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SEVEN YEARS' WAR

AFTER STARTING CROSSFIT IN 2008, BEN SMITH WINS THE GAMES IN 2015.

BY MIKE WARKENTIN



July 26, Ben Smith was crowned the Fittest Man on Earth.

And you might have seen it coming.

Smith, a podium finisher in 2011 and 2013, was far from a long shot heading into the competition, but he also wasn't the odds-on favorite. Many looked to Mathew Fraser, last year's second-place finisher, as the heir apparent to four-time champ Rich Froning Jr.

Fraser won the CrossFit Games Open, dominated the East Regional and looked like a man ready to cast his rivals aside like 10-lb. medicine balls at the Games. Smith finished third in the Open but fourth in the Atlantic Regional, placing 12th or lower in three of seven events—not an ideal way to generate momentum for the tests waiting at the StubHub Center.

But you might have seen Smith coming anyway—especially if you were around in 2009.

Ben Smith's Games Finishes

2009: 64th
2010: 8th
2011: 3rd
2012: 11th
2013: 3rd
2014: 7th
2015: 1st

Building a Champion

“Favorite WOD: All.”

The line is buried way back on the [2009 CrossFit Games website](#). It sits beside a picture of a very young Smith—18 at the time—doing overhead squats or snatches with what looks to be 95 lb. Smith's head is down, his stance is a bit wide, and his knees are rolling in slightly. He's wearing jogging shoes. The image is very different from that of the man who snatched 275 to take second in Snatch Speed Ladder in 2015.

Another tidbit from the profile:

“Least Favorite WOD: N/A.”

If Smith looked slightly raw as a rookie in 2009, he was already showing more polish at the 2010 CrossFit Games.



Nicole Bedard

It was telling that many considered the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games to be an off year for Smith, who finished 11th. Expectations were rising.



Ruby Wolff

In 2013, Smith was back on the podium at the Games, with eyes on the top step occupied by Rich Froning Jr.

The numbers in the profile are far from pedestrian (see Page 4), as noted in the first comment on the post, from someone called COS: “18 years old? WOW.”

Still, it’s less about the numbers and more about the attitude.

In his profile, 2008 Games second-place finisher Josh Everett listed stats better than Smith’s in almost all cases. He also served up a line most CrossFit athletes will understand:

“Favorite WOD: I don’t look forward to any of them.”

At 18, after starting CrossFit in April 2008, Smith had already set himself up for success by deciding he was going to love each and every challenge on the whiteboard.

If his 2009 debut in Aromas, California, was less than glorious, his sophomore year found him in the top 10 when the Games wrapped in their new home in Carson, California. The next year was even better: He stepped on the podium for the first time.

His stats were improving as well. Already in the elite category—especially in 2009, when a five-minute Fran was respectable—Smith’s numbers on benchmark workouts dropped further, while his lifting numbers increased dramatically. For example, his

snatch/clean-and-jerk combo went from 205/270 lb. to 265/320 in 2011 and to 300/365 by 2014.

Coverage of Smith increased as well, as pundits noted “the kid” had all the physical tools at his disposal. Perhaps lost in the now-gaudy numbers was that attitude, unchanged since 2009.

“The main thing I take away from the Games every year is that I need to get better. I always have things to improve. There is not one aspect of fitness that I wouldn’t like to improve. I try to be as well rounded as possible, and that can be achieved through programming,” Smith said in the 2011 article [“The Phenom Arrives: Ben Smith.”](#)

He continued: “Honestly, I don’t see myself being deficient in any one area. I just want to improve in every aspect. If you look at the top competitors, they don’t really have a glaring weakness. They are good across the board, and that’s what makes them great. I need to work to be just a bit better at everything.”

And he did get better at everything, including swimming—something that blindsided many athletes when it showed up at the Games in 2011. With a year of high-school swimming under his belt, Smith finished 16th after Games Director Dave

Castro cut the athletes loose in the waves at Santa Monica Pier. In 2012, Smith was 15th in Pendleton 1—swimming, biking and 150 m of running—and he was fifth in Pendleton 2, which tacked about 11 km of running onto the opening swim-bike pair. Turned out the kid could run, too. In 2013, he was second in The Pool. In 2014, he was 11th on The Beach, and he followed that up in 2015 by taking seventh on Pier Paddle.

