
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Fear and Loathing at the Arnold

Mike Warkentin ventures into the savage heart of the Arnold Sports Festival.

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March 2011



All images: Staff/CrossFit Journal

People are lined up for the Arnold Fitness Expo long before it opens.

Arnold ... (continued)

The line stretches almost from one end of the Columbus Convention Center to the other. It passes the gymnastics hall, the powerlifting and Oly platforms, the boxing and MMA rings, as well as the CrossFit Kids station and the Grand Ballroom that's home to the CrossFit competition.

Further away are the fencers, the cheerleaders, the table-tennis players and the dancers. At other venues are the skateboarders, the track-and-field athletes and the hockey players.

They're all here under Arnold's banner—but the hub of the whole weekend is the Fitness Expo freak show in the main concourse.

Biceps and Breasts

"Oh my fucking god," a puffy bodybuilder exclaims as five bikini-clad figure competitors walk past.

They look a little like greyhounds in high heels: long and lean and all ribs. They're tanned and sprayed an unnatural shade of warm brown, and the sequined fabric of their bikini tops is straining to hold the silicone in. They smell funny, kind of like perfume and chicken.

Everything is bulging inside the expo. If it's not the breasts, it's the biceps, or it's bags filled with as many free T-shirts and samples as possible. I'd guess you could leave the Arnold with 30 new shirts if you put in any real effort.

Near the entrance, people are chanting "Vitamin Shoppe" as loudly as they can, and a burly dude with a microphone is urging them on with the promise of free products. The people, mostly wiry kids, scream louder, and some of them jump up and down like rabid beasts.



There's an average Joe hiding somewhere in the pile of Barbies. He paid to be there.



What's at the end of this line? Most people don't know, but they want it badly.

I suddenly remember Bourbon Street in New Orleans. But the people in Columbus haven't come for booze and parties. They've come for freaks and free shit.

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The lines of people in the Expo are almost impenetrable at times, snaking for hundreds of meters to nowhere and back again. The people at the back literally have no idea what they're lining up for, but it must be something—either a celebrity or a badly fitting T-shirt or a protein bar.

Some intersections between the booths are impassable and become lobster traps that let you in but won't let you out.

"We were waiting in line for nothing," one woman says as a line suddenly disperses for no apparent reason. A new line starts forming somewhere else. If more than three people gather together and look in the same direction, a crowd swarms around them in seconds. Something must be happening.

I ask one guy what's at the end of the line he's standing in.

"Supplements and girls," he says. "It always leads to something good. The bigger the line, the better the stuff."

He confesses to sometimes lining up without having a clue what he might find at the head of the trail. One time, he says, the line ended with an "ugly chick with a voice lower than mine."

I know the booth he's talking about. It's packed with what might be transvestites, and—male or female—they're massive.



As seen on TV.

"We need to find a place that's giving out bags!" a man says as he pulls his wife into the fray.

"I feel like we need to be in line waiting for something!" another woman says, looking frantic and wringing her hands.

In one display, an average schmuck walks onto a platform filled with Barbie dolls. Their breasts are literally falling out of their tops, and their asses have devoured most of the fabric that's supposed to be covering them. The schmuck strikes a pose, and the girls quickly cluster around him like metal filings around a magnet. A picture is snapped, and they scatter just as quickly. He pays for the shot and leaves. A new schmuck steps onstage, ushered in by pro bodybuilder Andy Haman. Haman is the spitting image of Guile from the Street Fighter video game, and he is jacked.

I make the mistake of locking eyes with a guy near a booth. He lunges toward me and hands me a brochure featuring a "thermogenic workout enhancer" that's supposed to increase sweating in "problem areas." I ask him how it works. He tells me what's in it. I ask him again how it works. He hands me another brochure. I take it, walk away and drop it on the floor.

I see an old 173-lb. Thomas Inch dumbbell in one supplement booth. It looks completely out of place among the sleek, shiny labels, so I ask the exhibitor if anyone actually knows what it is.

"Not really, but a couple of farm kids have lifted it," he says as he hands me a can of protein pudding and sends me on my way.

