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## CrossFit After 40

Allison Belger turns 40 and finds that masters competitions give her a new outlet for her competitive spirit.

By Dr. Allison Belger TJ's Gym

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C.J. Rendic/TJ's Gym

I can vividly remember my mom telling me, "So now you have to decide if it is better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all." I was 24, and her question came shortly after the end of a seven-year relationship with my boyfriend from college.

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That's one way to console heartbreak: go after it with a philosophical question and try to encourage a deeper understanding or higher level of reflection. I come from a highly analytical family, and when the going gets rough, we think and wonder and ponder and try to gain some perspective on things. Maybe I was destined to become a psychologist.

Anyhow, over the course of my 40<sup>th</sup> "birthday month," as my husband TJ and I call it, I have reckoned with many existential questions and have also had a number of CrossFit-related experiences that have brought to mind my mom's question from over 15 years ago.

### Competition: The Fountain of Youth?

Throughout the past year leading up to my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, I had been reflecting on many things, as one often does in the face of such a milestone. Beyond the typical musings in which many people engage on the eve of a new decade, I had thought a lot about my life as an aging athlete and how I would continue to challenge myself physically given the constraints of my responsibilities and the realities of my aging body.

It had been a while since my days of competing to win. While winning is nice, for most of us, the prospect of being No. 1 in any athletic endeavor ends with the acceptance of a college diploma. When I ran marathons in my 20s, I certainly wasn't running to win. When I backpacked the John Muir Trail in the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range in my 20s, I wasn't doing it for time. When I took up snowshoeing as a winter sport, I wasn't planning on becoming a competitive snowshoer who could win races.

But CrossFit changes everything. It taps into those parts of our psyches that house competitive instincts and fuel our physical pursuits. It calls upon dormant hormones and startles to awareness the athlete in all of us. With each WOD, we are forced to decide how hard we will push, how fast we will go, how much we will lift, how well we will move. Unlike our contemporaries gliding on the elliptical machines with magazines in hand, we cannot go through the motions of our exercises while thinking about something entirely unrelated.

The intensity of CrossFitting at any level requires an internal dialogue and source of motivation that precludes distraction and disallows a half-hearted approach. It also makes us find a reason to come back and do it again the next time. Simply put, CrossFit is

too hard to be a mindless endeavor. It both evokes and requires emotional commitment. Perhaps this is why it also makes us competitive, regardless of our age. After all, competition simply entails trying to do something well—better than the last time or better than someone else. Why would that drive, that emotional involvement, dissipate with age? I'd argue that it doesn't.

Given CrossFit's relative infancy as a sport, those of us at the masters level—loosely defined as 40 and up—are masters athletes *and* beginners. Perhaps it's the combination of excitement about an entirely new way to be fit—truly and finally fit—and the race against time that makes masters CrossFitters uniquely driven to perform and compete. I'd venture to guess that most masters-level swimmers, runners and bikers, for example, were swimming, running, biking and entering races long before they turned 40.



Courtesy of CrossFit Davis

***Lorne Sachs of CrossFit Davis found that 44 was as good a time as any to get a new perspective on his competitive cycling training. Masters athletes around the world are discovering that CrossFit provides that same competitive drive.***

In contrast, most masters CrossFitters didn't even know CrossFit existed when they were in their athletic prime. I sense that one of things that fuels us is a desire to get the most out of every minute—to finesse our technique and strengthen our bodies, to become gymnasts and Oly lifters quickly enough to make something of ourselves as CrossFitters before it's too late.

And then there's the feeling we get when we learn something new with our bodies and try to master it in order to be better. Like drinking hot cocoa, it makes us feel young again, creating a physiological response that brings us back to our days on the soccer field with our parents fitfully cheering for us on the sidelines. Along these lines, our bodies' instinctual responses to competition—racing heart, jitters, butterflies—all harken back to the days of our youth when nerves played a major part in so many life experiences.

I felt all of these things and more when competing on the [TJ's Gym](#) affiliate team at the 2009 CrossFit Games, one of the most memorable experiences I've had in years. I've already written about that on the [Games 2009](#) site, so suffice it to say that finishing 11<sup>th</sup> overall under adverse circumstances (our advancing age being just one challenge) was an incredibly powerful experience.

### Facing Fran at 40

During my post-Games training, I found myself wondering how I would be able to find a CrossFit goal that would keep me fighting like I had during the month before the Games. I wanted something that would allow me to reach a level of intensity that would lead to some kind of measurable fitness gain or psychologically meaningful experience. At some point, in a state of delirium, perhaps, I decided that I would go for a sub-five-minute Fran.

