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Today's WOD: A Half-Marathon

To Anders Varner, a half-marathon is "just another workout."
Hilary Achauer reports.

By Hilary Achauer

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CrossFit Invictus

It came out of his mouth before he thought about what he was saying: "I bet I could run a half-marathon using only CrossFit as my training. No running."

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Hilary Achauer

Anders Varner wanted to know if pull-ups and box jumps would make him fit enough for a half-marathon.

Anders Varner, co-owner of CrossFit PB in San Diego, Calif., was talking to Patrick, a member who regularly runs marathons and triathlons. Anders was describing how the CrossFit philosophy of weightlifting and short, explosive exercises is much better training than going out and logging 10 miles a day, and he got a little carried away. He wasn't prepared for what Patrick said next.

"You're on. The Carlsbad Half Marathon, Jan. 23. We'll do it together."

Just Another Workout ...

Anders is not a runner. In fact, he hates it. A former competitive ice-hockey player, Anders is strong, coordinated and flexible. He will happily back-squat 385 lb., can clean 285 and can easily do a 2:37 Fran, but ask him to run a mile and he grimaces and offers to do 100 pull-ups instead.

However, Anders believes in CrossFit. He discovered CrossFit four years ago, received his Level 1 certificate in April 2010, and opened CrossFit PB with Bryan Boorstein in June of that same year. He's passionate about the effectiveness of CrossFit as a foundation for any athletic endeavor.

"CrossFit improves performance in every sport. It provides a base of speed, coordination, power and stamina that every athlete should possess," he said. "When an athlete is well rounded, not only will the performance improve, but he or she will be prepared for the unknown and the unknowable. And I bet most distance runners and triathletes couldn't come in here and kill a three-minute Fran."

Much has been written about combining CrossFit with running to improve performance in endurance events. However, Anders wanted to know what would happen if an athlete did almost no running in preparation for a half-marathon but simply treated it as another WOD. This would be a true test of the effectiveness of CrossFit, as well as its broad applicability across a variety of sports.

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Before Anders agreed to run the half-marathon, the longest distance he had ever run was four miles. Other than a six-mile run about two weeks before the half-marathon, Anders kept to his usual training schedule, which included an hour and a half of Olympic lifting and one or two short conditioning workouts. His philosophy is that as a true athlete, you should be prepared for whatever challenge comes your way.



Theodora Valovska

Without a lot of running experience, Varner went out too fast when the half-marathon began.

In addition to an Olympic weightlifting program three days a week, Anders fits in a traditional CrossFit WOD five to six days a week. Early in the month he hit Bulger, which is 10 rounds of a 150-meter run, 7 chest-to-bar pull-ups, 7 front squats of 135 lb., and 7 handstand push-ups. A few days later he did a 15-minute AMRAP of 5 muscle-ups and 10 70-lb. kettlebell swings. In order to increase his strength and flexibility, Anders asked a member who is also a gymnastics coach teach him how to do a backflip. For Anders, every day brings a new way to push himself, and he tackles every new challenge with a grin.

"I wanted to approach this challenge as if I had come in one day and the WOD on the whiteboard was 'run a half-marathon in under two hours.'"

When it came time for the race, Anders was in the midst of preparing himself for the Reebok CrossFit Games Open. Because his strategy was to approach the workout like another WOD, he didn't deviate from his training plan the day before the race. He completed a heavy day of his Olympic-lifting program, including 3 reps each of a 200-lb. snatch and a 235-lb. clean and jerk, and 2 305-lb. front squats 3 times.

When race day dawned, Anders wasn't nervous.

"People find their comfort zone in odd ways," he said, "and mine just happens to be challenging my body physically. When you have done Fran or Helen 20 times in your life and you realize you aren't going to die, most challenges become more of a mental test than a physical one. I was more concerned that I wouldn't be able to handle the mental side of running 13.1 miles than having my body break down on me, but I was excited to see how I would do and put my training to the test."

When Anders arrived at the starting line, instead of shirtless men with baggy shorts and women in tiny Lycra shorts and knee socks, he saw people in high-cut running shorts, visors and, most surprising, runners huddled under trash bags, which they would then shed, like a second skin, once they started running and warmed up.

Then the race began. Anders started out fast, and the first five miles were relatively easy for him. Anders was running 7:15 splits, which, in retrospect, he thinks was too fast a pace for that long of a race.

"As Greg Glassman says, 'You fail at the margins of your experience,'" Anders said. "My experience was with short, intense CrossFit WODs, not two-hour-long road races."

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your experience,'"**

—Anders Varner

He ran with Patrick for about four miles, and then Patrick pulled ahead, telling Anders he should have paced himself.

