
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

California Via Europe?

Blair Morrison finished seventh at the 2009 CrossFit Games and is working to get back to the competition while studying in Europe. Living abroad has brought its share of challenges—and rewards.

By Blair Morrison

May 2010



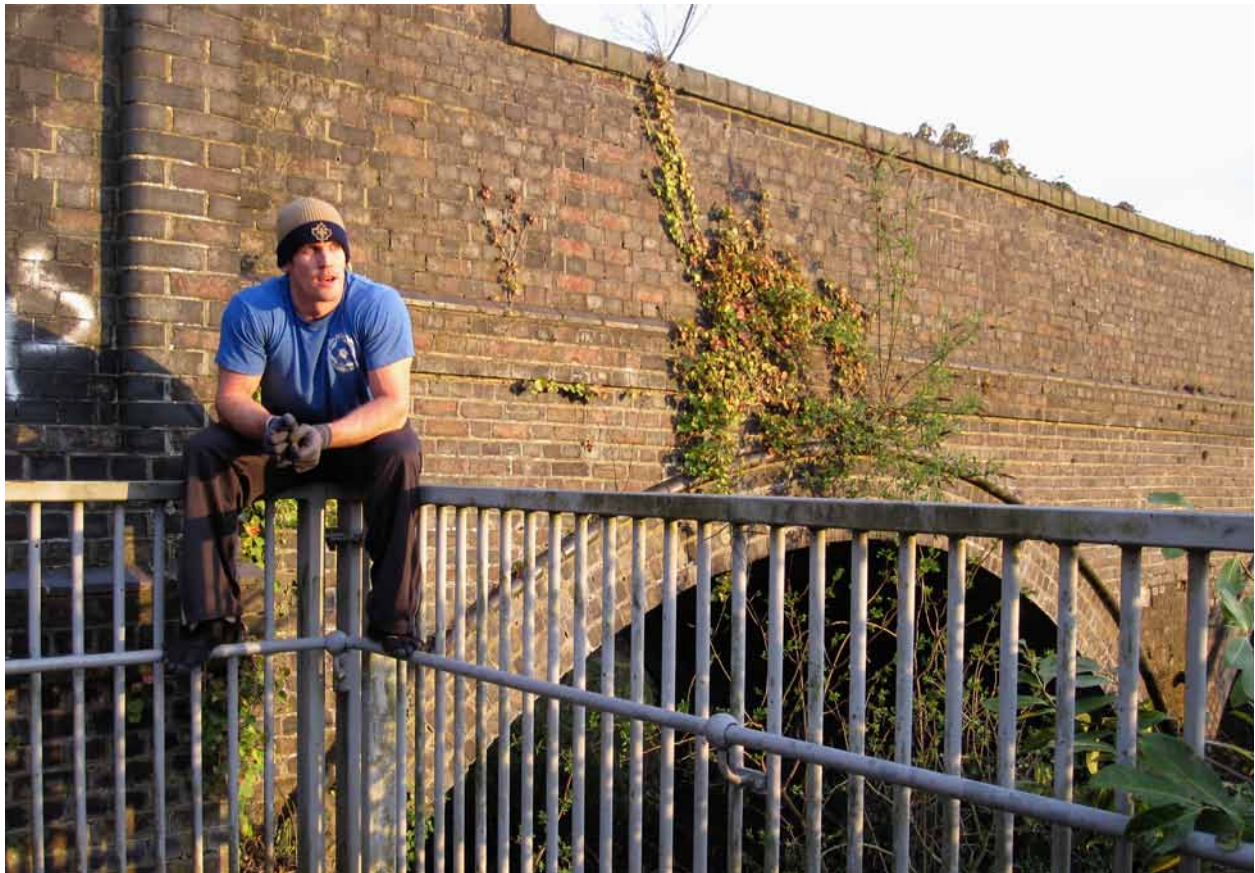
All images courtesy of Blair Morrison.

It is now just weeks until the European Regional Qualifier in Halmstad, Sweden, an event I have essentially been preparing for since last summer's final WOD in Aromas.

Aside from the 20 or so minutes immediately following the sandbag sprint, when I swore I had retired from CrossFit, it has been my fullest intention to return to the Games. Finishing seventh in 2009, my hopes for this year were to improve my weaknesses and come back for another shot at the top five this July. To say I've taken a road less travelled in preparation for that shot would be a mild understatement.

For those of you who aren't familiar with my situation, I am currently cutting a path across the Old Continent, where I stand at the three-quarter point in my pursuit of a master's degree in European history. My program has required me to live very light as I dwell and study in the Netherlands, France and now England. When afforded the time, I have pushed further out, travelling to Germany, the Czech Republic, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland and Italy.

