
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Rise of the Euro?

American Blair Morrison won the Europe Regional but reports that the Old Country is full of unbelievable athletes who are sure to be in the mix at the 2010 CrossFit Games.

By Blair Morrison

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The weekend of the Europe Regional is difficult to summarize. It was exhilarating and exhausting, with a more fulfilling end than I ever could have hoped for.

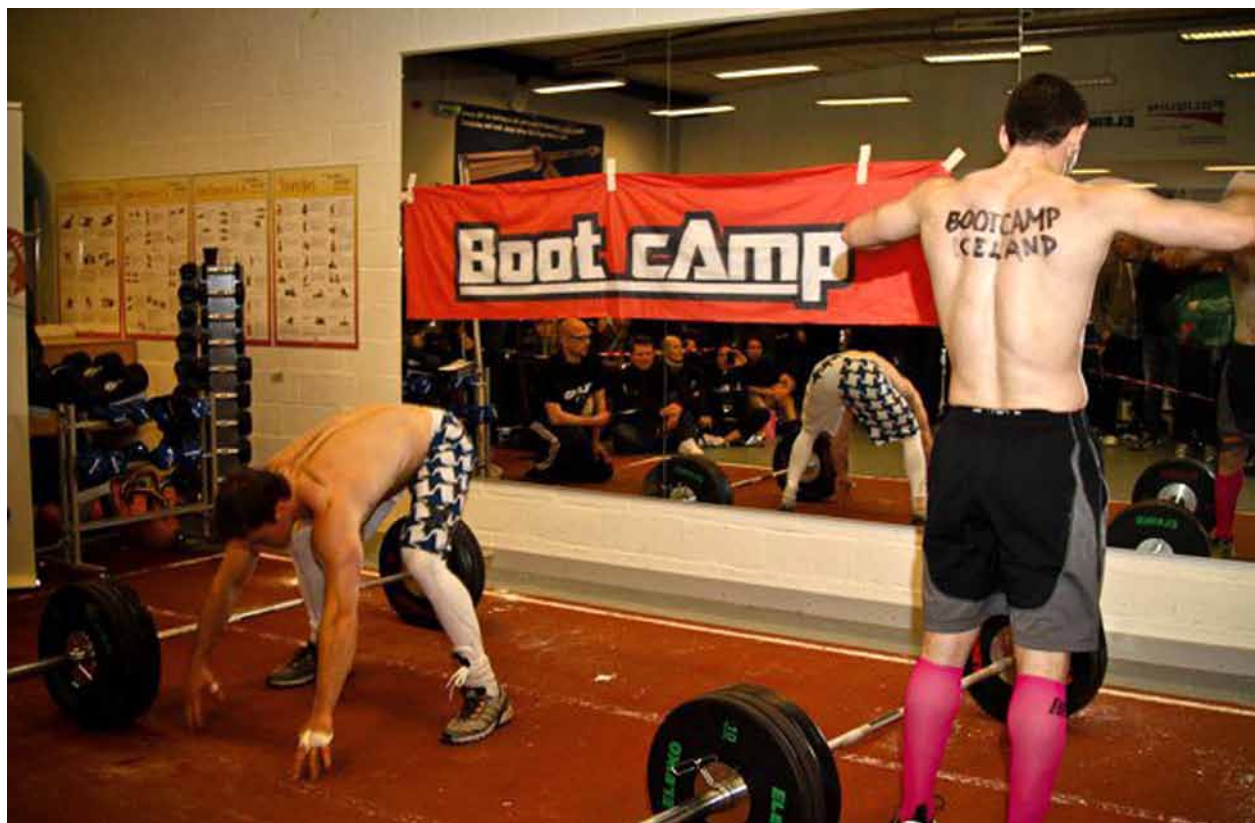
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It featured the standard elements of the CrossFit experience: anxiety, exhaustion, pain and joy. There was sacrifice, ambition, humility and satisfaction, often co-existing within a single person at a single time. I felt undercurrents flowing between athletes and groups, giving the competition life and depth while forming a perfect balance between rivalry and collectivity.

Such human elements were the real beating heart of the Europe Regional in Halmstad, Sweden, so a mere re-telling of the WODs and their outcomes would do the greater experience a severe disservice. My aim, instead, is to tell a different story, one where the events themselves are more means than end. In my opinion, this event was a rare combination of cultures and peoples. In their blending, one saw different support systems operate alongside one another to the benefit of all, as well as a validation of the friendships CrossFit inevitably forges.