Let me tell you that I have an absolute hatred of the barbell, especially when it must be thrust from a squat to an overhead position. It's right up there with 14-lb. wall-balls thrown to an 11-foot target, but that's another story. Anyhow, I decided that a sub-five Fran would be my CrossFit goal for turning 40. I hadn't done Fran since December 2008 at our TJ's Gym Fran Challenge. I managed a 5:43 that time around. The next time our gym did Fran, I was out on injured reserve, rehabilitating an injury from a previous life that surfaced during my early CrossFit days.

At the first of my turning-40 celebrations, TJ announced that I would be going for the sub-five Fran on my actual birthday, which was then three days away. Although



Courtesy of CrossFit Davis

***Inspiring masters athletes such as George Condon, 46, are showing that decreased physical capacity doesn't just "come with age." With hard training and a commitment to functional movement, you can maintain high levels of performance once you're over the hill.***

there was a pretty strong voice inside of me saying I hadn't actually trained enough for this goal, I asked for supporters, and they came three days later. A number of gym friends, and, of course, TJ, all did their best to motivate and encourage me through those 90 reps.

It was a stormy, dark Tuesday morning. I hadn't slept a wink the night before, paralyzed by nerves like I hadn't felt in a long time. Even the biggest soccer games of my past had been team events, as were the Games. This was all about me, and it would only last somewhere in the vicinity of five minutes. I'm not a sprinter, I hate the barbell, and I was really not sure I could pull it off.

Long story short, I didn't. I finished in 5:15. I gave it every last ounce of what I had in me that morning and left the gym with my head held high for having tried.



Courtesy of Allison Belger/TJ's Gym

**Athletes such as Dave Zeff of TJ's Gym are discovering that numbers on a calendar mean nothing.**

**It's numbers on the stopwatch that really matter.**

## Masters of the CrossFit Universe

Not two days after my Fran-at-40 "success in failing," a friend of mine sent me a link to the announcement of a local CrossFit masters event for people 40 and older. I was as troubled by the possibility as I was excited. I've always said there is no way I can hang with the real CrossFit studs in their late 20s and early 30s, and here was a chance to compete as the youngest. At the same time, though, I was reveling in the stress-free training and deep breaths post-Fran, and I was enjoying the lack of nerves and the freedom from the inward focus of my Fran attempt. Still, I knew I had to compete in this event.

I managed to recruit three other TJ's Gym women—fabulous athletes with lighthearted outlooks—to compete with me, which helped immensely. All I knew when I registered was that there would be a run, a strength event and a met-con. Run is great. I like to run and am pretty fast. Met-con is great. I usually do really well on those. Strength event is bad. I hate lifting. I am not a natural, I'm scared to lift, and I don't do it enough. It's my Achilles' heel in a sport defined in many ways by lifting. I figured that as long as I could hang in the middle of the pack on the strength event, I could still have a respectable showing.

When we were finally given details of the workouts, my heart sank. The run would be between 800 meters and 4 miles. Fine. The strength event would be three attempts at a 1RM clean. Fine. Of the lifts, the clean is my best. The met-con: 135-lb. deadlifts and 14-lb. wall-balls with burpees mixed in. Burpees—great. Deadlifts—not so great, but after blowing through 30 reps at that weight at the CrossFit Games this summer, I was fine with them. But those freakin' wall-balls? This felt like some kind of sick joke!

Finally, the day of the competition arrived. Although I was not nearly as nervous or uncomfortable as I had been in anticipation of Fran, I had a somewhat sleepless night the evening before.

A couple of people mentioned that they expected me to win, which didn't actually feel good to hear. Did they expect a win because I was bound to be the youngest? Or was it because they actually thought I could pull off strong performances regardless of my age? Such forecasting leads to pressure to perform, and that was the last thing I wanted.

Courtesy of Allison Belger/TJ's Gym



*The masters athletes from TJ's Gym after the run event in Walnut Creek. The author, second from the right, finished first in the WOD.*

After we arrived at [CrossFit Sweatshop](#) in Walnut Creek, Calif., we were finally briefed on the run. Turns out the distance would remain a mystery. All we were told is that it would be between 800 meters and 4 miles. Not knowing the terrain is challenging enough; not knowing the distance of a race is sheer torture.