During the course of these experiences I've never had what you might call a "home gym." I've had no consistent training partners. My regimen has, for the most part, been a solitary endeavor, the circumstances of which required many modifications on my part. The food people eat, how they spend their leisure time, what they consider exercise—these things differ drastically from place to place, and nowhere have they been like they are back home. My preparation for the Games has had to be flexible, creative, portable and cheap.



Blair Morrison's gym looks different than you might expect, but he's confident that its real-world challenges have prepared him for the road to the CrossFit Games.

Would You Like Vegetables With Your Bread?

My first month in the Netherlands, I wasn't convinced I would participate in the qualifiers this year. Without facilities or training partners, it just didn't seem possible to maintain a level commensurate with what was necessary to be competitive. Not to mention, the budget I was on didn't exactly allow for top-end supplementation or high-quality organic food. Every place I moved, my first order of business was testing out the local grocers for quality, selection and price, and it didn't look good.

**I dare anyone to find a meal
on a French menu that
doesn't include bread, cheese
or a heavy cream sauce. I'm
convinced it doesn't exist.**



***Forced to adapt to his environment, Morrison
had to be unbelievably creative in his quest
to stay at an elite level of fitness.***



After a few weeks of experimentation, I realized the Euro was not my friend (outpacing the U.S. dollar at a 1.5:1 clip). If I was going to eat enough to support the high volume of training I intended to maintain, I would have to cut corners and find ways to "trim the fat," so to speak. And I did, learning which foods were worth their weight and which were superfluous, as well as where to find the best deals. I streamlined my diet and did my best to cook every meal. But, in both Leiden and Paris, all I had was a hotplate on which to cook, and when I travelled to other cities or ate out with classmates, I found myself in, at best, quasi-controllable circumstances. I dare anyone to find a meal on a French menu that doesn't include bread, cheese or a heavy cream sauce. I'm convinced it doesn't exist.

All these restrictions forced me to hybridize my diet into a workable medium between getting enough calories to refuel my tanks and eating clean enough to maximize my performance. I was searing salmon and beef on the frying pan, chopping up chicken and pork for stir-fries, and throwing as many vegetables as I could into the mix. I had abandoned grains in my stab at the Paleo experiment, so



WOD: Scale bridge for time (additional weight optional).

locating a market that sold sweet potatoes was like finding an untapped oil reservoir. I ate them with everything. Eggs, chicken, steak—you name it.

In Paris I discovered shredded coconut—game over. I was making coconut curry, coconut turkey and veggie/coconut omelettes. I ate tons of hard cheese, both because it contained a lot of calories and fat and because it made just about every meal palatable. I had nuts every day, throwing together my own trail mixes to eat on the trains and between classes. Variety is hard to come by when always shopping the same stores, but in sub-optimal conditions you learn to deal with the nuisance of habit.

Overall, I enjoyed the creative ingenuity it took to wring the best out of my food situation, but it's never fun to feel squeezed. I missed being able to grill things, bake things and grab lunch without wondering if I'd find a meal *sans baguette*. If anything, this part of the experience taught me more about what I didn't need than what I did, and I'm better for it. Now that I have room to breathe, I know the best kind of air with which to fill my lungs.

Old Country, Old-School Gear

In addition to the impending food crisis, it was immediately apparent upon my arrival in Holland that readily accessible bumper plates, medicine balls, barbells and kettlebells were a thing of the past. Hefty price tags and machine-driven fitness in Paris only made matters worse. Coping with the absence of my chosen training environment was a process that forced me to fundamentally redefine my concept of fitness. I still rooted it in objective criteria such as strength, stamina, speed, accuracy, etc., but I had to find less-conventional ways of testing myself in these areas.

Where I initially searched only for proper boxes with Olympic platforms and pull-up racks, I began searching instead for areas within my locale that could serve in their stead. I began mentally adjusting what a "workout" consisted of, looking more for pieces I could fit together rather than an already-polished whole. Every place I lived or visited grew into a city-wide gym: every ledge became a pull-up station and every hill was a treadmill. I found myself constantly scanning for useable materials, testing lips and balconies, and contemplating distances, bridge lengths and heights of buildings. My two most valuable pieces of equipment were an old docking rope I picked up along the canal in Leiden and a couch-cushion slip cover that I filled with sand, dirt and gravel. My method was evolving, and I along with it.

