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Coaching for Competition

How do you turn good athletes into firebreathers?
Paul Estrada and Leon Chang coach a group from CrossFit Elysium
through their first competition.

By Paul Estrada and Leon Chang CrossFit Elysium

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All images courtesy of Leon Chang/Paul Estrada/CrossFit Elysium

"All coaching is taking a player where he can't take himself."

—Bill McCartney

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Grassroots events like the Left Coast Invitational allow all athletes to experience the thrill of CrossFit competition.

Several months back, Paul was approached by CrossFit Mission Gorge about putting together a competition between us, them and a few other affiliates. It was only a few weeks since our members had watched Paul compete at the 2010 CrossFit Games California Regional, and a fair number of them thought it would be a lot of fun to compete in something like that.

Our goal was to put together an event that would be open to beginner through intermediate athletes—people who might be the big dogs at their local affiliate but weren't at the level needed for sectionals. These people also wanted to experience CrossFit as a sport and know the feeling of competition.

Paul went down to CFMG to discuss the details of the event and what we wanted the athletes to get from it. We knew that we wanted a competition any athlete could compete in and have fun with. We came up with three events that would test all levels of fitness but were not too complicated for newer athletes.

The Workouts

Event 1

10 minutes to establish a max-effort deadlift. We knew this would favor the bigger, stronger members over the smaller, lighter athletes.

Event 2

15-minute Cindy. Here, we wanted an event that favored the lighter athletes who might not fare so well on the deadlift event.

Event 3

The Equalizer: 5 rounds for time of run 200 meters, 5 thrusters (115/80 lb.) and 10 burpees. This was the workout that could potentially determine the overall winner, someone who had good capacity in multiple components of fitness.

Each athlete would be assigned points based on order of finishing, as in the 2009 and 2010 CrossFit Games, with the lowest point total determining the overall winner.

Competition for Rookies

With the workouts designed, we picked a date and were underway. Within a week our team was excited, dedicated and looking forward to the event. The competition was called the Left Coast Invitational and was to be hosted by CrossFit Mission Gorge. The other affiliates were CrossFit Elysium, CrossFit La Jolla and CrossFit San Diego. All the affiliates agreed not to release the WODs beforehand, and our members continued to train just as they had been with no special modifications. Additionally, the affiliates had a “gentlemen’s agreement” that athletes with prior sectional or regional experience would not enter. After all, our primary goal was to allow the newer athletes to compete in a less-intimidating environment.

**“Success is the peace of mind
which is a direct result of
self-satisfaction in knowing
you made the effort to
become the best you are
capable of becoming.”**

—John Wooden

Two months flew by, and suddenly it was the day of the competition. For most of our athletes, it would be their first competition of any kind. Leon had a lot of experience coaching youth swimming and soccer, but coaching athletes during a competition was new to Paul. It remained to be seen whether we would be effective coaches in a competition setting. We were looking forward to this experience, both for ourselves and our athletes.

Our main concern was that the event remained about having fun. We didn’t want to turn into “little-league dads” who are only concerned about winning and take the fun right out of the event. Our second concern was helping the athletes mentally prepare for the events ahead and helping them plan in order for them to place as well as possible. We don’t know who was more nervous—our athletes or us.

We weren’t competing. Our bodies were not being put on the line and tested. It was probably similar to watching a child in his or her first music recital or first big game. We knew that once they started it was all up to the athletes. Our job as coaches was essentially done. Had we designed the right workouts to prepare them? Had we talked to them enough about how to mentally stay sharp during the WOD? We would soon find out.

For the max-effort deadlift event, we talked with each athlete, getting each to visualize what the 10 minutes would feel like. The strategy was individualized for everyone. All they had to wait for was, “3,2,1 ... Go!” Once the workout began the place exploded, and PRs were being set left and right. We had athletes setting new PRs ranging from 2 lb. all the way up to 80 lb. After each rep, we gave them the exact amount of time to rest and how much to add to the bar (most of the time our athletes didn’t even know what was on the bar).



As hard as they are, CrossFit workouts are also a great deal of fun.



Ben Beal from CrossFit Elysium lifts 485 lb. for a 40-lb. PR and a first-event win.

Our top male, Ben Beal, pulled 485, which was a 40-lb. PR. Our top female, Tiffany Gilmartin, pulled 285 lb., giving our affiliate a victory in both divisions. In addition, Brian L. tied for second with a 455-lb. pull, and we had two ladies, Stacie Beal and Danielle Saunders, also tie for second with 275. Karla Wagner pulled a 30-lb. PR, and with only 40 seconds left Paul told her to throw on 5 lb. extra to go for one last attempt. She quickly slid the weight on and got her hands on the bar. The whole room was yelling as she locked the weight out just in time.

We'd like to think in some small way our coaching helped the athletes achieve more than they could have on their own.

At this point in the day, we found our particular coaching style was something that our athletes were responding to. We weren't telling people that a workout was going to be easy. We found ourselves telling people, "You know this is a strong suit of yours. You know you can do really well on this one, so don't let yourself do less than you know you can." Every member went into the event expecting great things from himself or herself.

Additionally, we provided specific movement cues for athletes who needed them or reminded them of specific strategies we had discussed beforehand; i.e., "Don't push the run." We'd like to think in some small way our coaching helped the athletes achieve more than they could have on their own.

For the second event, both our men and women again claimed the top spots in the WOD, with honors going to Brian and Karla. Our other athletes also performed very well, in particular our ladies, who turned in many of the top performances. Karla had the distinction of outperforming every athlete, male or female, other than Brian.

After the second event, there was a break for the officials to tally the scores and regroup the athletes in order from lowest to highest ranking. Two of our ladies were tied for first, and one of our men was sitting in first. As coaches, we were already proud of our athletes for working so hard, but after getting that information, we were ecstatic. There's an extra little bit of pride that comes when you see your athletes give their all and it carries them to the summit of victory.

After the final event was finished and the points were counted, CrossFit Elysium had taken first (Karla) and second (Stacie) place for the women and first place (Brian) for the men. Brandon Verdon and Alessandra Wall each claimed fifth place, making it five of the top ten slots overall.

Awards and Rewards

After the awards were done we made sure to go around to our athletes and ask them if they were happy with the day. All of them had nothing but positive things to say. They were all proud of their efforts and knew they had worked to the limits of their capabilities. This was music to our ears—hearing our athletes talk about how much fun they had and how they would love to do it again. All of them expressed thanks for our coaching, and almost all of them told us that it made the event better. They said they felt very prepared for every event and had a confidence that helped them perform better than they thought they could.

Several of us grabbed drinks after the event, and Paul couldn't wipe the smile off his face. He told our athletes that he was more proud of them than he had ever been of himself. There is something so special about helping other people find an internal fire and drive and watching them turn it on and unleash what you always knew they were capable of. The feelings and memories we have of this weekend will remain forever and will bring smiles to our faces every time we remember them.



About the Authors

Paul Estrada (top) and Leon Chang (bottom) are both Level 1 certified trainers. They founded and opened [CrossFit Elysium](#) this past January after Leon's garage gym became a bit too crowded. In the past year, they have loved every minute of working with athletes of all levels to help them advance within the CrossFit program. With their experience in this recent competition, they are absolutely thrilled and looking forward to taking some of these athletes to sectionals next year.