. The kitchen situation is minimalist: two electric burners, two square feet of counter space, and a miniature refrigerator (with no freezer space beyond ice trays). Needless to say, the days of microwavable brown rice and frozen vegetables are long gone. And no oven, no grill.

The first week was full of trial and error with local grocers; i.e., buying too much food, buying shitty food, not understanding the labels on anything and struggling to use foreign currency. However, now that we’re into Week 2, I think I’ve hit my stride.

Every Wednesday and Saturday, I’ve discovered, local growers and merchants sell nuts, produce, meat, eggs, fish, bread, cheese, sweets and pretty much anything else you can imagine along either side of the Rijn River, which runs through the middle of town. The earlier in the day, the more expensive the prices and the better the pickings. With my fridge situation, a three-day menu is about the most I can handle, so the Wednesday/Saturday schedule is perfect.

Yesterday I bought bell peppers (red, green, yellow), spinach, avocados, blueberries, bananas, *oude kaas* (“old cheese”—the best you’ve ever had), a small bag of potatoes, 1 kilogram of salmon, three chicken breasts, a dozen farm-fresh eggs, and about a kilogram of an assorted trail mix (raw walnuts, almonds, cranberries and god knows what else). My fridge is at max capacity, but there’s nothing superfluous, and all of it will be gone by the weekend.



Courtesy of Blair Morrison

Eating well in Europe can be a challenge, but Morrison found shopping for fresh meat and produce every three days made things easier.



Courtesy of Blair Morrison

Europe may not have many CrossFit boxes, but it does have Olympic lifting platforms.

CrossFit, despite the impact of Europeans at the Games this year, was still largely a non-European phenomenon.

Courtesy of Blair Morrison



You can buy an over-priced tourist T-shirt at any European landmark, or you can take your shirt off and do a CrossFit WOD. The choice is yours.

The best part is that all of this cost me about 35 Euros, 15 of which covered the salmon and chicken. When added to the non-perishables I got in bulk at the natural-foods store (brown rice, couscous, canned kidney and black beans, lentils, salt, pepper, hot sauce, dressing) and some Greek yogurt, I'm completely set.

Every morning I'm able to scramble eggs with peppers, spinach, cheese, avocados and potatoes. Every night, I alternate between fish and chicken with salad and grains. Snacks are combinations of yogurt, nuts and fruit, plus leftovers. I've been frequenting a sandwich shop just about every afternoon when I'm out and about, but all their food is fresh as well. All in all, it's like I've been forced into a more agrarian diet because of inaccessibility and my inability to store things. It's kind of ironic that the more choices we have, the worse ones we tend to make, and vice versa.

Sept. 29, 2009, in Sicily, Italy

Then and Now: Divergent Fitness Standards

Historically, the scope of physical human achievement is practically inconceivable. Trying to compute the time, strength, will and ingenuity it took to build the things they built in Greece, Rome and medieval Europe short-circuits my brain.

Trying to translate those qualities into the world of today is not so easy. Suffice it to say that it took a different kind of strength to build the Segesta Temple in 400 B.C. than it took to build more modern places of worship like Yankee

Stadium. While both are impressive architectural achievements, the former certainly required a more robust physical presence than the latter.

I think this type of physicality is the ultimate example of what we now call "functional strength." It didn't exist in a gym with med balls and Thera-Bands and single-leg hops. It was all around, all the time, and everyone had it. In primitive societies, men and women were strong and fit because their lives demanded it. In order to build something like Segesta, everyone had to be strong. In order to defend the city in battle, everyone had to fight. At one point or another, they were all warriors, hunters and architects. Today we're lucky if one in 10 of us can get the wheelbarrow up the damn hill.

Those worlds certainly didn't encourage physical deconditioning the way our life of room service, remote controls and catalog landscaping has surely done. Some take the fact that we can afford to hire someone else to fix our roofs, pave our roads and build our walls as a sign of civilization's progress and technological adaptation. I think it's laziness and ineptitude—in sheep's clothing, of course.

I ask this: Why not be able? This is a fundamental question. Whatever the physical challenge, why not meet it? In Sicily in 400 B.C., there was no choice. Society dictated the standards of fitness by what it required of its people. You were physically able and valuable or you were physically unable and expendable. Today the standards are set by the individual, and they aren't very high.

