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Confessions of a Naval Pentathlete

Kasper Hansen, a member of the Danish armed forces, rekindles his love of training and sport through CrossFit.

By Kasper Hansen

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All images courtesy of Kasper Hansen

I stumbled upon CrossFit in fall 2009. Two of my friends started working out in one of Denmark's first CrossFit gyms, Butcher's Lab in Copenhagen, and they took me there a couple of times when I was in town. I had long been in search of new inspiration for my training to keep me motivated. CrossFit proved to be that inspiration.

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As its name implies, the naval pentathlon is not for "landlubbers."

I had been training and competing in Denmark's naval pentathlon since 2005 with good results. I was a two-time national champion and finished second in the Nordic championships in 2007 but still felt as if I had yet to fully realize my potential.

I loved the pentathlon. It was the first sport that kept me going since I ended my swimming career in 2002. I had been swimming since childhood and was pretty good at it. I had several junior and senior national championships under my belt, and my big goal was to qualify for the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. But the joy of training and competing had disappeared in the last two years due to reoccurring shoulder issues and long periods of rehabilitation. During those two years, I was training between 25 and 30 hours a week at a national training facility.

By the time I stopped swimming and had joined the Danish armed forces, I was stuck in a rut. I was fed up with training and lacked the desire to stick with one sport for more than two years. My workouts at that point were limited to what was required of me in the service. I tried several military pentathlons, but the finishing 8-kilometer cross-country run was never really meant for a heavy guy like me. I was always in the mix, still profiting from my years of hard work, but I lacked the same passion I had earlier.

It wasn't until a friend from the military academy brought me to a naval-pentathlon training session that I finally found something that sparked my interest. With my swimming background, I had a clear advantage over the other athletes in the two swimming events. One of the events even required wearing fins, which I had grown quite accustomed to as a swimmer, as they allowed me to stay in the pool while I rehabbed from my shoulder injuries. I had even competed at the national championships and won the 100-meter surface event. The naval pentathlon seemed like an excellent choice for me.

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While at the military academy, it was easy for me to train because all the tracks and most of the other national-team members from were in Copenhagen. However, when I graduated in the summer of 2007 and moved to a regiment two hours away, things got a bit harder. Most of my training sessions were done on my own, and I had to spend many weekends in Copenhagen, sleeping on friends' couches to keep up with my sport-specific training and my competition.

After the world championships in Germany in the summer of 2009, I had a hard time keeping up my motivation—always training on my own and never really getting the opportunity to train on the tracks enough. The visits to Butcher's Lab were inspiring, but I couldn't really figure out how to implement CrossFit into my daily training. I knew too little about it.

Rediscovering the Passion

In early 2010, I was invited to a CrossFit seminar along with other personnel from the armed forces working with physical training and education. Some of the pioneers of Danish CrossFit were teaching, and CrossFit Royal Danish Defence College was the host. With them was Blair Morrison, who was visiting Denmark and competing in the Danish CrossFit Open the day after. The day was great!

We talked a little about the foundations of CrossFit, watched some video from the 2009 Games and did three WODs. I was totally spent but enjoyed it so much I immediately started doing research and workouts I created myself or found on the Internet. I kept in touch with Blair, who has become a great friend and inspiration to me. [His blog](#) has given me great ideas and inspiration.

I finally found joy in training again. For the first time in a very long time I began really looking forward to the next workout. I had a limited amount of time to travel and train in Copenhagen on the weekends, and when the first competition of the season arrived, I had barely been on the tracks at all. The obstacle-course race was my first since the summer of 2009, but I was only 1 second off my personal best. I won the championship. And although I didn't set any personal records, the results were so close to my previous bests that I was sure my CrossFit training had positively affected my performance.



The Naval Pentathlon

Obstacle course: 10 obstacles of varying difficulty divided over 305 meters.

Watch Blair Morrison go through the course with me by clicking [here](#).

Life-saving race: 75-meter life-saving swim. Swim the first 50 meters wearing a jacket and pants and go the first 15 meters submerged. Then undress and dive to the bottom of the pool to pick up a dummy and carry it for the remaining 25 meters.

Utility-swim race: Swim 125 meters wearing fins, then pick up and carry a gun for 25 meters, going under a net 3 meters under the surface, as well as other obstacles. The longer the distance you go submerged, the faster you will be because of the fins. The best athletes' total submerged distance ranges from 100 to 110 meters.

