

CALVIN KLEIN

FIRST

WHAT
IT TAKES
TO WIN

2-TIME CROSSFIT GAMES CHAMPION

RICH FRONING

WITH DAVID THOMAS

FOREWORD BY DAVE CASTRO, DIRECTOR, CROSSFIT GAMES, CROSSFIT TRAINING

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TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC., CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS

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First: What It Takes to Win

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ISBN 978-1-4143-8678-2

Printed in the United States of America

19 18 17 16 15 14 13
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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FOREWORD

RICH FRONING IS the most powerful CrossFit athlete I know.

Our sport tests for the fittest person alive, and we do this by evaluating power output across varying time domains with a variety of functional movements—from short-duration efforts with really heavy weight to long-duration efforts with light or no weight. Consistently having faster times in completing these tasks equates to being fitter and more powerful. At the end of a CrossFit Games competition, we have tested fairly for the fittest alive, and in these tests Rich has been dominant.

In 2010 Rich won his Sectional and Regional competitions before going on to take second at the CrossFit Games. In 2011 he placed third in the first-ever CrossFit Open and followed that up with his first CrossFit Games victory.

In 2012 he accomplished what I think is one of the most impressive feats in the seven-year existence of our sport. Rich started the 2012 season by winning the five-week Open, in which athletes were given five days to complete a workout

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that was released each Wednesday. Competing against thousands of athletes from around the world, Rich took first in two events and was in the top three in two of the others.

Rich then advanced to the Central East Regional and won the event. The Regionals differ from the Open in that you have six workouts to do over the course of three days. The events are announced well ahead of time, and the competition includes a handful of other elite CrossFit athletes. Top finishers earn spots in the CrossFit Games.

To round out the 2012 season, Rich won the CrossFit Games for a second straight year. The Games differ from the Open and the Regionals in that athletes compete in unknown and unknowable challenges. Most events are not announced until shortly before the competition—sometimes just minutes before. Just as in 2011, Rich won the Games in dominant fashion after building up an early lead that was too difficult for anyone to overcome.

He is the first and only two-time male CrossFit Games champion, and in three Games appearances he has never finished below second.

The hat trick of winning the Open, the Regional, and the Games in 2012 will be hard to replicate by anyone else as the sport grows, and Rich might be the only person capable of doing it again.

These accomplishments aside, Rich's power transcends his physical strength and tremendous work capacity.

The first time I met Rich, I was impressed with how humble and gracious he was. He had just won the 2010

Southeast Regional, and he was smiling and shaking hands with people. I could tell he genuinely cared about those around him. When you spoke to him, he listened to you as if nothing was more important than what you had to say. He was young but already a great representative of the sport.

Over the past few years, the sport has grown quickly, and I've watched Rich grow as an integral part of it. The Rich I met in 2010 has not changed with his fame. He still smiles and shakes hands with those who want to meet him. He still genuinely cares about those around him. And when you speak, he still listens to you as if there is nothing more important than what you are talking about.

The next few years are going to bring more growth for the sport and more fame for Rich. He is a star, and his star is going to shine brighter and brighter.

But Rich will stay the same: true to himself, true to his fans, true to his family, and true to his faith.

Rich Froning is the most powerful CrossFit athlete I know.

Dave Castro

Director, CrossFit Games, CrossFit Training

PROLOGUE

FIVE FEET.

That was all I needed to reach the top of the rope.

Five feet had never looked so far away.

I was fifteen feet above the ground, hanging on for dear life to a rope dangling from a massive steel structure. My grip was shot, and I could hardly even hear the hundreds of screaming spectators in the Home Depot Center in Carson, California. I was hot, drenched in sweat, and utterly exhausted.

I released my left hand to grab the rope above my right. Almost six minutes into attempting to conquer this stinking twenty-foot rope climb, I was absolutely determined to make it to the top. But in the final event of the 2010 CrossFit Games, after three days of being run through a physical and mental wringer like nothing I had ever experienced, it was all I could do to get my left hand up and onto the rope.

I began kicking my legs, looking for every possible bit of momentum to help me make it to the top. By this point I was so far behind the competition, I knew I wouldn't come

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close to finishing the workout before the twelve-minute time cap. But there was no way I was going to fail on this attempt. I had already failed more times than I could count.

When I finally reached the top and stretched my left hand up to touch the bar the rope was hanging from, there was no time for celebration. I could tell right away that my right hand wasn't going to be able to hold up my weight on its own.

I put my left hand back on the rope, below my right one, but the downward slide had begun, and my arms and shoulders were too taxed to stop it. The friction from the rope ripped into my palms and fingers. My burning hands reacted by doing what made sense to them: they let go.

The landing twenty feet below was abrupt and awkward. My pride hit the ground first. Then my heels, and the momentum of the fall rocked me backward. My butt was next to make contact with the ground. The back of my head and neck struck an orange bucket of chalk next to the rig.