Honestly, it felt great. More and more, I found myself training outside the gym and loving it. Urban or rural environment, city street or barren trail, training outside just felt different. With simple tools and a creative outlook, I was working just as hard as I ever had (probably harder) yet finding I was more satisfied. My workouts felt more integrated, more natural and more fun. Why? Because I was forging a physical connection with my environment, using natural features to gauge my fitness rather than simulated ones, and because I was breeding confidence in my ability to overcome even the most unpredictable challenge.

I was forging a physical connection with my environment, using natural features to gauge my fitness rather than simulated ones.

If we think about an average day in an average life, this connection is rarely made. After all, a great challenge in someone's physical world could be changing the filter in the coffee machine. Most people proudly spend every ounce of their energy avoiding physical challenges, as though that were the rightful culmination of the modern civilization experiment: Here we stand on the shoulders of our ancestors so that we no longer have to stand.

Physical challenge is saved for the gym, for those 30-90 minutes spent under incandescent track lighting and overhead fans, pushing our limits in controlled space. It's a split existence, really. Modern fitness is born, bred and assessed in a vacuum but rarely tested in the field. I was of this mindset until that first month of my program last September, trapped by a paradigm that defines fitness in a prerequisite location. Now, I cry for the individual who runs 5 miles a day five days a week and never gets a sunburn. I pity the man who does endless pull-ups and never sees anything above the bar. For me, those days are gone.

Again, sometimes it takes necessity to find invention, and that's what happened. Somewhere between bear-crawling 12th-century stairs in Holland and deadlifting stones in Sicily, it clicked in my head: not only was this brand of fitness more suitable to a life outside the gym, but it was



"But those thick pull-up bars really, really hurt my hands, coach."

also the very definition of CrossFit proper. Total fitness is not when you've mastered a wide range of prescribed workouts or skills (body weight/heavy load, endurance/power, etc.). Those are merely building blocks. The ultimate is when you can meet *any* challenge in *any* environment with *any* set of tools. I realized that I could test my aerobic capacity just as effectively running up the Eiffel Tower as I could rowing 2K. I found that a chipper using nothing but farm equipment could be more challenging than one using all the latest balls, bells and bars. These were revelations that led me on a series of physical adventures I never could have imagined but now have me literally prepared for anything.

Ponder this: 100 of the world's fittest athletes show up to the 2010 CrossFit Games ready to compete after months and years of training varied movement patterns and energy pathways. Dave Castro gets on the microphone to read the workouts aloud, and as he does everyone realizes there isn't a single barbell event. Or all pull-ups are to be done on a rack built of 3-inch rectangular piping. Or, heaven forbid, there's a pool. How prepared would those 100 athletes be? How varied would the months and years of programming look then? I'm not saying it will happen that way, or that it should—only that it could, and it'd be completely within the bounds of program variability. If we prepare for a non-gym world by doing gym-specific exercises with gym-specific equipment, all we'll be is unprepared.

Until my European experience, gyms were a crutch on which I leaned too heavily. I see that now. To be clear, I would not choose to live without them. If I hadn't found "the room that time forgot" in Leiden or the basement P.E. classroom in Paris, I wouldn't be as prepared as I am today. Building strength, technique and skill with certain fundamental movement patterns is most effectively done in a controlled environment, and there's much to be gained from having a place to go when the weather turns bad. I love Olympic lifting, doing WODs like Fight Gone Bad and Fran, and sucking every bit of advantage I can from training in a space surrounded by like minds (this is the real beating heart of any box, not the equipment). But the confidence gained from pushing myself to the limit in a truly unpredictable setting cannot be simulated.



*The arch is a common feature of early architecture.
The CrossFitter is not.*

**Until my European
experience, gyms were
a crutch on which I
leaned too heavily.**



When you're outside, you are presented with endless sensory input: wind, noise, temperature, visual space, etc. There's constant variation in the tools you use, be it bags, beams, bridges, walls, ropes, hills, cars or people. An environment with this much possibility stimulates creativity and breeds confidence in the individual's ability to overcome all things. The more stuff you use and the more tools you touch, the greater the connectivity you create and the greater the belief in your own ability to master your surroundings. Such is the ultimate brand of fitness, in my opinion.

