

Centers of Excellence - Part I

Athletes from CrossFit Calgary and CrossFit Central did extremely well at the 2009 CrossFit Games. In Part 1 of this two-part series we talk to James (OPT) FitzGerald and Brett (AFT) Marshall about their training secrets.

Mike Warkentin



James (OPT) FitzGerald won the 2007 CrossFit Games. His training partner, Brett (AFT) Marshall, was two points behind in second place.

In 2008, OPT was 12th and AFT was 39th out of 196 athletes. Six other CrossFit Calgary competitors also made the trip to Aromas.

At the 2009 CrossFit Games, CrossFit Calgary had four athletes in the Top 16, and their Affiliate Cup team—led by AFT—finished fourth overall.

Coincidence? Probably not.



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Experience Points

CrossFit Calgary was originally based out of Optimum Performance Training, a smaller training facility that was intended for individual clients but was modified to accommodate groups. In March 2009, CrossFit Calgary moved into a larger facility that used to be a transmission shop, and now customers waiting in line at the Minit Lube next door get to witness CrossFit chaos from the comfort and safety of their SUVs.

Do not tap glass; do not feed the athletes sugar.

According to OPT and AFT, the seeds of CrossFit Calgary's success were sown in 2007, when a couple of Canadian training partners flew down to California to do a few workouts at a ranch in Aromas.

"Brett and I came back from the Games in '07, and we were in love with CrossFit," OPT recalls. "Well, I was in love with CrossFit over two years prior to those Games, and those Games were a chance for us to show everyone that we take this shit seriously, and we really love it as a sport. We basically bleed it, pretty much, to the point where we've given up a lot of ourselves and our lives to create this so other people in our community can experience this."

OPT believes the culture he created at the original facility—which still exists for personalized training—has been recreated in the new space a short drive from Calgary's Olympic Park.

"When you walk into OPT and our facility, it's a code that you have to expect to eat well and train hard," OPT says. "There's no halfways about it, and I think that the expectation that Brett and I had coming back from '07, we taught other people about that, about how special this sport is and how really frickin' hard it is, and what you've got to do to excel at it. I think we just surrounded ourselves with other people who really fed off that passion, and it just bleeds through when you see it in subsequent Games."

"Those (2007) Games were a chance for us to show everyone that we take this shit seriously, and we really love it as a sport."

— James FitzGerald

That's not to say CrossFit Calgary is packed full of firebreathers tackling every WOD as if it's a precursor to the CrossFit Games. While OPT demands his athletes pay attention to nutrition, recovery and rest in addition to their training, he also understands that many CrossFitters just want to get fit and stay healthy.



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OPT (left) and AFT (right) used their experiences at the 2007 CrossFit Games to prepare their athletes for the 2009 competition.

"We give off a sense that this is serious and we love it," OPT explains. "If you want to be a part of it, then we're going to teach you how to prep and how serious you have to be about it. And if not, that's OK, too. You can still work out with us and still love it as a fitness regime."

Strength and Success

AFT handles the programming for CrossFit Calgary, and he loosely bases it on the main site.

"The only reason I deviate from CrossFit.com, I guess you could say, is that it gives you a little bit more control as an affiliate to manage your clients and where they're at," he says. "But the other thing is that you're managing logistics to a certain extent. It may or not work to run Lynne, for example."

While featuring the constantly varied, high-intensity functional movement CrossFitters know and love, AFT works in a bit more strength work. After seeing Josh Everett in action, Marshall was convinced that stronger athletes were better athletes.

That notion was confirmed for him at the 2008 Games, where he saw Jason Khalipa warming up for the final WOD: 30 reps of full squat clean and jerks at 155 lb. Khalipa didn't even bother to jerk the weight because he was strong enough to drive it overhead without dipping underneath. When Khalipa managed to use his brawn to beat the technically solid Everett and win the overall title, Marshall decided strength was of utmost importance to his athletes.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

D.J. Wickham finished 10th at the Games after strong showings in the deadlift and snatch WODs.



OPT's Training for the Games

OPT wasn't planning to compete in the Games after bowing out of the Canada West Regional Qualifier in order to organize it. When a special invitation from Coach Glassman came to the 2007 champion, OPT was left with only five weeks to prepare for the grueling test at The Ranch.

OPT quickly designed a regimen that was based on 11 cycles of two days on and one day off, with different energy systems targeted all the time.

"I think I did 11 cycles of two and one, and on the two, the first two, I did two workouts," he says. "The second two I would do three workouts. The third two, I would do four workouts, and then I would go back to two and then three and then four, and then I built intensity and volume into those twos and threes and fours, over and over."

For example, in the first cycle OPT would pair heavy Oly lifting one day with a 16-minute met-con involving running on the next. On the following cycle he would do a shorter high-power WOD and then a longer body-weight met-con in the evening of the first day. The following day would involve heavy training on a single lift or higher reps of one movement. And so on...

"Basically, I tried to fit in all different energy-systems scenarios with high load, low load, body weight, all different metabolic or monostructural modalities, basically just to hit on so many different things," OPT says.

Training Continued ...

"I told all my clients—all my private clients, all of our members—that we have to be stronger, so I do have a bit, I would say, of a strength bias in my workouts," he says. "Whether it's individual clients, we're doing strength work more often than you'd see on the main site. It's not that we're not doing met-cons, but often I'll be doing strength and following with a shorter met-con after that. And I try to get as much strength as I can into the programming for our gyms."

General programming aside, the other members of CrossFit Calgary's Affiliate Cup team—Rob Corson, Geoff Aucoin, Michelle Savard, Laura MacDonald and Stacey Deering—all worked one-on-one with AFT, who delivered periodized programs designed to prepare the athletes for the Games.