Discovering Local Resources

Finding a place to train, or even people who like to train, was a bit of a chore. First, there are only four gyms in Leiden, the city where I'm currently based. After visiting the first three, I was convinced all hope was lost. Imagine a cardio room from 1960, and that's about what they've got here. However, the fourth option (which I only heard about through word of mouth) proved to be far different and has led to a wealth of knowledge and opportunity.

Sept. 19, 2009, in Leiden, Netherlands **Finding a Gym and a Training Partner**

I went to meet with the owner of L.K.V. de Spartaan, who, it turns out, doesn't want to work out with me. However, he did want to introduce me to Hank. Hank is the last remaining member of the No. 1 Dutch weightlifting club to still train at the gym. The rest have either moved away or become too busy with family, work, etc. to continue coming in regularly. So, of the original 10 or so, Hank is the last man standing. He's still young, very strong and ultra-nice. He brings his five-year-old son to the gym to watch him work out, which I thought was pretty cool.

Fitness is an international language, when it comes down to it. Methods may differ slightly from place to place, but the motivations, the need to improve, the sense of accomplishment—those things are universal. Finding someone to train with propels these elements, and thus it can be so important in a new place.

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Enter Hank. Tonight we trained, as expected, sans his young child. He employed a pretty traditional weightlifting-specific program: we worked full squat snatches for triples, doubles and singles, followed by double sets of heavy low-hang snatch pulls, and we finished with heavy sets of back squats. He didn't go too heavy on the snatches, instead working mostly on his technique, but he encouraged me to keep going up. I didn't get 100 kilograms tonight, but, watching the video clip, I pulled it plenty high enough to make the lift. And Hank thinks my pull is good enough for 110 right now if I improve my focus during the drive and improve my catch positioning.

I included clips of each of our last few sets on my blog. By comparison, I appear really loose and a little all over the place, but it gives me a good visual of where I can improve.

WOD

Snatch

4, 4, 4, 3, 3, 2, 2, 2, 1, 1, 1

Snatch pull

2, 2, 2, 2

Back squat

4, 4, 4, 4, 3, 2

Interestingly, Hank told me tonight that it's the mental side of it he really enjoys—how losing concentration for just a split second could mean he pushes the bar 2 centimeters out during the second pull and thus results in a missed catch at the top. Honestly, his attitude toward training is inspiring. He truly does it because he loves it. He's intense when he's on the platform or under the bar, giving it an honest 100 percent every lift, but in between he was light-hearted and intent on helping me improve.

As I've explained before, finding your purpose for training is perhaps the most important way to ensure you will continue to do it. Whether it's competition, sense of fulfillment, doctor's orders or even vanity, finding the one purpose that will drive you makes all the difference. Hank's is sport. He loves the sport of weightlifting. Even though he doesn't compete anymore, he continues to "play," thus continuing to stay fit and live strong.

Amen to that.

The World is my Box

Finding L.K.V. de Spartaan was great because it gave me a place to lift heavy weights, erg, and learn from those with more knowledge and experience than me. But the flexibility it offered with regard to programming was still limited. I needed more space and less restrictions to truly re-create my program. In this respect, the history and beauty of Europe became inspirational. I started to look at the city and its beautiful churches, long canals and cobbled streets, imagining the ways I could physically interact with it. Every set of stairs became a treadmill, every object became a weight, every ledge was meant to be climbed. Suddenly, I was a member of a gym without walls.

Sept 7, 2009, in Leiden, Netherlands

Citadel WOD

I found the Burcht (a medieval citadel) on one of my lost adventures getting to know Leiden. I figured it would be a good spot for my first workout, being that it's historic and simple. It's very cool and always open. Just me and the garbage men at 0700. Here's the workout:

5 rounds of:

Stair sprint up (30 steps if skipping stairs)

5 burpees

Bear crawl down (60 steps)

5 burpees

Sept. 12, 2009, in Leiden, Netherlands

Graventseen WOD

So this morning I got up early and jogged to The Gravensteen, which means "castle of the count." It's a building that now houses the international office of Leiden University, but originally it was home to members of the Dutch aristocracy. At some point in the interim, it was the prison, court of law and site of execution for all of Leiden. This fact struck me as incredible. The international office (where my academic fate is ultimately decided) is essentially renting space from death row—a potentially ominous sign for my studies here.

The only way to karmically balance this situation, in my estimation, was to pay my tax in sweat and hope the ghosts of Dutchmen past were appeased. Using an old fisherman's rope (15 lb.) I found near the riverbank earlier in the week, I constructed this workout:

With additional weight (vest, rope, etc.) do 3 rounds for time of:

20 strict pull-ups

10 pistol squats (each leg)

Run 200 meters



Courtesy of Blair Morrison

The Burcht was built in the 12th century as a defense against Spanish and French invaders. Morrison uses it as a defense against laziness and inactivity.