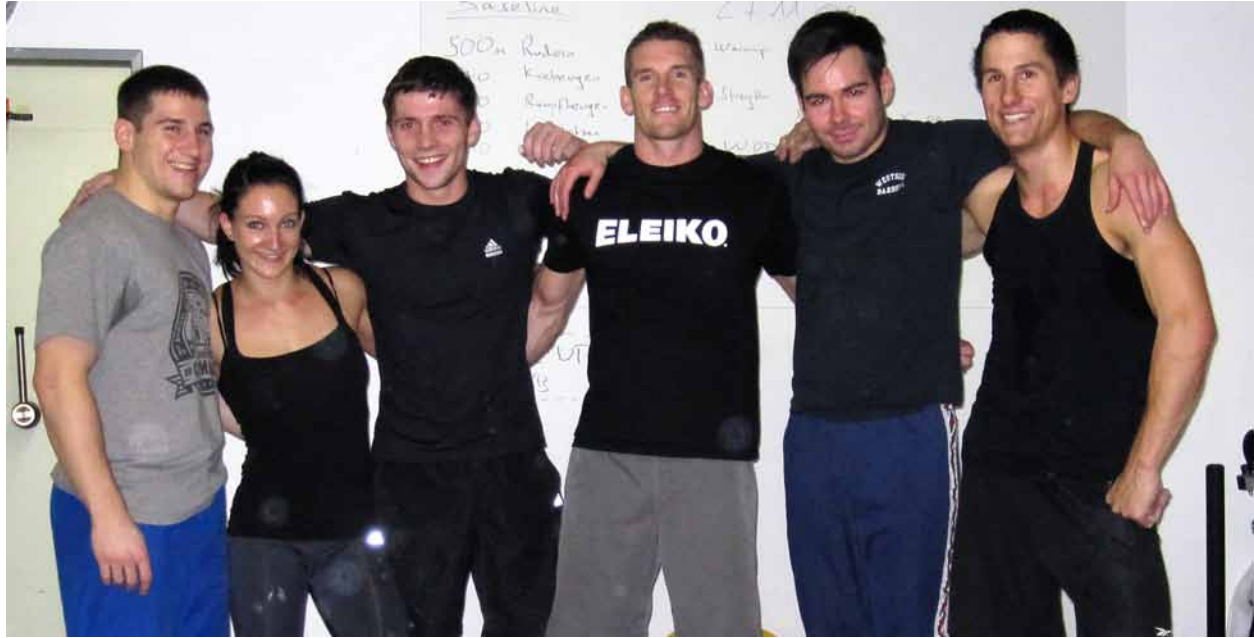
In many ways, being forced to create my "gym" from day to day was a motivating experience. Knowing there was no whiteboard to tell me what to do, understanding that the WOD I did was unlikely to be replicated by anyone anywhere—these were powerful stimulants. But I'd be lying if I said it didn't get lonely. And tiring. Most days the excitement for what I had planned was enough to get my best effort. Recently, having the qualifiers on the horizon has carried me through. But on those days when I was mentally lukewarm, physically sore and all-around tired, I needed something in the foreground, up in my face, telling me how much of a pussy I was for not giving everything I had. On those days I missed my gym, and I really missed having someone there to show me the way.

Discovering the European Community

So, again, I came to the point of revelation. It's an uncomfortable fact that I hated admitting, but I needed short-term goals, reachable standards and ways to measure myself. And, more than anything, I needed support. Never underestimate the power of commiseration. It's the glue that holds communities together, especially this one.

Luckily for me, this is an age of unprecedented accessibility, where commiseration comes in droves and is only a mouse click away. I found the support, the short-term goals and the never-ending measuring stick I needed by tapping these resources. After a few weeks struggling with things in the Netherlands, I did a Google search for affiliates near me, near places I would be living or near places I wanted to visit. I sent out e-mails explaining my situation and my interest in the growth of CrossFit in Europe, not expecting much in return. Within 24 hours I had nearly 20 responses from across Europe. I was in contact with trainers and athletes in Berlin, Prague, Ansbach, Copenhagen and London. That would balloon to include Brussels, Manchester, Newcastle, Basel, Utrecht, Milan, Stockholm, Israel and more. I found myself registered for competitions in Sweden and Denmark, planning trips to train with people I had never met, and exchanging ideas regarding programming, diet and recovery with perfect strangers via Facebook and Blogspot. Turns out I wasn't so alone after all.

**The past eight months I've
ran, climbed, swam, lifted,
pushed, pulled, dragged
and carried my way into top
shape in spite of any and all
infrastructural shortcomings.**



With a little exploration, Morrison found that the CrossFit community is growing quickly in Europe, and he made a host of friends all over the continent.

