

Centers of Excellence - Part II

Athletes from CrossFit Calgary and CrossFit Central did extremely well at the 2009 CrossFit Games. In Part 2 of this two-part series, we talk to Jeremy Thiel and Mike Gregory about their training secrets.

Mike Warkentin



Courtesy of CrossFit Central

Rewind to July 11 at the 2009 CrossFit Games.

Jeremy Thiel is standing in the athletes' warm-up area, yelling at a flat-screen TV streaming the live feed from the JumboTron towering over the Stadium. The energized Texan is barking instructions and encouragement as Crystal McReynolds and Carey Kepler work their way through a WOD. He looks almost as fired up as when he pulled 505 in the deadlift ladder a few hours earlier.

Thiel is passionate about CrossFit, but he's also passionate about CrossFit Central, his athletes, his friends, his co-workers and his family—and Kepler and McReynolds represent all those things at once.

It Takes a Village

CrossFit Central did extremely well at the 2009 Games. McReynolds, a coach at Thiel's box, finished ninth, and Kepler, his sister and the co-founder of CrossFit Central, finished third. Lance Cantu, another Central coach, placed 34th. CrossFit Central's Affiliate Cup team—made up predominately of Central trainers—placed second. One year after finishing third at the 2008 competition, Thiel himself made the Top 16, placing 16th after withdrawing from the final WOD with a lat strain.

Together with CrossFit Calgary, which placed four athletes in the Top 16 and a team in the Affiliate Cup final, CrossFit Central stood out as a box that was "doing something right."

Thiel believes the success of his box in Austin, Texas, comes from within.

"We have a mission here to push the human potential," Thiel says, "and each coach and each person, each athlete, is constantly supporting and elevating. ... What we see is CrossFit as a community, and CrossFit Central has taken it to the next level. I think maybe it's a problem possibly in our culture these days where a lot of people are going it alone and there's not a lot of community. Our goal and focus at CrossFit Central is to develop a supportive community that can actually be an extended part of your family."

To move knowledge from coach to coach, CrossFit Central has implemented its own in-house training program.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Prior to the Games, Carey Kepler complemented her outstanding metabolic conditioning with some extra strength work.

While Thiel is very conscious that at least half of the more than 500 members of CrossFit Central don't really understand the CrossFit Games and the new sport they represent, he strives to produce excellence in every athlete, from firebreathers trying to get to Aromas to deconditioned members trying to get into smaller clothes. That means being a coach at the box comes with a responsibility to learn as much about CrossFit as possible.

"How do you take what's on dot-com—all the videos, all the journals—and condense that and teach it to a lot of people?" Thiel asks. "I think it takes a well-rounded staff of individuals who are experts, and that's what Coach Glassman has done. HQ has brought in Olympic weightlifting experts or barbell experts or gymnastics experts. We have kind of created that community here."

Thiel has tried to hire a staff of experts to train his athletes, and he believes the special skills of each coach were a real asset in preparing for the Games. With elite coaches watching qualifying Games athletes train and giving constant feedback, the athletes were able to train harder and smarter while preparing for the rigors of the Games.

"What we've been able to do collectively is bring together very intelligent individuals who are coachable, and we've been educated through CrossFit and through the specialists from Coach Burgener to Robb Wolf to Coach Glassman," Thiel explains.

Thiel has about eight Level 2-certified CrossFit trainers, and the rest of his staff of approximately 22 have well-rounded qualifications. If you run down the list of coaches on CrossFitCentral.com, you'll see experts in powerlifting, kettlebells, running, agility, parkour, Oly lifting and beyond. To move knowledge from coach to coach, CrossFit Central has implemented its own in-house training program.

"What we see is CrossFit as a community, and CrossFit Central has taken it to the next level."

—Jeremy Thiel

Staff/CrossFit Journal



CrossFit Central places a lot of importance on nutrition, supplementation and psychological preparation—aspects that take training beyond the WOD.

"We really believe in modelling," Thiel explains. "So from there, whenever we certify and get trained, Carey Kepler is in charge of our overall education and development of our trainers. And so we're very well educated. If we have three trainers go to an Endurance Cert, we bring back the content and basically replicate the cert to all of our trainers to teach them what it is that they've learned."

Dot-Com Delivers

In terms of specific training for the Games competitors, Thiel reveals the strategy wasn't all that complicated: the coaches basically just followed CrossFit.com and supplemented the main-site WODs with some additional work.

"I think there was a discipline of doing some of the weaknesses, working weaknesses, and working on repetitions of certain skills," Thiel says, noting that his sister is a great runner who is challenged by strength WODs. To compensate, Kepler supplemented her met-con WODs with some strength work and overhead lifting in the months prior to the Games.