The Beasts of Europe

The event took place at the Eleiko Center in Halmstad, a small town less than 200 kilometers north of the Danish border. Unlike other U.S. regionals being held at universities or fairgrounds, this complex was not particularly large or accustomed to hosting competitions. But it sat suitably removed from the center of town, giving the event the breathing space and privacy it required. Inside the tape was every muscle-head's dream: sparkling new bars, bumpers and kettlebells lined the walls and floor of the main showroom. Just outside stood an enormous pull-up rack with ropes, monkey bars, cargo nets and parallel bars. The facility was ordinarily used as a showroom for Eleiko's world-class equipment, but this particular weekend it had been transformed into a showcase for the best fitness athletes in Europe.



Dadi Hrafn Sveinbjarnson

The Eleiko Center might not be a regular competition venue, but it's packed with all the high-end gear a diehard CrossFitter would ever need.

And the athletes present were impressive. Leading up to the qualifier, there was a lot of speculation about the relative strength of the respective regionals based on athlete profiles, stated benchmarks, etc., with Europe largely being doubted. As so many of us know, a statistical account of lifts, times and numbers has little to no bearing on athleticism or ability to perform under pressure, to say nothing of the intangible qualities that hold people together. What matters is not what you say you've done, only what you actually do. And what I saw people do in Halmstad was remarkable.

In Europe everyone can run. *Everyone*. Even in heats featuring bigger guys, the pace was blistering.

WOD 1/2:

With a 15-minute running clock, complete a 2.2-kilometer run for time. Your time on this run represents your result for WOD 1. Immediately following completion of the run, do as many repetitions as possible in the remaining time of ground-to-overhead with 70 kg (50 kg for women). Your total number of repetitions represents your result for WOD 2.

In Europe everyone can run. *Everyone*. Even in heats featuring bigger guys, the pace was blistering. I was pushed to the brink of collapse in order to take third, and I consider myself to be a strong runner. Then, as I was trying to catch my breath, I caught a glimpse of Elvaar from Iceland down the row getting right into his lifts like it was no big thing. Maybe it's the weather, maybe it's the remnants of Viking blood, but it's not my imagination. People here are characterized by an uncommon mental capacity to overcome pain and adversity. And believe me, it was on display all day.



Maria Estella Gullestrup

If you can't run, you probably won't do very well at a CrossFit event in Europe.

Europe Regional Athletes Who Qualified for the CrossFit Games

Men

1. Blair Morrison
2. Sveinbjörn Sveinbjörnsson
3. Richard Vanmeerbeek

Women

1. Annie Mist Thorisdottir
2. Samantha Briggs
3. Jenny Magnúsdóttir

WOD 3:

- 20 chest-to-bar pull-ups
- 20 box jumps (24 inches)
- 20 toes to bar
- 10 x 10-meter overhead carry (80 kg; 6 x 10 w/ 60 kg for women)
- 20 toes to bar
- 20 box jumps (24 inches)
- 20 chest-to-bar pull-ups

Everyone struggled on the second round of bar and box work. Grips were gone, core stability was all over the place, and the conditions on the day were wet, cold, and miserable. I was able to find my rhythm during the overhead carries and post the best time of the day but was overshadowed by those who didn't have it so easy yet still managed to respond. I watched one girl literally get crushed by the weight three times in a row after coming off the bars in good order. She'd try the lift, crumple under it and wind up on her ass pinned beneath the bar. I thought to myself, "There's a DNF. No way she's ever getting that up." She proceeded to step back, shake herself, and beast 10 consecutive repetitions without fail. What? Fail once, maybe a mistake. Twice, still possible to recover. Three times and you're mentally dominated. Talk about mettle. I half expected her to breathe fire on the way back to the pull-up bar.

WOD 4:

- 400-meter run
- 3 rounds of:
 - 15 power snatches (40/30 kg)
 - 35 double-unders
- 400-meter run

This WOD was like "moving day" at the Masters. Anyone who wanted to have a chance to qualify had to perform here. People smoked the double-unders and snatches, proving that gone are the days of tripping on ropes and muscling up Olympic lifts. Technique and skill are points of pride that have been very well received.

The most exciting moment of the weekend came during this event. After battling back from an early deficit, Frederick Aegidus came out of the weight room in third position, just ahead of Sveinbjorn Sveinbjornsson. During the first 200 meters, Sven overtook him and began pulling away toward the finish. This was the point in the race when I remember being ready to puke. Rather than holding his position and coasting in, Frederick started picking up speed with 75 meters to go. Sven heard him coming and

did the same to maintain his lead. Frederick pushed harder and closed the gap to within a few steps with less than 20 meters to go—and he was gaining.