Another booth over, a ripped-up guy is using the Shake Weight, and he's really trying to feel the burn. He's probably training to use some of the new and improved shaker cups on display in a massive pyramid at the center of the Expo. Apparently new technology has revolutionized the cup.

I overhear a tattooed guy asking an exhibitor how to use Jump Stretch bands for benching. The answer is ridiculous and would make Louie Simmons spit fire. I'm pretty sure Mr. Tattoo is going to be injured under a bar in a week.

At some booths, thick, thuggish exhibitors have made a critical mistake: they have no women hawking their wares. They stand glaring over their protein products, but the crowds bypass them for the booths packed with perfect 10s.

Other booths use celebrities as bait. Randy Couture is doing an interview with Lauren Abraham at one, while UFC ref Big John McCarthy is at another. Brian Stann is here. Four-time Arnold champ Flex Wheeler is pushing products elsewhere. Mr. Olympia Jay Cutler is turning heads. Arnold himself is around somewhere, too. Lou Ferigno, the Terminator's old nemesis, is selling photos for \$20. Lou occasionally pulls a fat bankroll out of his pocket and shuffles through it, but no one seems to want to add to it. A pic with tiny blond *Oxygen* cover girl Jamie Eason is a more prized commodity these days.

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"My fiancée will kill me if I get a picture with her," one guy says as he walks past a model whose skin is the color of barbecue sauce.

All the other big names are here: protein, casein, arginine, glutamine, L-carnitine. And all the initials, too: ABB, GNC, MHP, BSN, MRI, ISS, HCG, EST, EFX This list is almost endless.

On the main stage, arm wrestlers are battling it out, and bikini girls wait in the wings for their turn.

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I ask a group of kids if they want to be as big as the freaks.

"I'd love to be that big," one says earnestly. "I want to be Mr. Olympia."

Another tells me he thinks bodybuilders are "gross," and he'd rather look like a fitness model. I ask him how he trains. He says he works out for three hours a day—bi's and tris

I ask him if he's heard of CrossFit.

He says he's heard the name but doesn't know anything about it.

I tell him to check out the CrossFit competition in the Grand Ballroom.

Beyond Thunderdome

Down the hall outside the Expo, a 130-lb. woman is squatting my max for an opener on the powerlifting platform. Over in the Oly area, I can see CrossFit T-shirts peeking out from behind singlets. One of the people at a booth near the door is wearing a CrossFit Savannah T-shirt.

Coach Mike Burgener is announcing. He tells the crowd the loaders are doing CrossFit because they're constantly working to change the weight on the bar. I hear laughs. I look around and see Matt Chan, Spencer Hendel, Austin Malleolo, Camille Leblanc-Bazin, Jason Khalipa and Rob Orlando sitting in the audience. They watch Chad Vaughn narrowly miss an American-record clean and jerk. Kendrick Ferris and Casey and Natalie Burgener are here, too.



Based on his performance at the Arnold, Graham Holmberg looks more than ready to defend his CrossFit Games title in 2011.



On the rings, this kid can do most of the stuff you can't. He's about 7.

The CrossFit Kids—including original and very successful experiment Connor Martin—are doing demonstration workouts with near-perfect form, even at high intensity. Connor can beat most of my numbers, too. He's 19.

Inside the Grand Ballroom, things are relatively peaceful in spite of the crowd and the loud music driving the team competition. I look around and see the de rigueur CrossFit T-shirts and recognize a lot of people. Almost no one is carrying a bag of free shit from the Expo.

Between events, I ask Rich Froning Jr. if he's been through the chaos in the main concourse.

"It's like the county fair on steroids," he says, shaking his head.

I tell him I couldn't take it for very long, and he understands.

"It's almost like we're on our own little island here ...," he says. "We don't really fit in with the meatheads. It's like a spectacle to go in there."

Free spirit Dave Lipson is having fun with the whole thing.

"Let me see if you can read through my sarcasm: I think these people are the picture of health here at the Arnold, and they're role models for children."