Physically and mentally spent, I didn't even feel the landing. It wasn't until later that I learned just how hard I had fallen.

And it wasn't until the event was finished that I learned just what the rope failure had cost me: the CrossFit Games championship and title of Fittest Man on Earth.

It would have made for a great story, a complete unknown from small-town Tennessee coming out of nowhere to defeat the greatest CrossFit athletes in the world.

But then, the rope.

Two years and two Games championships later, I still get asked by those in the CrossFit community about that rope and how it cost me the title. They suggest that if it hadn't been for the rope, I would be a *three*-time Games champion.

But the truth is, if not for that rope, I don't think I would be a three-time champ. Or even a two-time champion. I am convinced I would not have won another Games.

There is something those people don't know about the rope. Or me.

The rope changed my life.

CHAPTER I

“JUST WORK”

THIS IS JUST WORK!

The final event on the second day of the 2010 CrossFit Games was called the Sandbag Move. My assigned judge began describing the details of the event as I walked out onto the stadium floor toward an empty wheelbarrow that was waiting for me.

We would have to throw 600 pounds of sandbags from the seats at one end of the stadium onto the ground, load them into a wheelbarrow, haul them across the stadium, and then carry the bags up the steps to the top row at that end of the stadium.

The description just as easily could have been coming

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from my dad, assigning me yet another of the many random chores he gave me when I was growing up to instill within me a strong work ethic.

I knew the Sandbag Move had to be catching some of the other competitors off guard. But to me, it seemed like just another day of getting work done back home in Tennessee.

The Sandbag Move is a classic example of how random the events at the Games are. And, at least at times, how practical they can be.

At its core, CrossFit consists of real-world movements that people use every day, throughout the day: picking things up, carrying them, lifting them overhead, pulling them, pushing them, dragging them.

Granted, for most people, hauling sandbags in a wheelbarrow across a sports stadium isn't an everyday activity itself. The Sandbag Move is one of those Games events that can make you scratch your head and ask, "Where on earth did this idea come from? Who thought it up? And how bad of a mood was he in when he thought of it?" But that's what the Games are—facing the challenges delivered by the unknown and the unknowable.

We had twenty minutes to complete the workout, and I finished in seven minutes, fourteen seconds—good enough to win my heat of six competitors and finish second among the twenty-four who had advanced to that point in the Games. My second-place finish moved me into first place overall, heading into the third and final day.

When I caught up with my family and friends after

completing the Sandbag Move, my dad's first words to me were "You're welcome."

I must admit, my dad had prepared me well, because as I grew up, long before the CrossFit Games had been created, he made sure I stayed busy doing the unknown and the unknowable.

Odd Jobs

Most of the time around our place when I was growing up, there was some chore or other to be done. And when there wasn't, one could easily be created.

Like most kids I knew, I played video games, but my gaming systems were never the coolest ones to have. So I spent a lot of time outside, playing sports and games or finding outdoorsy activities to do in the woods where we lived. Besides, if I didn't find anything to do outside, my parents would come up with something that would get me out of the house. I could either find an outdoor game or activity that I wanted to do, or I could spend the rest of the time until sundown performing a chore I didn't want to do.

There were plenty of times when the jobs my parents thought up for me made no sense. Like the summer when Dad pointed to a pile of old lumber filled with rusty nails.

"I'm gonna use those boards," he told me, "so I need you to pull all those nails out."

I'm sure I looked at him kind of funny, because the assignment seemed odd.

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“Besides,” he added, “pulling those nails will help you with throwing a curveball.”

A kid dreaming of a major-league baseball career, I actually believed that and did as ordered, pulling every single nail out of every one of those boards. Then the wood just sat there, unused, for a couple of weeks until Dad finally threw it onto a pile with a bunch of other junk and lit a bonfire.

Come on, I thought, remembering how Dad had said he had plans for using the wood.

There was another time when I had made Dad a little angry, although I can't recall what stupid act I had committed.

We had two barns on our property about fifty yards apart, and inside one was a big pile of cinder blocks. Dad told me to take the cinder blocks from that barn and move them into the other barn and stack them there. It took me about three hours to complete the task, carrying two blocks at a time, and when I finished, I was actually rather proud of how neatly I had stacked them. I mean, they had been just tossed into a pile in the other barn.

When Dad came home from his job, he examined my work.

“You know what?” he said. “I don't like where those are at. Why don't you move that pile back over to the other barn.”

I had to spend the next three hours moving all those cinder blocks back to where they had been in the first place. Except I had to stack them neatly instead of throwing them into a pile.

At least that time I had the assignment coming for getting into trouble.

I learned early that when possible, it was best to make work fun.