Sven would not give in even though you could see his legs beginning to go. They lunged across the line and no one could tell who had won. It was seriously a photo finish. The judges had to go to a spectator's video footage to determine that Sven had broken the line first by just a fraction of a second. With Frederick sprawled on the asphalt like a wet noodle and Sven leaning limp on the shoulders of friends, I stood in awe of their effort.



Dadi Hafn Sveinbjornsson

After coming from nowhere to challenge for the crown at the 2009 Games, Annie Thorisdottir will be one of the favorites heading into the 2010 Games.

Annie Thorisdottir didn't stop smiling the entire time—apparently the workload was just short of laughable for her.

The final WOD was 5 rounds of:

5 deadlifts (120/90 kg)

20 burpees with a lateral jump over a bar

With all but two men and two women eliminated from contention for the third qualifying spots, you might expect everyone else to lay off the pedal just a bit in the interest of self-preservation. Riiight. Sven came out covered in magic marker, Anders Karlsson channeled Mikko Salo and won the event, and Martin Moller was screaming like a banshee. This WOD was grueling and awful from the end of the second round to the finish, but I don't think I saw a single person break a set of burpees. Most of the guys jumped up with energy to spare.



Maria Estella Gullestrup

WOD 5 was hotly contested despite the fact that only a few athletes still had a shot at qualifying spots.

Mikko's Mates?

What I saw this weekend proved to me that the level in both skill and raw ability is higher here than at the Mid-Atlantic Regional I attended last year. There were standouts across the board, but a few deserve additional mention. Annie Thorisdottir didn't stop smiling the entire time—apparently the workload was just short of laughable for her. Honestly, if she doesn't win it all this year, the girl who beats her will most likely have to be half cyborg.

Richard Vanmeerbeek is just 22, yet he lifts as much as I do while displaying confidence and composure I'm envious of. He needed a monster performance in the final WOD to qualify, and he delivered—you have to respect someone who comes up in crunch time.

Samantha Briggs is an ex-footballer, ex-triathlete, pretty much ex-whatever-she-wants-to-be—the girl is a straight *animal*. She runs faster than most men I know, lifts more than most women I've seen, and has twice as much toughness as the lot combined. Those are not exaggerated statements. Anyone arguing Europe is undeserving of its allotted qualifying spots is in for a surprise come July.

The thirst for CrossFit in Europe is astonishing, and it has only just yet seeped into the larger part of the continental soil. Imagine what will happen when it hits Eastern Europe.

But perhaps more striking than the athletic level of the competition were the cultural differences and barriers the event had to overcome. "Diversity" in Europe is almost a misnomer because people are so distinct. There were participants from Iceland, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Belgium, Germany, Italy, England, Wales, Belarus, and the United States. The thirst for CrossFit in Europe is astonishing, and it has only just yet seeped into the larger part of the continental soil. Imagine what will happen when it hits Eastern Europe. Start blending the Olympic legacy of

