
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

“You Heard of CrossFit?”

Josh Bunch visits the Arnold Sports Festival to find out what the sports world really thinks of CrossFit.

By Josh Bunch Practice CrossFit

March 2012



All images: Josh Bunch/Practice CrossFit

When Arnold Schwarzenegger first ventured to Ohio's state capital, something urged him to return for decades to come.

It's possible a past Columbus bodybuilding victory left a soft spot for the Austrian Oak. Maybe the Terminator likes Buckeyes. Maybe the rumors are true: he lost a bet. For whatever reason, the Arnold Sports Festival is held every year in Buckeye country, and it continues to draw a diverse crowd and host more sports than the Olympics.

1 of 5

The Arnold Sports Festival is one part show, one part sell and one part heart. There are those who attend solely to show off. Their day consists of little more than using “smedium” T-shirts to showcase their ILS (imaginary lat syndrome). Those busy showing off are counterbalanced nicely by those busy selling out. Capitalism could be defined by the massive list of non-FDA-approved products on sale and promising to enhance everything from biceps size to bedroom stamina.

Thankfully, the heart still beats strong. No matter the commercialism, fake boobs or bogus products, somewhere there is always a quiet fighter in a corner waiting to do a job, waiting to compete. This is where CrossFit fits into the Arnold sports spectacle.

Is CrossFit really spreading the globe like we believe it to be?

For three years running, CrossFit has made quite the Arnold appearance. From the 2010 sectional event to 2011’s Rogue and Again Faster exhibitions to the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games Open, CrossFit has delivered. When CrossFit is at the Arnold, it’s part of a showcase of sporting diversity. It’s one thing to troll the crowd at the CrossFit Games in Carson, where you’re surrounded by CrossFit people, but it’s very different altogether to saunter around at an event where CrossFitters are by far in the minority.

With a diverse population being exposed to CrossFit at the Arnold, a few questions come to mind. Is CrossFit really spreading the globe like we believe it to be? Sure, CrossFit is on ESPN, but so are bowling and billiards. And if CrossFit tests elite fitness, what do elite specialists—or “elite spectators”—think of the sport of fitness?

Chuck—Otterbein University Defensive End

Chuck was the first security guard not impressed by my CrossFit badge, which had previously allowed me access to areas it clearly was not supposed to. After a brief albeit friendly altercation, I asked Chuck if he had ever heard of CrossFit.

“Ha—funny you should ask: our entire football team was introduced to CrossFit two weeks ago,” he said, shaking his head in what looked to be an act of submission.

“I can see how your contest claims to have the fittest person in the world.”

—Chuck

“And?” I asked.

“I never want to do it again, but I understand I should,” Chuck said. “I can see how your contest claims to have the fittest person in the world. After trying it, I would agree.”

Lisa—Gymnast

The kid giving me the thousand-yard stare as he smiled and sat in the iron cross was starting to piss me off as I walked through the mammoth gymnastics exhibition. If he wasn’t 7 I would have kicked his ass.

Just as the green-eyed monster consumed me over the talent of a 7-year-old gymnast, I met Lisa and her family. Lisa is an 8-year-old gymnast from Europe. Remember, the Arnold Sports Festival is a worldwide draw.

“You CrossFit”, she said. CrossFit shirts are better icebreakers than the funniest joke.



When you mention CrossFit outside of your box, do you encounter blank stares and confusion or impressed admiration?

Lisa and crew went on to inform me that CrossFit overseas is gaining ground more and more every day. Last year a box opened less than 10 miles from her house. Less than one year later, she has a box within two miles.

"A few of my friends are doing it, and I wish I could. It sucks, but for now I will continue my training and hope CrossFit will be there when I'm done," Lisa said.

Olympic hopefuls are policed more so in gymnastics than any other sport, and female gymnasts are strictly governed throughout their young lives if there is even a glimmer of greatness within them. Apparently Lisa has that glimmer, but she wants to CrossFit too.

Paul—Professional Bodybuilder

Several non-English-speaking interviews later I found what looked to be the one and only coffee shop on planet Arnold. The price of a cup proved that very fact. The only game in town gets all the town's money.

As I swerved into the amusement-park line, I met a rather vascular mountain of man, oil and muscle in front of me. He looked to be in the midst of a long-distance argument with his female friend across the convention-center floor. Apparently she needed immediate assistance with a clothing malfunction—or lack thereof. He didn't want to lose his spot in line.

"Hey, man. Go help your girl. I can get it for ya," I told Everest in front of me.

"Really? Uh, cool. Thanks," he said while tossing me a 20 and earthquaking his way to his damsel in distress.

When the barista finally finished legally robbing me, I handed the bodybuilder his cup.

"That was really cool, man," he said.



CrossFit fans mix with curious bodybuilders, gymnasts and powerlifters to watch a CrossFit demonstration.



Bodybuilders might not be interested in CrossFit, but most CrossFitters aren't interested in spray-on tans.

After a little small talk Paul, introduced himself. He is a professional bodybuilder who was competing this weekend, and apparently the coffee was for his girl. Paul had not had liquid in 36 hours.

I told Paul who I was, and he had heard of CrossFit.

