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Leading From the Back

During the CrossFit Games Open, a lot of attention is focused on the athletes who finish on top. But could we learn even more from those lower on the Leaderboard?

By Maureen O'Hagan

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Shaun Cleary

Josh Bridges completed CrossFit Games Open Workout 14.5 in 7:49.

Samantha Briggs did it in 8:31.

And Cori Creran from Clifton, New Jersey, took 1 hour, 28 minutes.

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Is she 10 times less fit than Briggs? Or is there a chance we've been looking at this all wrong?

Before you answer, think back for a moment to 14.5: burpees and thrusters, that diabolical combination, for 84 reps each. You probably have your own choice words for it. Awful. Horrendous. A death march from the first set to the last.

Did it take you 15 minutes? It probably sucked for all 15. Thirty? Same answer. Now imagine doing it for even longer. You're sucking wind. Quivering. Nauseated. For an hour or more. Get the picture?

"It takes a lot more energy and strength to do what Cori did than to finish in 10 minutes," said fellow CrossFit Passaic Valley athlete Jacqueline Bruno, who witnessed the entire thing.

Creran knew long before the clock started she'd be the last finisher in her box. She was 47 years old and had come to CrossFit weak, overweight and in pain from a bum knee. But she was hooked instantly. Then, last July, she had a kidney infection that turned septic. By the time she left the hospital, she could barely walk up stairs.

She signed up for the Open because it was a way to really

commit—which is exactly what she did. A financial analyst, she likes to do things methodically, to dig into the facts and understand how things work. Before the workout, she studied the videos and got pointers from her coach, Pete Hasselberger. She thought she had it figured out.

"I had a plan in my head," she said.

Four reps a minute, she told herself, that was the goal. It'd be all over in about 40 minutes.

Wrong. Her plan was toast from the word "go."

It was the thrusters. The weight, 65 lb., was her max overhead. She could pull off one thruster but would fail at the next. It was killing her time—not to mention her energy. In the first set, she missed at least a half-dozen attempts. But she kept plodding, kept trying to string them together.

Finally, she reached 21 thrusters. She dropped to the mat and began her burpees. After the thrusters, they came almost as a relief, a slow, methodical march toward 21.

Looking around at that point, she realized others had already finished their workout. She glanced at the clock.



Cheryl Boatman

Scenes like this could be found all over the world as affiliate members banded together to cheer comrades through Workout 14.5.



Alicia Anthony

Workout 14.5 was a test of fitness, but it was also a test of mental fortitude.

Nearly 24 minutes had gone by. She was feeling breathless and weak. And still way off her mark.

"How long am I going to stick this out?" she asked herself at that point. "Can I stick this out?"

Bruno, who was judging, thought Creran might quit there.

"You could see in her face she was hurting," Bruno recalled.

But Creran picked up the bar once again. Bruno was floored.

"Every single time, it was all of her energy and strength to get that bar into a clean, squat down and push it over her head," Bruno said. "It was her max. And she did it how many times?"

Bruno was sweating just watching. When she had done the workout earlier that morning, she wanted to quit, too. She managed to finish in 18:06, but it felt like torture. If she were in Creran's shoes, she thought, she'd give up.

But Creran kept going.

"A couple times I broke down because I didn't think I was going to be able to do it," she recalled. She felt a wave of dizziness with every thruster.

The tears began to flow.

Hasselberger knew what was going on. It was the chatter, that fusillade of emotions and rationalization that bombards our psyche in moments of doubt.

"We've all heard the voice inside our own head," he said. "I know the tone of it, the dialogue that was going on." He told Creran to breathe.

By the round of 15, she was aching.

"That fear, that doubt, that exhaustion," Creran recalled. "I thought, 'I could easily quit this. Why am I doing this?'"

She looked at Bruno.

"Get out of your head," Creran recalled the judge telling her.

Creran kept going. Her body ached, and a wave of dizziness came over her with each thruster.

"In the scheme of things, it didn't really mean anything" to finish, she said later. "But it meant everything. If I didn't finish, I couldn't get a score."

She also realized something about herself: "I quit things before in my life, and I regretted it."

So she continued. Hasselberger came up with a new plan. Forget about stringing thrusters together, he told her. Do one thruster, drop the bar and rest; another thruster and rest. It gave her a focus, a new goal.

"I made a deal with myself," Creran said.

As long as she could get the bar overhead, she wouldn't quit. Thruster, rest. Thruster, rest. But if she kept failing, she could stop.

"It just seems to me that you get into a mode," she said. "Keep chipping away and you just keep going."

Nearly 90 minutes later, Bruno, Hasselberger and another athlete, Dominick Azzolini, were still there with her.

"I don't want to disappoint them," Creran said. "It was hearing them cheer me on. You're doubting yourself. And you're thinking, 'There's no way in hell I'm going to get through this.' To me, that's what the whole community is about. They want to see you succeed."

She had gotten through 21, 18, 15 all the way down to her last set of three thrusters. Creran dropped the bar for the last time.

"On the ground," Azzolini yelled. "Three burpees. And then you're done!"



Shaun Cleary

For many, the pain of Workout 14.5 slowly turned into a long-lasting sense of accomplishment. But only after a solid five to 10 minutes of writhing on the rubber.

Bruno was jumping up and down, thrilled.

"It was an incredible thing to watch," she said. "It was humbling."

For her, it was an "a-ha moment."

"With CrossFit you sometimes become so obsessed with your score and RX-ing it," Bruno realized. She was guilty of doing so herself. "But it's not always about time, whether I'm the top finisher in the box. It's your own personal satisfaction, your own competition with yourself. And finishing a workout is a big deal.

"It was awesome to watch."

Finally, Creran was finished. One hour, 28 minutes, and 28 seconds of awesomeness—and awfulness. And now it was behind her.

"It was a celebration," she recalled.

Bruno sent out a flurry of texts.

"I just witnessed the most amazing thing," she told fellow gym members. "To watch her do that and not give up, that was a lesson for all of us."

When the excitement wore down, Creran admitted she felt a moment of embarrassment. It took her that long? Then her phone started to ping.

"Awesome!" one friend texted. The messages kept

coming. And Creran, at home with bags of ice on her knees, started bawling.

"I had my personal reasons for not quitting," she explained. "But I didn't realize how much it meant to everybody that I keep going. I think it meant more to them than it did to me."

Champions, All

Now, back to the original question: what is fitness? What is true strength? Who's the biggest badass?

We celebrate the best in the world, people such as Rich Froning, Josh Bridges and Sam Briggs. We marvel at their physical prowess. We rain accolades on them.

But maybe it's time to take a good look at the athletes around you. There's probably a Cori Creran in your box, too.

"Like I said, it doesn't really mean anything in the scheme of life," she said. "But it means everything moving forward. You had a plan and you conquered that fear. And you made it."



About the Author

Maureen O'Hagan is a Seattle-based journalist who is the recipient of numerous national writing and reporting awards. Skeptical by nature, she tried CrossFit for a newspaper story in 2009. Now she's hooked.