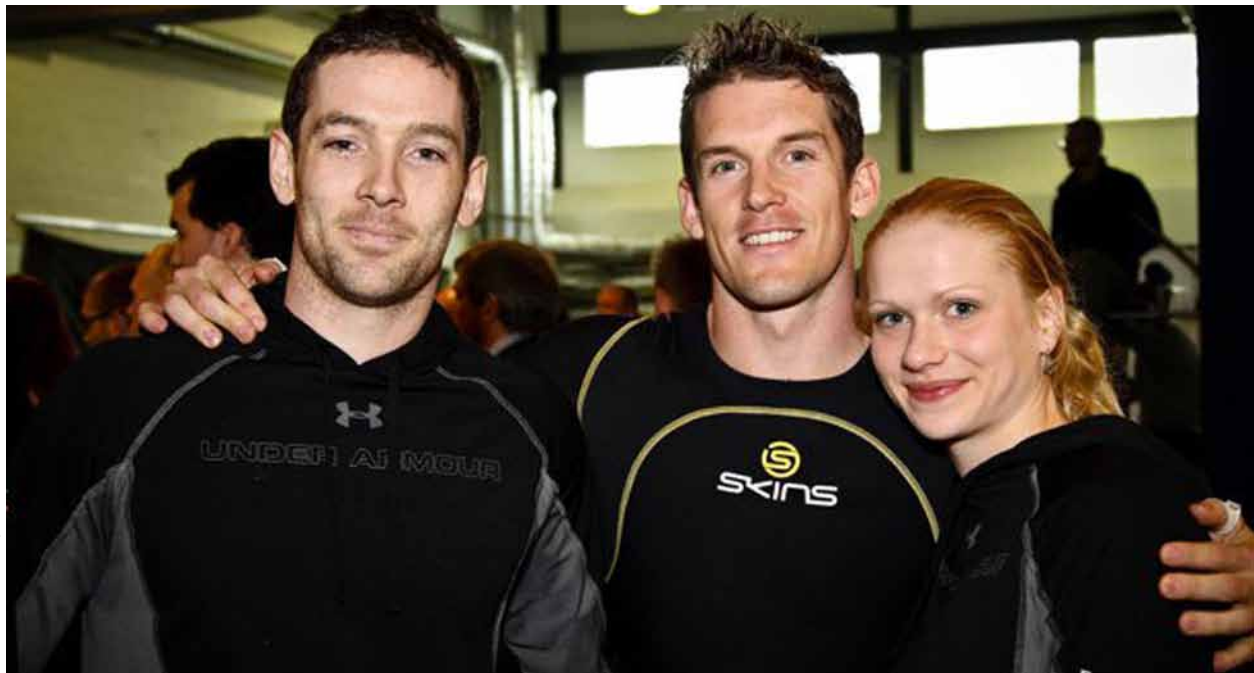
the past with the “unknown and unknowable” current of the future and you’ll have an entirely frightening hybrid. Think of Russian, Romanian and Ukrainian gymnasts doing muscle-ups and ring dips. Consider Bulgarian and Polish strongmen training 60 kg clean and jerks for time. The possibilities are mind-boggling. There is so much to be learned and gained by this type of cross-cultural exchange that CrossFit without Europe just doesn’t make sense.

Still, the obstacles in both language and custom are real, and they require the right kind of people to overcome them. Thankfully, the men and women holding up the walls in Halmstad are those kind of people. Talk about an organizational nightmare. There were people coming from three different time zones by plane, train and automobile to a place with no major airport. I heard seven different languages spoken during the course of two days, and I don’t even have a good ear for language. There were no major sponsorships or infrastructural support, just the volunteer hours of a few overworked individuals with a local connection to Eleiko.

Yet the quality was undeniable. Things ran smoothly, adjustments were made on the fly with decisiveness and solidarity, and the final product was refined. As I grow to understand more and more about what it takes to plan, organize and pull off an event like this, I cannot but be humbled in the presence of men like Mads Jacobsen and Martin Altemark. These guys shouldered incredible burdens, taking blame when things went wrong and delegating praise when they went right. Class and fortitude are powerful traits in combination. I am grateful these men possessed ample stores of both.

Camaraderie and Competition

Another point that stood out to me this weekend was the different support networks operating around the athletes. All athletes have their preferred competitive environment, and the people they choose for company are an important aspect of that environment. Whom do you lean on when you’re tired? Whom do you celebrate with when you succeed? Who shares the burden when the pressure mounts? In Halmstad, I observed more than a few instances of just how important this support can be, and in how many different forms it can come.



Dadi Hrafn Sveinbjörnsson

Blair Morrison (center) flanked by Sveinbjörn Sveinbjörnsson and Annie Thorisdottir. All three will be making repeat appearances at the CrossFit Games after strong performances in 2009.

The crew from Iceland, for example, was like a pack of Arctic dogs. They moved together, ate together, woke, slept and breathed together. When one was competing, all were competing. During the final WOD of the weekend, Sven and I were within a few feet of each other, but I doubt I could've heard a single word if he had uttered it. It felt like the entire island was raining down around us. It was the same when Annie competed and even louder when it was the affiliates' turn. During the runs, they were chasing each other around the course, shouting encouragement and epithets to the point that I doubt any competitor would dare not finish. After every event they crowded around offering congratulations and conciliation. In between they hung together, strategizing, laughing and refueling for the next challenge. It was inspiring. I could only smile, pretend I was Icelandic and assume they were yelling at me.

Support like this can have enormous benefit because, by spreading the burden over many shoulders, the individual feels less alone. He can drown out pressure, nerves, doubt and even pain. It gives him pride in himself and in the group he represents, offering one more reason not to quit when things get tough.



Maria Estella Gullestrup

The Europe Regional was a competition to be sure, but the camaraderie at the Eleiko Center was undeniable.

But it can also be overwhelming. Too many voices will blot each other out, leaving nothing but a wall of sound. Often it's not the mass of noise that pushes us on but the single voice that cracks the throng. Richard Vanmeerbeek came to Halmstad with such a voice—his father—and during the course of the weekend this voice proved as strong as any crowd. I rarely saw one man without the other. Whether they were eating, lounging or in the midst of an event, there was never more than a few meters between them.