Interestingly enough, CrossFit Central actually does less strength-focused WODs than you might think. Whereas some boxes—CrossFit Calgary is one—try to add in more strength WODs than you see on the main site, the athletes in Austin are doing more met-con work.

"Strength work is something that we definitely promote and we definitely believe in, but at the same time, our clients that come to us on a regular basis, 95 percent of them come twice or three times per week," says Mike Gregory, who handles the programming for the co-ed classes. "With that in mind, a lot of times they want to come in and feel like they're spent. A three-times-a-weeker coming to us isn't probably looking for specifically gaining strength, so I've got to keep in mind that we're going to incorporate strength training into our workout, but a lot more metabolic conditioning than you'd probably find on dot-com."

Heavy days only come up about four times a month, with the hopes that every client will get a two heavy WODs a month. Gregory believes strength is as important as any of the other 10 CrossFit fitness domains, but he encourages athletes to work on it on their own.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Mike Gregory, who captained CrossFit Central's Affiliate Cup team, handles the programming in Austin. Interestingly, he opts for less strength work and more met-con WODs.

Thiel believes solid nutrition accounts for 60-70 percent of CrossFit Central's success in Aromas.



Jeremy Thiel came into the Games 10 lb. heavier than last year but made sure his endurance wasn't affected by the increased muscle mass.

As for the Affiliate Cup team, Gregory says the members primarily trained as individuals, but the group would practice key team workouts once or twice a week for about two months before the Games in order to get a sense of each other. Once they got to The Ranch and found out the format for the competition, they felt more than prepared.

"We understood the strategy involved with team workouts going into it," Gregory says. "We very much stuck to doing our own workouts as individuals because, in my opinion, that's what's going help set your ability to become the most fit, and then on occasion we'd have a team workout that would tax the body but allow you to have good time to rest and recover."

That strategy paid off in July when Gregory, Andy Lewis, Tyler Parsons, Jessica Sharratt, Jen Cardella and Kris Kepler managed to place no lower than 14th in all three of Friday's Affiliate Cup WODs.

In addition to Gregory, Lewis, Sharratt and Cardella all collect checks at CrossFit Central, and Kris Kepler is the proud husband of Carey—how's that for community?

Thiel himself looked to build on last year's success at the Games by doing a bit more running and putting on some mass.

"I actually started running about 30 days out about three days a week. ... I weighed actually 10 more pounds this year than I did last year," Thiel says. "I put on quite a bit of weight. And it's kind of interesting because, prior to sticking to dot-com on a regular basis, I was running quite a bit as a regular part of my routine just because I enjoy it.

"And I got away from that because I was really focusing on the Games and my strength was going up and I was putting on weight. I don't know if it was an age thing, too. I'm 27 now. I don't know if I'm holding onto muscle mass better than I was when I was younger, but I gained weight and I wanted to trim down a little bit more before I went to the Games."

If you had to summarize the reasons for CrossFit Central's success at the Games in one word, you might choose "community."

Clocking about 4.5 miles per training workout at a pace around 6:45 allowed Thiel to finish 16th in the trail run in Aromas, and less than an hour later he was one of 16 men to pull 505 and complete the deadlift ladder in WOD 2. The combination of strength and endurance served Thiel well in the contest, and he was one of the favored competitors before a rough go in the sledgehammer WOD dropped him out of contention for the overall title.

Beyond the WOD

One of the common threads between the CrossFit boxes in Calgary and Austin is nutrition. OPT and Brett Marshall are very careful when it comes to diet for their athletes in Canada, and Thiel takes a similar approach to fuelling his clients. In fact, Thiel believes solid nutrition accounts for 60-70 percent of CrossFit Central's success in Aromas.

"We follow a pretty rigorous nutrition program from the Paleo/Zone, athlete Zone model," Thiel explains. "I'd say 90 percent of the athletes at the Games that qualified were doing that Paleo/Zone-athlete Zone."

Gregory agrees: "I believe it was very good athletes with a very hard work ethic and a really good grasp on their nutrition."

Supplementation also plays a key role, and Thiel puts a great deal of emphasis on recovery via myofascial release and trigger-point therapy.