"Two or three months out it was, 'Let's work on everything that you hate and everything that you suck at,'" Marshall laughs. "So workouts weren't fun. ... It was just being mindful of overall fitness, knowing that in a CrossFit competition, be it the Games or what you're facing on a daily basis, it could be anything."

He continues: "There is a definitely a drop in volume and increases in volume and intensity to get them to a peak state. But again, I don't stick to any sort of format, per se. If I wanted Michelle or Stacey increasing their intensity and volume in a given week or two but it looked like they weren't going to be able to do that at that point, then I'm backing off."

Training Continued ...

Although he was in good shape when he started the program, he felt as if it really prepared him for the Games.

"From five weeks out I was still fit, in good shape, but I didn't do a lot of pain training, and basically we're just getting into those scenarios and putting up with pain and learning how to screw things up and then get out of it appropriately—just learning how to battle basically all the demons that come on with fatigue and stuff," he says. "So it took me about five weeks ... to get to that point where I felt really confident."

OPT believes he might have peaked one week early, so he cut down his volume in the final days before the Games. Once he was in California, a great run along the beach confirmed that he was ready for the Games.

"I felt good to go for Saturday morning."

OPT was forced to withdraw from the final event due to injury but still managed a 13th-place finish, adding yet another accomplishment to a growing list of impressive Games performances.



Staff/CrossFit Journal



The members of Calgary's Affiliate Cup team benefitted from individualized programs designed by Brett (AFT) Marshall.

Running With the Big Dogs

The individual competitors at the CrossFit Games—D.J. Wickham, Michael (Bro-PT) FitzGerald and Lauren Pryor—were on a more specific program designed by OPT himself. (See sidebar beginning on Page 3 for OPT’s personal preparation for the Games.)

The Big Dogs program evolved from—what else?—a series of whiteboard workouts OPT used to post at the smaller Calgary facility to challenge athletes and coaches who were looking to get away from named WODs and really dig into constantly varied movement. As with all things CrossFit, what started on the whiteboard soon made it to the web, and [OPT’s personal blog](#) now has followers from Calgary to North Carolina. OPT monitors the times and loads posted in the comments section and then programs the site based on what he sees from his athletes.

“Basically, what I offered to it was a little bit of an individualization approach to it,” OPT says. “And I still uphold that today to the Big Dogs blog in that it’s kind of a nice number right now and has been for a year, where I can analyze and change based upon weaknesses and strengths.”

He adds: “With the Big Dogs stuff it just seemed that, because I knew everyone that was doing it, whether it was 10 people or 40 or 80 or 100, I kind of got a drift as to what people are good at and was keeping those things in mind with the principles of fitness. I was kind of able to individualize a lot of the stuff on there and work on things people needed to improve in order to create that philosophy of whole fitness—which is what OPT really speaks of and is quite passionate about.”

The site is specifically periodized to prepare for competitions up to and including the CrossFit Games, and the August 2009 programming featured an increase in volume and skill work and a decrease in overall intensity to reflect the post-Games condition of the athletes. In the coming year, OPT hopes to include more competitions in the schedule, and he’ll continue to periodize his workouts accordingly.

“Going through the competitions throughout the year will allow people who want to do the Games or prep for the Games to get a sense as to what it’s like to do that in relation to volume, higher intensity and lower volume before competition, and basically how to peak for it appropriately.”



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Four athletes from CrossFit Calgary made it into the Top 16, including Lauren Pryor, who finished 14th.

The individual competitors at the CrossFit Games—D.J. Wickham, Michael (Bro-PT) FitzGerald and Lauren Pryor—were on the more specific Big Dogs CrossFit program designed by OPT himself.

Besides basic workout prescriptions, the site also features speed recommendations for the reps. For example, "Chin-ups @ 30X1" means "three-second eccentric phase, no seconds spent at the bottom, explosive concentric phase and a one-second hold at the top. Specific rest periods between sets are also included, as well as post-WOD nutrition based on gender and body composition.

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— James FitzGerald

"When you start following the blog, you'll see that the community has the utmost respect, but they also will let you know that you've got to have your shit together in relation to your food if you're going to uphold the kind of training that goes on in this arena," he says. "And what I mean by that is prepping yourself appropriately for higher peak phases or higher volume or ... knowing how to do pre- and post-workout nutrition, knowing how to balance your insulin throughout the day and just using different methodologies that I have."



A Scientific Approach

Both OPT and AFT are quick to point out that their success doesn't necessarily mean they've found some secret program. In the end, they're just doing CrossFit as Coach Greg Glassman intended it.

"Yes, we're putting together the program for them that gets them ready for the Games or whatever it is, and potentially that's different than what other affiliates are doing, but that's the black box," AFT says. "That's what everybody is doing. I don't think any one affiliate is doing the same thing, and I think it would be the wrong idea to say, 'CrossFit Calgary has a better model and let's follow their model,' because all of a sudden you've lost that ability to try new things and see what works."

Nevertheless, the results of the three editions of the CrossFit Games prove that CrossFit Calgary is doing something right.

OPT believes that as CrossFit becomes more recognized as a sport, success will come to the trainers and athletes who take it very seriously and approach CrossFit in a scientific and open-minded manner.

"You're going to see those folks excelling at the Games," he says, "as well as large groups and communities excelling at the Games."



About the Author

Mike Warkentin works for the CrossFit Journal. He managed to draw blood while doing Fran at CrossFit Calgary but still had fun doing it. He hopes the people in line at Minit Lube enjoyed the show.