

the **CrossFit**[®] JOURNAL ARTICLES

CrossFit Europe, Part 2

Blair Morrison wins the Eleiko Scandinavian CrossFit Challenge but finds he isn't the only victor. He believes it's proof that CrossFit has created a new competitive standard.

Blair Morrison



Courtesy of Alex Battisti

It is late Monday night, and I have just returned from Halmstad, Sweden, the site of the 2009 Eleiko Scandinavian CrossFit Challenge. Conservatively a half day's trek from my current home in the Netherlands, this trip was worth its weight in train-conductor's ticket stubs. Even after five grueling WODs, countless hours in transit and a noticeably consistent lack of sleep, I'm still buzzing from the experience.

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Courtesy of Alex Battisti



3-2-1... Go! The Eleiko Scandinavian CrossFit Challenge started off with a kettlebell run made more challenging by cool temperatures.

The Trip From Hell

I left Leiden at 12 p.m. on Friday afternoon (Oct. 30), expecting to meet friends in northern Germany six to seven hours later. After changing trains five times—twice incorrectly—I arrived in Kiel at 8:40 p.m. “Nightmarish” doesn’t quite capture this initial leg of my travel experience. In addition to the extra time and effort required to rework the mistakes I had made, I had the added stress of thinking I had missed my Berlin friends due to my incompetence.

Pulling up to the final station, I was already working through contingency plans to cope with my inevitable stranded-ness. Luckily, my friends were still there, only having arrived 20 minutes prior. Needless to say, it was a relief to not have been left behind.

From there we drove six hours to Halmstad, Sweden, crossing a few monstrous bridges and traversing the Nordic coastline for much of the voyage. We arrived just after 3 a.m. (bear in mind that the first event was set to start at 9 a.m.). That’s roughly 15 hours of travel for those of you keeping track. The return leg of the journey provided more of the same: we missed a ferry and I had to stay the night in Berlin rather than trek back across the continent in the dead of night. All told, I think I logged 32 hours of car/train/ferry time on this trip.

I mention these details only to place my overall feeling for the weekend in the proper perspective: the event was so well organized, the people were so great, and I enjoyed the experience so much that I emerged happy in spite of my travel woes.

Great People, Great Equipment

First, the spread was impressive. The Eleiko facility was beautiful, large and nicely tucked away on the edge of town. For all events, we were using state-of-the-art equipment (incredible bars, brand new kettlebells, chrome-plated bumper plates, etc). The place was, in a word, loaded.

Equally prepared for our arrival was the staff, supplied mostly by [CrossFit Nordic](#) and [Crossfit Uppsala](#) out of Stockholm. These guys, led by Mads Jacobsen and Martin Altemark, were organized, friendly, professional and incredibly encouraging during every event. They set the tone for the entire competition with their enthusiasm, intensity and welcoming demeanor.

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The author picked up the pace on Lap 2 of the first WOD and managed to finish on top—but only by one second.

The competitors covered a broad spectrum of nationalities, with representatives from Sweden, Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands and Belarus. All told, I think there were 30-40 competitors, male and female combined, all of whom I found to be very interesting, kind and dedicated people. I'm actually looking forward to spending time with many of them in the coming months when I visit Copenhagen and southern Germany.

The combination of facility, staff and competitors created an atmosphere that permeated the competition—an atmosphere that reminded me very much of the Mid-Atlantic Qualifier I went to last April in Virginia Beach, and of the CrossFit Games in Aromas this past summer. People were motivated without hostility, focused without stress, driven to achieve but also interested in the success of others. This is very different than the environment you encounter in most competitive arenas, and it is, in many ways, the defining memory I took with me from Sweden.

There were five events total—three on Saturday, two on Sunday—and they proved strong tests of a broad range of skills and modalities.

WOD 1 — Oct. 31, 9 a.m.
1K run with 16 kg kettlebell

First, this was more than 1K run. I would put it closer to 1.5—not quite a mile, but very close. The course was the perimeter of the Eleiko facility twice. As the Berlin guys and I arrived late due to navigation troubles, we were split between the last two heats, giving us the benefit of seeing the course but the detriment of a poor warm-up. The challenges for this event were the cold air, the awkwardness of the kettlebell and the extra weight. Propping it on one shoulder proved the best technique, but I must have switched shoulders six times during the run. My traps were pretty bruised from the jostling.