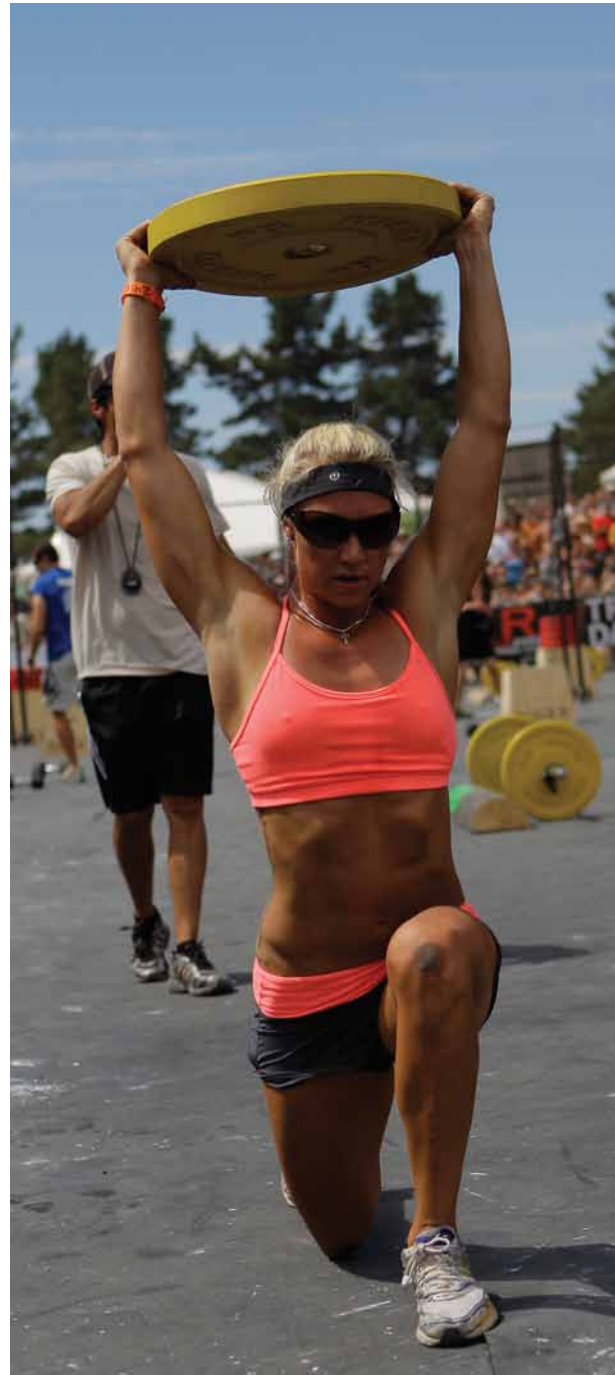
"We want to activate support for the overall body with the nutrition and then we want to come in post-high-intensity training and put in active recovery with the myofascial-release type of activities," he says.

Moving beyond the body, Thiel worked hard to prepare his athletes psychologically for both their daily WODs and the CrossFit Games. After competing himself in 2007 and 2008, Thiel knew what it was like to go head-to-head with the fittest athletes in the world in a high-intensity environment full of cameras and screaming fans.

"We're very conscious of sports psychology, and the sense of awareness of how you're approaching your workout and the level of intensity that is brought," Thiel says.

He adds: "We look at a wealth of information from goal-setting and how you're adjusting your goals and how you're addressing each component of your workout."

Thiel utilizes the collective intensity created in his box to prepare his athletes for competition, but he'll also turn them on to books such as *The Slight Edge* by Jeff Olson and



Staff/CrossFit Journal

While Jeremy Thiel is an intense competitor, Crystal McReynolds is more laid back. CrossFit Central tries to teach their athletes how to get into an ideal mental state before each WOD.

selections by motivator Anthony Robbins. Mental preparation, discipline, goal setting and mental toughness are all aspects Thiel works on with his athletes.

He pays particular attention to the personality of each athlete and tries to use a different approach to bring out the best in each one. Thiel himself is a fiery, intense competitor who ramps up the energy before a workout, while McReynolds is extremely laid back and calm. By recognizing the characteristics of each athlete, trainers at CrossFit Central hope to create the ideal ready state for top performance, even in gruelling circumstances.

Community Club

If you had to summarize the reasons for CrossFit Central's success at the Games in one word, you might choose "community."

Thiel has worked hard to create something more than a box in Texas—he's trying to create a lifestyle. That lifestyle includes hard workouts and great programming, but it also includes good food, continuing education, psychological preparation, careful supplementation, friendship and camaraderie.

The result is a community that was on display in Aromas in July—a community perhaps best illustrated by one passionate trainer/athlete yelling encouragement at a flat-screen TV.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

The trainers at CrossFit Central believe a holistic approach is the key to producing top athletes—and they may be right.



About the Author

Mike Warkentin is the managing editor of the CrossFit Journal. He is a Level 2 certified trainer, and he enjoyed working with Coach Mike Burgener and meeting affiliate owners from Squamish, B.C., to Bathurst, N.B., at a recent Olympic lifting cert in Ottawa, Ont.