One job I always had in the fall was to pile up apples that had fallen from the trees in our yard and haul them off so they wouldn't rot on the ground and attract bees. I turned apple picking into a baseball game, taking a Wiffle ball bat and imagining I was Cecil Fielder from the Detroit Tigers, launching majestic home runs over the power lines and into the seats of Tiger Stadium. In reality, when belting baseballs rather than apples, I was a line-drive hitter more along the lines of my favorite player, shortstop Alan Trammell. But what does it hurt for a kid to pretend?

Work and Play

Both my parents believed in hard work. Raised to have a strong work ethic, they were intent on passing that trait down to their children.

I was the only boy, so the hardest work landed on me. My sister, Kayla, is four-and-a-half years younger than I am. We're complete opposites. I think she might have played one year of T-ball growing up, but other than that, the closest she wanted to get to sports was as a cheerleader.

Kayla was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes when she was twelve, and after that, I teased her about taking advantage of the diabetes to massage the system and get off the hook for a lot of the work.

There was no getting out of work for me, though.

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I did my fair share of grumbling and complaining under my breath, but I noticed that my parents both modeled hard work. They weren't sitting on the couch and telling me to go do something; they were working hard too.

My dad always had a project—or three—going at home. Dad, who now is head of maintenance with the Oreck vacuum cleaner company, was skilled with his hands and always building, making, or fixing something. Mom worked as a waitress, and when she wasn't doing that job, she seemed to be constantly cleaning either our house or someone else's. Both inside and outside, it seemed my parents always had something they were working on at home. I could count on one hand all the times I remember seeing my parents lounging around doing nothing.

My parents were both products of families that believed hard work will get you where you need to go. I grew up hearing my parents, grandparents, and aunts and uncles telling my cousins and me that working hard would bring us advantages later in life. We were taught that everything we would need as we grew older wouldn't just be handed to us; we would have to work for much of it.

My dad, Rich Sr., was raised in a home where his father was dedicated to his job: my grandpa worked at General Motors for forty years. My mom, Janice, grew up on a parsnip and turnip farm. She had eight brothers and sisters, and being a farming family, they had projects year-round they needed to work on together.

Their families were mostly from north of Detroit,

Michigan, and we lived in that area, near the small town of Romeo, until I was almost five. Then a job transfer for my dad took us to Cookeville, Tennessee, where I still live.

The transfer took place under somewhat unusual circumstances. Dad worked at TRW Automotive and was operating a machine that packed air bag reactors with sodium azide, a highly flammable and potentially explosive dust. Apparently the room in the plant where all the excess dust was sucked up and collected hadn't been cleaned as it should have been. Dad was tightening a screw on the machine during the workers' lunch break, and the screw grew hot and ignited the dust. The dust went up into the vent and into the room that hadn't been cleaned, and that caused an explosion. No one was injured, but Dad said he was within an arm's length of having a cinder block wall fall on him.

The explosion was not Dad's fault, and out of everything that happened with the accident, he wound up being promoted to maintenance supervisor and transferred to TRW's plant in Cookeville, which is about halfway between Nashville and Knoxville on Interstate 40. We laughed about Dad's blowing up a plant being his path to a job promotion.

My parents purchased a home on five acres outside of Cookeville. We also owned five acres across the street, and with that much land, there was always some type of work to do.

After coming home from work at the plant, Dad would get busy working around our house. I didn't think there was anything on a car he couldn't fix or anything he couldn't

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build out of wood. He enjoyed showing me how to build or fix things. That was our time to be together, just the two of us guys, and we both treasured it. At the end of the day or when the job was completed, I was the designated cleanup boy. Because I liked to work out, Dad would find ways to turn my chores into workouts. The benefits to my baseball career seemed to be his go-to reason whenever I balked.

Mom and Dad not only kept me busy, but they also had no hesitation coming up with work for my friends to do. Friends who would come over to see me mostly lived in subdivisions and weren't used to having to do the type of chores I did. That didn't stop my parents from trying to "help them out" by putting them to work.

After my friends left, I would tell my parents that my friends were threatening to stop coming over to see me because of the work they were made to do. But my parents thought everybody would benefit from knowing how to work hard.

I couldn't escape chores even when we returned to Michigan to visit family. One of my aunts would put my cousins and me to work just like my dad did. Uncle Don and Aunt Chris had five acres, and Aunt Chris would have us rake grass clippings from the mowing because she believed that the clippings would kill the grass. Five acres of grass clippings is a lot.

Aunt Chris also frequently told us to go to a field that had been recently plowed and pick up big rocks and haul them back to put around the perimeter of the large pond on their

property. Even now when I see that pond, with rocks all the way around it, I think back to how much work it took for us to make the pond look nice.

Now that I'm older, I'm thankful for the work ethic my parents and family cultivated in me. Not only has it paid off for me in CrossFit competitions, but I can look back to when I played high school baseball and later when I worked as a fireman and developed a reputation for being a hard worker. It's true what I heard from my extended family growing up: people who work hard gain an advantage over those who don't.