The first lap wasn't too bad, but it's just hard to get air into the lungs when it's cold and you're supporting extra weight above your heart. I came around in 3:40 and decided I needed to pick it up a bit if I wanted to catch the leader in the clubhouse at 7:27. I pushed harder—I really started feeling my legs—and could feel the fatigue affecting the stability of the weight.

Still, I was able to finish hard and cross the line in 7:26, which turned out to be a very good thing. Even with the extra effort I was still six seconds slower than my initial lap, and I only edged the competition by one second. Afterward, my legs were completely jellied, leaving me a little unsure for the rest of the day. But I had posted the best time in the first event, and I had to be happy with that.

WOD 2 — Oct. 31, 1 p.m.
50 double-unders
30 overhead anyhows (60 kg)
50 double-unders

Going into this workout, I had a pretty decent idea of what to expect. I took the double-unders methodically and planned to break the lifting into sets of 10. First set I did 10, took three breaths, then did six. I could feel my legs from the first WOD, so I stepped back for a second, then did four more quickly. On the last set, rather than going for all 10 in one go, I decided to split them into fives. Just this short break saved my legs a ton. The overhead portion of the movement felt fine the whole way. The last 50 double-unders went smoothly, and I finished in 3:46. I think the next best time was 4:45. I felt relatively little fatigue after this event compared to the first, but I was definitely still tired.

WOD 3 — Oct. 31, 4 p.m.

4-minute Tabata row for meters

In this WOD, the erg only let you record distance for 20 seconds at a time, then it stopped for 10 seconds. No credit for coasting or for rowing during the rest time. This was a great way to test recovery and work maximum effort for short intervals.

I didn't expect to do too well in this event, mostly because it favors taller, heavier guys because of their stroke length. I went into it trying to shorten my stroke and make up for the length difference with rate. This worked well for the first four rounds (I was averaging around 110 meters per round), but from there I started to lose steam. I think a slower approach at the start may have paid off. I still managed to pull 865 meters, sixth best, but my ass and hamstrings were practically cramped afterwards. I hate rowing, period.



Courtesy of Alex Battisti

A Tabata row for meters gave Morrison a chance to renew his hatred for rowing.

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WOD 4 — Nov. 1, 8 a.m.

Max-weight deadlift (in 4 minutes)

Max air squats (in 4 minutes)

Strategy was key here. Watching the early heats, I only saw two guys pull more than 200 kg, which was my best weight coming in. Because every squat counted the same as a kilogram, it didn't make much sense to push too hard on the deadlifts. I lifted 190 kg without too much trouble and decided to rest the remainder of the time so I could make up the difference on the squats. The judges were pretty strict on the squats, really emphasizing the vertical extension at the top. I was able to keep a steady pace through the first three minutes and accelerated through the final minute. I never stopped and finished with 202 squats. This gave me a total of 392 points, the highest mark by two.

At this point, the event was over for most of the competitors. Only the top three after the first four events were to compete in the fifth, and previous totals meant nothing. Even though I was in the lead going in, I had no cushion.

WOD 5

Nov. 1, 10:30 a.m.

12-minute AMRAP of 5 squat cleans (60 kg)

7 box jumps, 9 burpees

The WOD was announced 15 minutes before we started. The fact that it was an AMRAP was a good sign, because I tend to do better in longer workouts where I can pace out the elements. But the exercises were pretty basic, so I didn't think there was much technical advantage either way. The squat cleans proved to be the difference. The two guys I was competing against were both a little lighter than me, so I think 60 kg was less of a problem for me. They were just as steady on the box jumps and burpees from what I could tell, but I stretched out leads during the lifting portion. I finished nine full rounds with five seconds to spare. Second was just short of eight rounds, and third was just short of seven.

Courtesy of Alex Battisti



By taking it slightly easy on the 1RM deadlifts, Morrison was able to maximize his score on the air-squats portion of WOD 4.



The final WOD was a 12-minute triplet of cleans, box jumps and burpees, and it played to Morrison's strengths. He finished first in the workout and claimed the overall victory.