The Carlsbad Half Marathon is a down-and-back course, so when Anders hit the halfway point and turned around, his mental game started to slide. It suddenly hit him that he had to run all the way back to where he had started. His body felt fine, his heart rate came way down, and he experienced a sense of calm. However, he was used to workouts that lasted, at the most, 30 minutes. He was used to loud music, clanking weights and sweaty people shouting encouragement. He wasn't sure if he could continue without some sort of mental stimulation.

Anders turned on a podcast to distract himself but found it slowed him down. His mind wasn't focused on running.



"I had to turn the iPod off so I could keep a decent pace," he said. "I really felt fine through 10 miles, especially considering this was significantly longer than I had ever run in my life. I was having a hard time without any mental stimulation, but the physical side was exactly how I wanted things to be."

***Varner craving deadlifts
during his long run.***

Then Anders hit the last three miles. Right after Mile 10 his running form fell apart. He began running with an awkward shuffle step, and his joints began to ache. It brought home how bad running form will quickly wear down your body, and he understood firsthand how people who run a lot of races have the potential to suffer from injuries due to poor form and overtraining.

"I think the first 10 miles were a direct result of my physical conditioning. CrossFit allowed me to run 10 miles without pain and at a pretty solid pace. The last three miles were the equivalent to the mental strength one needs to push themselves through the last mile of Murph," said Anders. "Because of the mental and physical strength I've gained through CrossFit, I don't think there is an amount of work that can break me.

"As CrossFitters, we push ourselves every day to our limits. You have to have a mentality that nothing will break you. No matter what someone throws at me, I will finish, and I will find a way to succeed. I may lose the race because I lack the sport specificity or experience, but it is going to be tough to get me to quit. I have yet to encounter many things that are harder than your first Fran—or a 2:37 Fran."

As hard as the last three miles were, Anders says they were not as hard as a 20-rep back squat or a regular afternoon session at CrossFit PB.

"CrossFit is the best way to train the mind and body I have ever found in my life," he said.

Anders kept going, and he finished with a time of 1:49:58. The race was over, and he felt terrible. Although he had a base level of training that allowed him to finish, he didn't have the sport-specific training to make running 13.1 miles anything but brutal. When I asked Anders if he had an endorphin rush at the end, the famed runner's high, he said, "No. All I wanted was some protein, fat and fruit, but they only had sugar-filled energy bars. Drinking water is good to rehydrate, but it wasn't going to help me recover. I didn't get to eat a normal meal for over an hour after the race. This was terrible planning, and I really beat myself up even worse not having proper nutrition ready for the end of the race."

In the days following the race, Anders felt an overall flu-like illness. He was used to being sore, but his body didn't know how to recover from the stimulus of a two-hour run. He took the next day, Monday, off, but on Tuesday he went back to Olympic lifting and set a snatch PR of 210 lb. On Wednesday it was back to conditioning work.

"Because I was also in the middle of CrossFit Open prep, I wasn't able to take a full week off," he said.

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—Anders Varner

Anders is glad he ran the race, but he's not signing up for any marathons—or half-marathons—anytime soon.

"I think my motive to prove our training works and should be used by all athletes, no matter the sport, was confirmed," he said. "The reason we kill ourselves in the gym is to go out and have the ability to experience life to the fullest. Without CrossFit, I doubt I would have the ability to do something like this on a whim."

Learn and Play New Sports

It's easy to get wrapped up in the competitive side of CrossFit, especially as the 2011 CrossFit Games get underway. Competition is good, and it brings out the best in many people, but it's also important to enjoy the experience as much as the result. To look for new challenges, to see what our bodies can do—that's what lies at the heart of CrossFit.

Back in the safety of his CrossFit box, sitting on a 30-inch plywood box on a chalk-smeared floor, Anders talked about what the experience meant to him. He looked around at members in the midst of a WOD, hauling weighted barbells over their heads again and again, and he said, "The purpose of all of this is the experience and the journey. Going outside of our comfort zones and still succeeding at some level—that is why we're here. Any of the feelings, emotions, sickness, triumph and pain that go into a race or a WOD are just small steps in one's lifelong pursuit of fitness."



Courtesy of Hilary Achauer

About the Author

Hilary Achauer is an award-winning freelance writer and editor with a background in marketing and communications. An amateur-boxer-turned-CrossFitter, Hilary specializes in health-and-wellness content, focusing on emerging fitness trends. Her writing has been featured in a leading online parenting magazine as well as a number of travel and lifestyle publications. She is an editor for Frommer's travel guides and writes websites, brochures, blogs and newsletters for universities, start-ups, entrepreneurs, accounting and financial service organizations, and management consultants. She lives in San Diego with her husband and two small children and spends most of her free time at CrossFit PB. To contact her, visit HilaryAchauer.com.