Neither appeared affected by what happened in other heats or in events already completed. Their focus remained on what Richard could control: himself. When he competed, the voice of his father sang above the rest, coaching and urging his son onward. When he rested, their conversations were quiet and subdued as they strategized for the next event. If time allowed, they drove back to the hotel to eat and relax away from the surging energy of the Eleiko Center.

A network of support like this would never forge itself so quickly in the real world, but it seems almost commonplace in this community.

It was interesting to observe how well adapted Richard was to this type of environment in only his second or third competition. His demeanor was consistently calm, focused and un-agitated—hardly the hallmarks of a typical 22-year-old CrossFitter. He wastes little energy and maintains maximum concentration. Much of that has to come from his intimate system of support and the calming influence of a person whose belief in him never falters. It's a truism that a reciprocal relationship exists between the impact we have on a group and that which it has on us. Some guys are built of fire and brimstone and need that type of environment to excel. Others prefer cooler heads with less distractions. Some seek both. In any case, finding the right balance makes a huge difference.

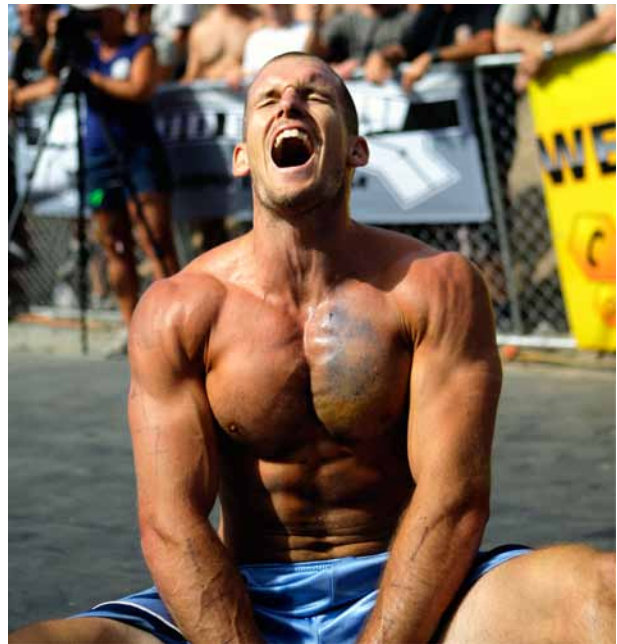
The support I enjoyed in Halmstad was unique from those mentioned above, primarily because its roots were so shallow. No relationship I have here is older than six or eight months, yet people were urging me on as hard as or harder than any man there. I talked strategy with many athletes I'd only just met. I was at ease between WODs because I was enjoying the company of people I'd visited with or competed against months earlier. A network of support like this would never forge itself so quickly in the real world, but it seems almost commonplace in this community. I think it's this type of personal connection that makes CrossFit so uniquely rewarding.

To think that until last fall every person in Halmstad was a perfect stranger to me is truly a remarkable thing. Sven and I were fighting tooth and nail in every WOD, yet I found myself wishing for his success as much as I wanted my own. Sarah Troelson Krarup has become like a second sister since my visit to Copenhagen last November. I found myself looking to her for advice, encouragement and validation before and after every event. Jason Mulligan has been a friend only since January, but in the months since I've grown to enjoy his company as much as that of anyone I've known since childhood. These people will be friends for the rest of my life. Relationships like this are rare because they are based on a camaraderie built on competition, rivalry and respect. CrossFit thrives on them. I've come to realize that my time in Europe has been, among other things, a process of building such relationships.

The weekend in Halmstad represented many things that stand apart from competitive CrossFit but remain thickly rooted in it. Diversity, support and friendship are just a few among them. The Europe Regional was the end point of my year-long training pursuit, and it felt great to have my hard work rewarded with a spot in the Games. And it was a reunion of sorts, as it brought together so many of the people I have met and grown to love since last September. Without the support of so many quality individuals between then and now, my experience these past nine months would not have been possible. It was a lonely journey that produced in me a crowded soul.

The Future in Europe

CrossFit in Europe will only continue to grow, making more of these connections and building stronger bonds with every succeeding competition, certification and event. The diversity of culture and history will only make this process more interesting and more fruitful in my opinion. As for the Games, I am eager to see the level continue to rise as more and more people compete for fewer and fewer spots. At least this year I can observe it firsthand.



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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. Follow Blair's travels at [Anywherfit](#).