A New Standard of Competition

I guess it's possible that my opinion is biased because I finished first in the competition, but I thought the events were well conceived, tested a broad range of skills and fitness standards, and were realistic in application, keeping the number of moving parts to a minimum. Furthermore, the schedule served as a strong organizational framework around which the rest of the weekend could be built. Having previously competed in qualifiers and the CrossFit Games, I feel this event more than upheld the standard.

In total, this weekend consolidated my previous experiences with CrossFit events and enabled me to distill their essential characteristic: The most important victory is not that of the individual over the competition but of the individual over the event. Now, this is not meant to be a cheesy, rah-rah, find-true-strength-within kind of statement. On the contrary, it is meant to be an empirical observation of the collective strength and the unique standards for appreciation present at these competitions. I witnessed this clear as day during the second event.

The second WOD on Saturday was 50 double-unders, 30 overhead anyhows (60 kg) and 50 double-unders for time. I did well in this event, performing the movements smoothly and cleanly, finishing in 3:46 and posting the best time by about a minute. By every known competitive standard, it would be logical to assume that my performance in this event was the most "impressive" turned in. Not so. Not even close.

Two heats before me, an individual failed to complete the WOD under the 15-minute time limit, yet he put my performance to shame. His technique on the double-unders was shaky. His clean and jerks were a downright struggle from the first repetition. Five reps in, I could see the pain on his face as the idea of not finishing crossed his mind. A few spectators rushed to his aid, encouraging him to continue.

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Then, an astonishing fact circulated throughout the room: prior to the event, he'd never done a clean with more than a broomstick. *A broomstick.* Because his affiliate didn't have access to a bar, his experience coming into the competition was limited to technical practice with a weightless wooden handle.

Needless to say, the entire audience became captivated by and invested in this individual. For the remaining time, he was flooded with coaching tips from staff members and showered with cacophonous applause from the crowd. The place went absolute bananas every time he

completed a repetition. I can't imagine a more concerted effort by a group of total strangers to propel someone to whom they have absolutely no allegiance.

He collapsed on the ground after the 15 minutes had expired, just 20 double-unders short of completion. He was congratulated by every single person there and looked truly triumphant. When I finished the event, I got one high five and a thumbs up.

Past a certain point in any WOD, I don't think anyone truly cares about anything besides being done. All other concerns fade away, leaving a contest between the individual and the workout, a fight between will and pain. This is the new competitive standard.

Some might bridge the apparent gap between the standards for success seen in traditional competitive athletics and the ones displayed in this example by pointing to the relative degree of difficulty the event represented for each of us. This may be true, but I think it's more. This wasn't just a greater appreciation for an individual giving a greater effort. Such an appreciation is, after all, no unique phenomenon. In traditional sports, there's a long history of respecting an opponent who fought hard, didn't give up and lost while giving maximum effort. Coaches preach this idea to kids all the time, and it's embodied by this Norman Dale quote:

"If you put your effort and concentration into playing to your potential, to be the best that you can be, I don't care what the scoreboard says at the end of the game. In my book we're gonna be winners."

However, anyone who's played competitive sports knows Dale's words to be purely motivational rhetoric. While the message is true and integral to playing the game the way it was meant to be played, the ultimate question in sports is still, and always will be, "Did you win the game?" Just ask the defeated party if playing hard made him feel any better about losing. Or listen to the level of applause for the winning team vs. the appreciation for the losing one. Everyone can respect the effort of the defeated, but it will not be celebrated. These are the effects of a competitive standard that is based on comparison.

Such is not the case at CrossFit events. Honestly, past a certain point in any WOD, I don't think anyone truly cares about anything besides being done. All other concerns fade away, leaving a contest between the individual and the workout, a fight between will and pain. *This is the new competitive standard.* It's what the audience recognized in Sweden, and it's why they chose to applaud the struggle. They weren't acknowledging an individual's great effort in defeat; they were cheering his effort in victory.

I think it's this unique element that keeps CrossFit competitive without seeing it devolve into the absolute, win/loss world of traditional sport. In fact, I don't see it as a sport at all. It's the element that I see saving the larger CrossFit program from the run-away success of the CrossFit Games. Without it, I think it would be very easy to lose sight of the primary goal of the model (fitness for every challenge in life) and to focus on other, less important aspects (fitness as a measure for comparison between individuals).

I want to say thanks again to those responsible for the facility and the organization and running of the Scandinavian CrossFit Challenge in Halmstad. It really was an incredible weekend.



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.