It's an inarguable beauty of CrossFit, this sense of community, and it goes far beyond the membership of any single affiliate. The network is insane and it's available. My need for camaraderie led me down a path that was completely unnecessary in normal training conditions and, as a result, I feel more integrated than ever. I sought advice from giants, writing Coach Burgener and Louie Simmons on separate occasions, and was rewarded with kindness and enthusiasm. When I follow what my friends at CrossFit Copenhagen and CrossFit Butcher's Lab are doing, I work harder. When I witness affiliate owners starting from scratch, working 18-hour days and helping their members achieve, I'm inspired to achieve. When people write my blog to say they beat a time or set a record, I want to do the same.

Conversing and training with people from different backgrounds and with different approaches, people who have creative ideas about how to test human potential, have only enhanced my conditioning these past eight months. Competing against my peers at their respective local challenges reminded me what it takes to perform at the highest level under the heaviest stress. It's broadened the base of support and friendship that I'll draw on for the

rest of my life and made me truly appreciate how closely knit this sweater is. These are advantages I otherwise would not have had.

When I started my master's program last fall, I expected keeping up with training to be hard, inconvenient and grueling. I had no idea. My nomadic lifestyle has incurred more than its share of training obstacles, from constantly being forced to pick up and move to always searching for CrossFit-friendly facilities to never knowing where to find eggs for breakfast. Dealing with these issues can understandably wear down a person's resolve over time. Consistent programming is a challenge when aches, pains and lack of enthusiasm are your biggest roadblocks, but try keeping up with the Joneses when your instruments and locations change daily and no one is around to make you look the fool for not putting out top effort.

But even this cloud had its silver lining. Sure, I had no one to push me, and sure, I was largely training without proper equipment, but, as is so often the case, limitation was accompanied by opportunity. The past eight months I've ran, climbed, swam, lifted, pushed, pulled, dragged and carried my way into top shape in spite of any and

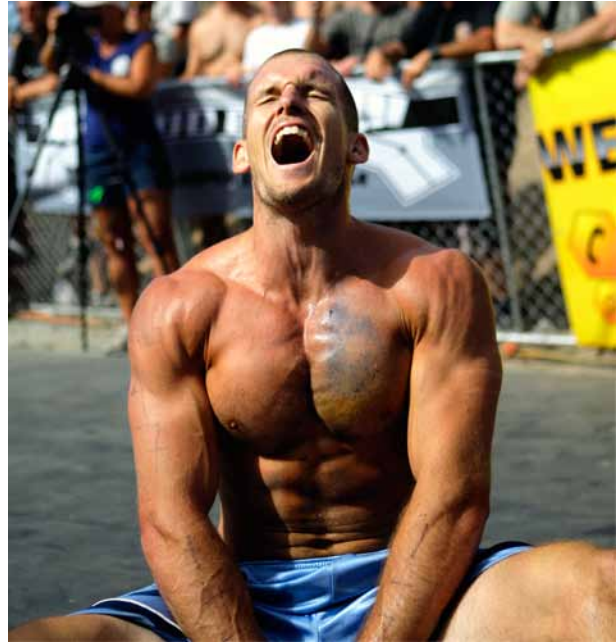
all infrastructural shortcomings. It hasn't been ideal and it hasn't been easy, but here I am, ready to compete. I've drawn on intensity and camaraderie transmitted through ethernet cables and, in the process, gained life-long friends, training partners and mentors. I've forced myself to reinterpret daily environments and to ignore past assumptions telling me I needed four walls and a ceiling to train. This has injected a new life and exhilaration into workouts that I never felt before. The "limitations" of this experience have, in fact, been truly liberating.

Heading to the regionals in Sweden, I feel anything but alone and everything but unprepared. I know many of the competitors personally, having trained and/or exchanged e-mails with them during the course of our shared preparation, and I cannot wait to lace up alongside them. I feel strong, fit and ready to chew glass. My road to this point has had more trials with fewer advantages than most people I'll be competing against, so I feel tested.

But whether the unconventional circumstances of the past year have produced enough cheddar to get me back to the CrossFit Games isn't really at issue. I heard Chris Spealler say last year before the trail run that he has to remind himself that he is not his performance—that his performance does not ultimately define him as a person. Of all the comments I overheard or watched in the trailers afterwards, his was the best said. My experience since September has been unforgettable and valuable beyond my result in any competitive event. I wouldn't change it.

If I DNF the first WOD or make it all the way to the finals only to finish one point back of qualifying, I'll be crushed. I'll hate it. But not because I missed out on eight months of training in a proper gym. The benefits outlined above far outweigh that cost. Ultimately, my performance at the qualifiers won't justify or condemn this experience, just write the next chapter in it.

Hopefully that chapter takes place at the 2010 Games.



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 Master's 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 the physical challenges and the mental fortitude that comes from the ability to overcome them. Follow Blair's travels at [Anywherfit](#).