Naval Pentathlon continued ...

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Over the next couple of months, I continued doing CrossFit and even attended a Level 1 course. Later that summer I went to Finland for the third stage of the Nordic Cup Series. As the competition went on, I exceeded my own expectations, winning my first international competition and setting an all-time national record.

At the end of the season I finished the last competition of the Nordic Cup Series in Sweden in third place, missing the top two spots due to minor technical errors and not due to my physical conditioning. Despite that, I won the Nordic Cup Series with the highest point average.

When the pentathlon season ended, I competed in several CrossFit competitions in Denmark and Sweden. Apart from being great fun, they were a good way to keep myself in shape outside the season. I did very well, though I haven't claimed any top spots yet.

What CrossFit Did for My Naval Pentathlon

Being a seasoned athlete and having years of experience not only in the naval pentathlon but also in a high-level performance environment definitely deliver some of the answers. I don't have to practice the more technical aspects of the sport as much anymore as new athletes do, and I can rely more on my experience. That still doesn't change the fact that I have to work hard to reach my potential.

I find it hard to pinpoint one or several of CrossFit's general physical skills that prepared me well for the naval pentathlon or the other way around. I'm not going to lie: I've always been a good athlete. I've been physically active since I was a kid, doing gymnastics, track and field, and swimming. First and foremost, rediscovering the joy and pleasure of training has been key to the success of using CrossFit in my training routine. A love for what you are doing is the single most important factor to continuing. I really enjoy CrossFit, and I always have some sort of workout in my mind that I can't wait to try.

Naval Pentathlon continued ...

Seamanship race: The most technical event. Start on land by climbing a 5-meter pole. Stick pins in a color-divided board and slide down the pole. Perform various tasks on land before jumping into a rowboat. In the boat, row slalom through five buoys and back, moving a chain from one buoy to another and picking up a big shackle on the last one to bring it back to the first.

Amphibious cross-country race: Wearing uniform pants and a jacket, carry a rifle on your back while running 2,500 meters. During the run, shoot five targets at a distance of 50 meters. Then paddle 100 meters in a small rubber boat and throw dummy grenades at a target before crossing the finishing line. The fastest guys do this in 9:30-10 minutes.



—Kasper Hansen



On land, naval pentathletes are challenged by an obstacle course.

Sure, I could probably say the agility and balance I obtained from running the obstacle course have prepared me well for those aspects in CrossFit, and that the feeling you get during a CrossFit workout with constantly varied and functional movement patterns resembles the feeling you get during the obstacle run. But as I said before, the love of doing what you do is the single most valuable gain I got from CrossFit.

A lot of people praise the CrossFit community, and I definitely stand in line to do the same. I have gained so many new friends through CrossFit, and everywhere I go I experience the same passion for it. I have met a lot of great friends through CrossFit, and as an instructor I have also experienced how CrossFit inspires people.

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Lately I've started a blog called [CrossFit Submerged](#) to suggest ways to incorporate swimming into WODs. It has proven to be a great opportunity to contribute to the CrossFit community with my knowledge on swimming.

In July, I'll compete in the Military World Games, which can best be described as the Olympic Games for armed forces around the globe. My goal is to finish in the top five. Shortly after I return, I will be deploying to Afghanistan for six months. I hope to be able to train enough there to be prepared for my quest to qualify for the 2012 CrossFit Games.



About the Author

Kasper Hansen, 28, is a 1st lieutenant in the Danish Army. He has completed several CrossFit courses, including the Level 1, endurance, powerlifting, and movement and mobility seminars. Among his athletic achievements: Danish junior champion in the 100-meter and 200-meter freestyle, semi-finalist at the European Junior Championships in the 100-meter freestyle, Danish record holder in the 4 x 50-meter freestyle relay, Danish junior record holder in the 4 x 100-meter medley relay, Danish fin-swimming champion in the 100-meter surface race, three-time Danish naval pentathlon champion, second place at the 2007 Nordic Championships, and two-time second-place finisher and two-time third-place finisher in the utility-swim race at the world championships. His best result at the world championships was 13th overall in 2009. Some of his CrossFit stats: a 1:55 Grace, a 2:57 Fran, a 7:28 Helen, an 11:03 Nancy, a 192-lb. snatch, a 264-lb. clean and jerk, a 462-lb. deadlift, a 407-lb. back squat, and a 297-lb. front squat.