“I think I’m in better swim shape now than I ever was,” he said at Hermosa Beach on July 22, still breathing hard but smiling.

While podium finishes highlighted Smith’s growing greatness, something else was happening, something that was moving the young athlete into the ultra-consistent realm of—dare we say it?—Froning. Smith was striking weaknesses off his list, maintaining his supercharged engine, getting ever stronger and, most importantly of all, becoming an all-around athlete who could stay competitive in any event while winning those that were in his wheelhouse.

Find Smith’s name on any CrossFit Games leaderboard and scan horizontally. If you cut Smith a bit of slack for a rough debut in 2009, when his best finish was 33rd and his worst was 62nd, you’ll notice a trend.

In 2010, you’ll see a 35th in Pyramid Double Helen but nothing lower than 15th after that, including an event win and a second-place finish. In 2011, he posted a low of 19th in Killer Cage alongside top-12 finishes in eight of 10 events. He also finished third and 10th in Skills 1 and Skills 2, which included rarer tests such as a softball throw, an L-sit and a weighted chest-to-bar pull-up.

In 2012, Smith had a trio of bad events clustered together. He took 41st in Ball Toss, 28th in Track Triplet and 33rd in Medball-HSPU. In what some might call an off year, Smith balanced the subpar events with six top-10 finishes. In 2013, he logged seven top-seven finishes and three second-place scores. His lowest placing was 32nd on Row 1, a potential bad investment of a scoring opportunity 2,000 m into the marathon. In Row 2—total time for 21,097 m—he was 23rd, perhaps indicating a bit of strategy was in place in the early going. Either way, he was 32 points ahead of Scott Panchik for third when Sunday came to a close.

In 2014, Smith suffered in the Sprint Sled events, but he notched eight finishes in the top 11, including finishes seventh or better in five of the last seven events. On Sunday he delivered what you might call a less-perfect version of a “Froning finish.” While the four-time champ closed out the day with three wins to become

a legend in the Sport of Fitness, Smith put Saturday-night's 24th in the rearview to take 11th, third and seventh to sign off strong.

Every year since 2009, Smith almost put together the performance he needed to win, and early in his career, he realized his potential himself.

"My one goal this year is to win the CrossFit Games," he said in the 2012 article "Dark Horse to Top Dog: Ben Smith." While he didn't come through on top in 2012, he didn't have long to wait. In 2015, he had only one slip: Sandbag 2015, in which he tied for 34th. But that error came very early in the competition, and Smith never finished outside the top 11 afterward. In fact, he was in the top seven in 10 of 13 events, winning two outright and finishing 36 points above Fraser.

After his victory, he told CrossFit Media everything changed in his seventh run at the Games.

"Something felt different. I could feel it," he was quoted in "The Fittest on Earth." And perhaps something was different. After all, he won after six years of trying.

But in reality, nothing was different. Smith just continued to get more and more consistent, and the story rolled on to its logical conclusion. It was all according to a plan set in motion in 2009, when a young athlete from the Mid Atlantic decided to list his favorite workout as "all."

The recipe is actually exceedingly simple, and Smith wasn't in the beer tent when Froning created it: Win the events in your wheelhouse, stay close to the athletes who win events in their wheelhouse, and avoid bottom-barrel scores on your worst events. Refine and improve over a period of years, sprinkle with mental fortitude and just add fitness.