He's got more: "I think this completely exposes what the world of fitness is, and it's completely flawed ... This is not health. This is sickness. That's what we're fighting against. That's what makes CrossFit special and different."

**"It's like the county
fair on steroids."**

**—Rich Froning Jr. on the
Arnold Expo**

Lipson has talked to several people who have wandered in from the rest of the Arnold to check out the CrossFit thing. He says they want to know if the program has curls in it and why CrossFitters are so skinny. He says he told them they just need to try CrossFit.

Christy Phillips called the Expo “overwhelming” even though her Rogue teammates warned her ahead of time about what she’d encounter.

The excess of the Expo aside, people are watching top Games competitors, and while some of them are already members of the choir, others are seeing CrossFit for the first time. That’s a good thing, and it’s one of the reasons why CrossFit is at the Arnold.

“I looked out during one of the heats of Grace and thought to myself, ‘I can’t believe this is a spectator sport,’ Phillips says. “I was at the Games and could acknowledge it then too, but ... this isn’t the Games, but it’s still going to draw people that are here to watch ... I think that’s kind of the turning point for a sport when you start getting spectators who don’t necessarily do the event that they’re watching.”

2009 Games champ Mikko Salo summed up the whole Arnold Festival with one word: “Awesome.”

He added: “I’ve never seen something like this. This is really awesome.”

Over at the CrossFit Kids booth close to the powerlifting event, Jeff Martin talks about his second year promoting CrossFit Kids at the Arnold.

“Last year we spent a whole lot of time talking to people about what CrossFit was, but this year there are an awful lot of people who already understand what CrossFit is and they come by and they go, ‘Oh, there’s a kids section.’ On the flip side, we’re having people come by and say, ‘Is there an adult section to CrossFit?’ which is kind of cool.”

Martin also says the kids are having a blast. He explains the rings are a hit with little female gymnasts who aren’t allowed to touch the rings at their gym. Apparently the rings are only for the boys. Not so in CrossFit.

I look over Martin’s shoulder, and a young girl in a sequined singlet is doing a muscle-up.

“You watch their faces light up, and it’s one of the greatest things,” he says.

He’s right.



Small med-balls are a thing of the past. These ones weigh 100 lb.

What Is Fitness?

The Arnold Sports Festival is an incredible event that brings a host of truly amazing athletes together in one place. But they compete in their various sports around the periphery in assorted rooms and facilities. Hardcore fans and parents might stay the whole day to watch a powerlifting meet, a gymnastics competition or a fencing match, but most festival-goers just drop in and out from time to time to watch the occasional 800-lb. squat, 430-lb. clean and jerk or 2:15 Fran.

The real hub, the core of the Arnold, is the Expo, with its supplements, its girls and its pumped-up freaks. The festival brings the elite of sport together for a weekend, but it also brings the elite salesmen and marketers. They know how to make people buy their stuff, and they create the ultimate spectacle to designed to whip consumers into a froth that will move units fast.

An impossibly large bodybuilder tells a scrawny little kid that a beverage will jack him up beyond his wildest dreams, so the kid buys it, does some curls and keeps dreaming. A spectacularly beautiful woman with huge breasts smiles and hands out samples. What she's really selling is sex, but she'll throw in a case of protein bars and an autographed picture for 100 bucks. Lazy people eye the one-person saunas that claim to help you "burn 600-800 calories in 30 minutes" and "clear cellulite." Desperate workout kings suck down anything and everything that might help them get bigger and stronger faster.

Everyone's looking for a shortcut.

Outside the Expo, the athletes—both CrossFit and otherwise—are earning it the old-fashioned way. They're loading a bar and picking it up. They're working out instead of searching for something that works. The clanging they make comes from bumper plates rather than cash registers, and their heavy breathing is inspired by hard work rather than hard bodies. They've earned the sweat on their shirts and singlets, and they didn't need to use some cream to generate it. They're getting results.

And most of them look pretty good, too.



Sandra Benz

About the Author

Mike Warkentin is the managing editor of the CrossFit Journal and the owner of [CrossFit 204](#).