Sept. 26, 2009, in Marsala and Erice, Italy

Vineyards and Castles

After traveling to Italy, I decided to do some exploring in Sicily.

Turns out there's a vineyard 10 minutes from where my grandparents and I are staying. With the sun rising over the ridge and the rows of grapes just starting to glisten, I felt physically inspired by the scene. While I was looking around for resources, one fact made itself very obvious: there are a lot of big stones in Sicily.

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Courtesy of Blair Morrison



Europe's narrow alleys are bad for Buicks but perfect for some parkour-style CrossFit.

The vineyard is walled in by stacks of stones, and stone lifting is a decidedly old-world form of exercise, so this felt like an appropriate apparatus. I found one that was big but liftable and did 30 deadlifts for time. Kudos to the men who have been stacking stones for eons without the help of cranes. This was awkward, uncomfortable and heavy. It took me just over seven minutes to complete, and I don't think the rock weighed more than 150 lb.

Later in the afternoon, along with my grandparents and a few others, I ventured up to Erice, a medieval mountain city overlooking Trapani. This place was unreal: incredible structures, untouched ruins and heart-stopping views. If history is what you want to experience, this is the place to do it. The Palace of Venus, a relic from the Roman times, literally hangs over the edge of a 3,000-foot cliff. There are numerous churches towering over piazzas and squares, and so many tight alleyways bustling with local and touristy shops. Every corner had an authentic Sicilian cafe or restaurant.

With the help of my grandmother and grand-aunt, I did a short met-con at the base of a temple overlooking the bay and beach below:

For time:

21, 15 and 9 reps of box jumps and burpees.

Oct. 1, 2009, in Leiden, Netherlands Van der Werfstraat Wall

Today's workout took me back outdoors. A few weeks ago, I walked past a stretch of wall on the Van der Werfstraat in Leiden and thought it looked like a great spot to do some body-weight, parkour-style gymnastics training.

This was tough, and I recommend getting gloves. I didn't and wound up with a few cuts on my hands from small shards of glass. The wall was just shy of nine feet high—perfect for this type of routine. I finished in 15:14. Afterward I felt it in the shoulders and core, but I gotta say, I really liked using the wall. It requires a different kind of strength to climb and walk on your hands than you build in the weight room. I think I'm going to incorporate this location into some runs in the future.

The workout was as follows:

10 wall muscle-ups

1 handstand wall circuit

8 wall muscle-ups

2 handstand wall circuits

6 wall muscle-ups

3 handstand wall circuits

4 wall muscle-ups

4 handstand wall circuits

2 wall muscle-ups

5 handstand wall circuits

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Oct. 9, 2009, in Noordwijk, Netherlands

CrossFit on the Beach

My neighbor and I took a mini excursion to Noordwijk today, seeing as how the weather was so inexplicably gorgeous here: 60 degrees and sunny, if you can believe it. The beach was empty, making it even more beautiful and even more appealing to use for my own devices. I wanted to do an endurance effort today, and the long stretches of open sand provided plenty of potential. The workout looked like this:

20 x 50 meter run

50 meter bear crawl

20 x 50 meter run

50 meter handstand walk

20 x 50 meter run

50 meter duck walk

20 x 50 meter run

50 meter crab walk

20 x 50 meter run

50 meter broad jump

What Comes Next ...

I've just returned from a trip through Germany and the Czech Republic, where I met and stayed with various CrossFitters working to establish the program in their cities. It was an incredible experience. I see this as the next logical step in this adventure. By traveling to different facilities on the continent and experiencing their unique brand of fitness, I will generate a better understanding of CrossFit as a method, but also of the time, effort and dedication it takes to build a fitness community from scratch.

For video footage and more information on this story, visit [FitQuest](#).



About the Author

Blair Morrison is 27 years old. He was born and raised in Sacramento, Calif., where his family still lives. He received his undergraduate history degree from Princeton University and is now studying European history through Europaeum Masters Programme at the Universiteit Leiden. Formerly a personal trainer at Balance Gym in Washington, D.C., Blair placed seventh in the 2009 Crossfit Games. He is dedicated to the pursuit of physical challenges and the mental fortitude that comes from the ability to overcome them.