Lots of fitness. ■

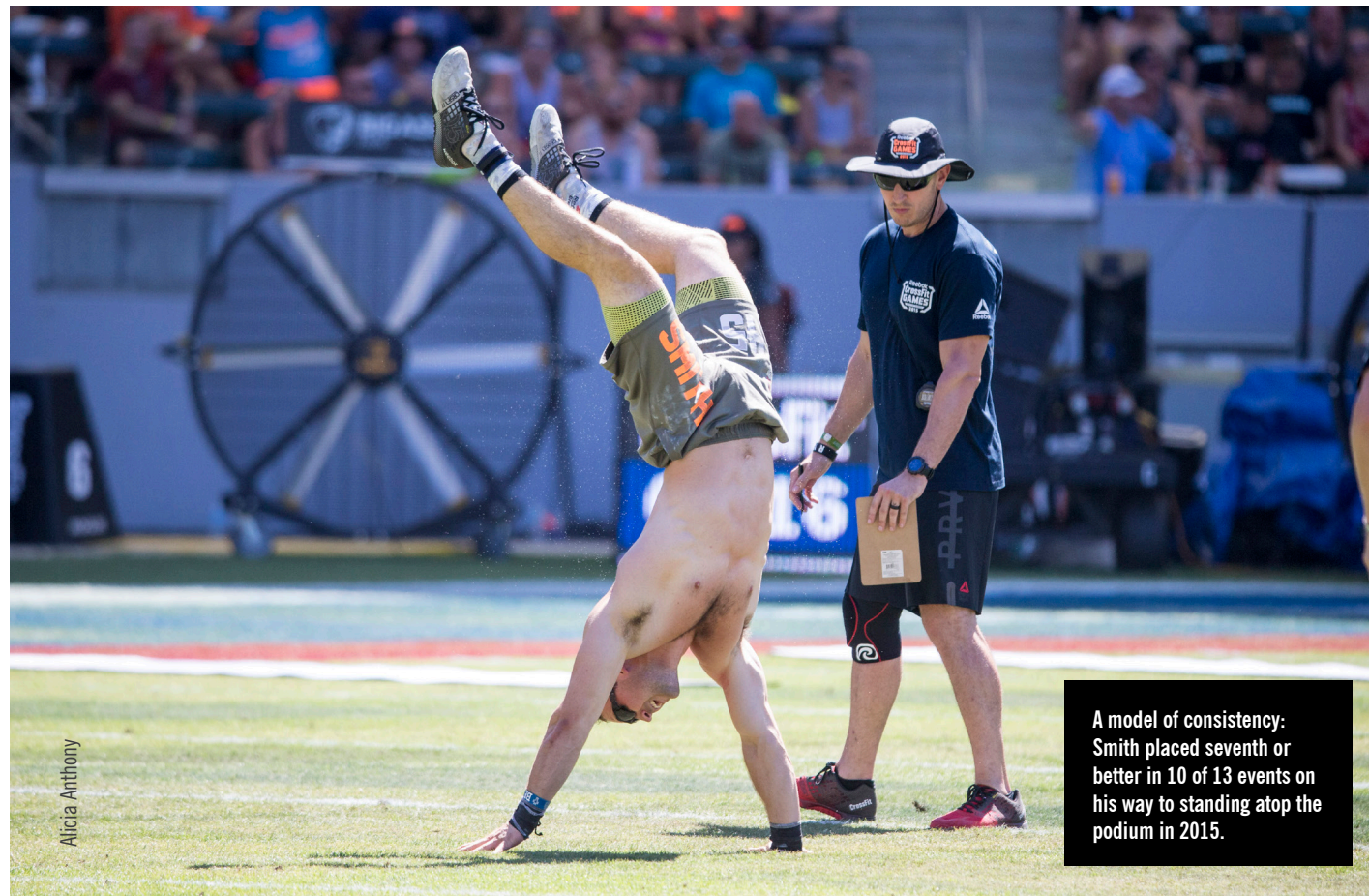
About the Author

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Melissa Smith

Seventh in 2014, Smith was poised to put together the performance he needed to win the CrossFit Games in 2015.



Alicia Anthony

A model of consistency: Smith placed seventh or better in 10 of 13 events on his way to standing atop the podium in 2015.

Ben Smith's Stats Progression

2009—Age 18

Fran: 2:44
Cindy: 30
Helen: 7:36
Grace: 2:04
Deadlift: 455
Press: 155
Back Squat: 405
Snatch: 205
Clean and Jerk: 270
Max Pull-ups: 45
Source: 2009 CrossFit Games Program

2011—Age 21

Fran: 2:25
Helen: 7:19
Grace: 1:51
Deadlift: 540
Back Squat: 450
Snatch: 265
Clean and Jerk: 320
Max Pull-ups: 76
400-m run: 0:58
Fight Gone Bad: 444
Source: 2011 CrossFit Games Program

2015—Age 25

Fran: 2:25
Helen: 7:19
Grace: 1:51
Deadlift: 540
Back Squat: 480*
Snatch: 300
Clean and Jerk: 335**
Max Pull-ups: 76
Fight Gone Bad: 520
Source: CrossFit Games website (accessed Aug. 7, 2015)

*Footage of a 520-lb. lift was uploaded to Instagram late in 2014.
**Footage of a 365-lb. lift was uploaded to YouTube April 15, 2014.