"Yeah, CrossFit. You guys are those infomercials on at 2 a.m., right?"

"Well," I said, "we are about as much infomercial as you are Richard Simmons."

As Arnold Sports Festival bodybuilders go, Paul was a pretty open guy. After I explained a little of what CrossFit was, he didn't seem to reject it. He just didn't seem to care for it. This carried over to the remainder of the bodybuilders I spoke with during the Arnold weekend. Those who were aware almost universally said their girlfriends were CrossFitters, but there is no way they could do that type of activity and stay as large as they were. They seemed to respectfully believe CrossFit is for the girls and bodybuilding is for the boys.

Patrick—Powerlifter

To many, Columbus is a Mecca of iron. For years, bodybuilders who have claimed residence in Ohio have become champions, while Louie Simmons and Westside Barbell have created countless powerlifting champions.

Patrick, a lifetime powerlifter, and I met when I rolled by the Inzer booth. He and crew spotted me first and said, "Do you CrossFit?"

Surprised, I turned and said, "Yeah. Why do you ask?"

Without missing a beat, Patrick chimed in and said, "The giant tattoos and shirt that says CrossFit all over it kinda gives it away."

Touché, powerlifter. Touché.

As I sat down with the energetic and welcoming crowd of powerlifters, I found their knowledge to be incredible. It was like talking to mirror versions of Louie Simmons, and it was fun as hell. One woman informed me, in a dialect I could not grasp, that CrossFit is for people who want to move fast, not be strong. I didn't argue—her total is bigger than mine.

Another man said, "CrossFit is great for kids, but I can't see myself doing it. I'm sure it would make me healthier, but I'm not sure it would make me stronger".

Patrick laughingly went on to say that one of his friends had begun CrossFit.

"A buddy of mine hurt his shoulder, so he figured it wouldn't hurt to go over to the 'dark side of fitness' for a while. Apparently he likes it. We haven't seen him since."

As I left my new powerlifting buddies I wondered what powerlifting is to fitness if CrossFit is the "dark side of fitness."

It appeared that many CrossFitters have developed a passion for the sport of Olympic weightlifting.

I wonder if we will ever be on the same side.

Joshua—Olympic Weightlifter

A stone's throw from the CrossFit complex at the Arnold was an Olympic-weightlifting playground. This year it seemed bigger than years past. There was more room for spectators—spectators with CrossFit flags.

As I approached the stage, I saw many familiar faces eagerly awaiting the next lift. It appeared that many CrossFitters have developed a passion for the sport of Olympic weightlifting. This became very apparent as I talked to silver

medalist Joshua Gilbert.

After I congratulated him for medaling with a 290-lb. clean and jerk at a body weight of 135, he went on to tell me about his training center in Las Vegas: Average Bro's Gymnasium, which shares its location with CrossFit Las Vegas.

"No, I have never done CrossFit before, but I can easily do 25 strict pull-ups and barbell work. I would be good at it," Gilbert explained. "I will tell you this, though, there really isn't money in Olympic weightlifting, but CrossFit's purse keeps getting bigger. I wouldn't mind to get a piece of that," Gilbert said.

As I wished Joshua well, I considered CrossFit's purse and realized I had never thought about it before. Are other elite athletes recognizing that we may have a dollar or two to offer the fittest human alive? Will dollar signs eventually beckon new recruits to compete to win the CrossFit Games?

Elite Spectators

In CrossFit, the crowd is the competitor, and the competitor the crowd. This one simple fact seemed to separate CrossFit from every other sport within the Arnold Sports Festival. Many rooms contained many fans but few participants. Not so at the CrossFit exhibition.

While back at club CrossFit, I managed to stake out several spectators filtering in from the sea of millions calling Columbus home for the weekend. Opinions were mixed

Maybe the only way to
know CrossFit is to
experience CrossFit.

to say the least:

"Oh, this is CrossFit. It's for really fit people."

"I told you, CrossFit girls have the best butts ever."

"I wish I could do that."

"I don't know what this is, but it will never last. People don't want to work that hard."

"I still don't understand how these people are so fit and only work out for like three minutes."

"This is what everyone at Gold's Gym is talking about."

"I saw this on ESPN. These dudes are badass, and the shit they do is no joke."

"Where do I sign up?"

And maybe the last question reveals the most about our sport. Maybe the only way to know CrossFit is to experience CrossFit. Without the action, something is lost in the translation. Coach Greg Glassman has talked about this many times.

"What is CrossFit?"

"Meet me at my gym tomorrow at 6 a.m."

An external crowd may never truly get CrossFit, but that's not the point. The point is that we never compromise our position so that they do. Progress and improvement are only possible with integrity and discipline: two qualities CrossFit presents in spades.

And while it may take a crowd of CrossFitters to hear the gospel, that shouldn't keep the same crowd from preaching it to anyone who will listen.



Courtesy of Josh Bunch/Practice CrossFit



About the Author

Josh Bunch is a longtime affiliate owner, Reebok CrossFit Games Central East Regional media director, and a writer who ensures the CrossFit lifestyle has the potency of the pen and value of the word it so deserves.