As I looked around at the field of competitors, I picked out the one I thought would beat me overall. She was ripped. No body fat. Lots of muscles. She looked like a flat-out athlete. When she whipped out a set of butterfly pull-ups in her warm-up, I was convinced I was going down. I knew I had to beat her on the run if I was even to contend with her at all.

On most runs I can get out of my head and let my thoughts run free, but this one was all about the mind. I made the mistake of anticipating the end of the run three too many times, sprinting in as though I was at the finish line, only to learn there was much more to come. It was brutal, but I ended up taking first and beating my targeted competitor by over two minutes.

### Pushing for the Win

During my warm-up for the next event, I threw up some warm-up lifts at weights I had struggled to manage only two days before in practice. My judge told me I had to start heavier. I told her that she didn't understand, that I suck at lifting, and that there was no way. She wasn't having it.

I was talked into a 113-lb. start and made it like it was 95. Then I was talked into 123 lb. I had never even attempted more than 118 and had never made more than 115. It seemed ridiculous, but I went for it. Got it—and again it was easy. Still doubting that this was really happening and being conservative, I asked for five more pounds for my final lift. That was 128—a couple of pounds over my bodyweight. My arms and legs were shaking with nerves, adrenaline and lord knows what other competition-evoked chemicals. I went for it and made it and jumped up and down in a group hug with my teammates!

So far, I had beaten the woman I had pegged as my competition by over two minutes in the run and 13 lb. on the clean, so I was in the driver's seat. Uncertain of the mathematical possibilities based on the scoring system, however, I told myself I had to win my heat in the met-con in order to secure an overall victory.

After "3-2-1... Go!" we were deadlifting. Another long story short: we headed into the final set of wall-balls with her two ahead of me. I'm not sure how I did it, but I passed her on those wall-balls and beat her by 10 seconds. I ended up with the fastest time on the met-con, male or female.

I was flat on my back, deep in recovery, when it dawned on me that I had just secured a victory. It felt great. I could literally feel the nerves, the stress, the strain and the not-knowing leaving my body. It was over—I had

busted my butt, and I had won. Another competition over, adrenaline rush complete, almost time to move on again. But first I got to stand on a big old box and hold the hands of the women who took second and third places.

You can watch a highlight video of the event [here](#).

### Victory—So What Now?

So, what is the point of my writing this, and what does any of this have to do with my mom's question some 15 years ago?

We are all faced with opportunities to move out of our comfort zones and lay it on the line in a public forum, whether in athletics or in some other venue. Is it better to have fought and lost (or won!) and experienced it all than to never have known the feeling of trying? You will never know unless you put yourself out there.

Before the masters event, there was a lot of talk at our gym about who would compete, with people saying things like "What would be the point?" "I can't win," or "I'm too old." Had we as an affiliate team decided not to compete at the CrossFit Games because we were too old and underprepared, we would have missed the experience of a lifetime.

Had I not gone for Fran on my 40th birthday, I never would have felt the elation that can come from a failed attempt that is actually a massive success in disguise. Had I not competed at the masters event for fear of losing to a stronger, more confident 40-something woman, I would never have experienced the grit of that day, the power of my nerves, and the overwhelming feeling of cheering on fellow athletes and having them do the same for me. These experiences were all well worth the fear, the pain, the nerves and the lost sleep.

As we age, there are fewer and fewer opportunities for athletic competitions. Of course, many sports have masters divisions acknowledging the inevitable physical declines in bodies over time, but these are not always available. Besides, age often brings an increase in responsibilities, less time and energy to focus on training, and a decrease in the competitive drive.

Or does it? Perhaps this perceived decrease in drive is simply a byproduct of having fewer venues in which to compete with like-bodied athletes. A woman at our gym recently turned 60 and busted out 16 consecutive unassisted pull-ups to celebrate (watch the inspiring video [here](#)). I dare say that if she were in a room with



Courtesy of Allison Belger/TJ's Gym

***Deirdra Rodgers celebrated her 60th birthday by doing 16 consecutive pull-ups at TJ's Gym, proving competitive fires fuel self-improvement as well as masters competitions.***

other 60-something CrossFitters going after a workout, she'd have a fire within her that's no less intense than the ones raging inside much younger athletes.

Or perhaps the decline in competitiveness is a realistic and sensible internal response to an outside situation that is out of one's control. When I was 25, I used to care a whole lot about how I looked, what clothes I wore, how attractive I was compared to others at a party or bar or other social venue. While I still care how I look, I certainly don't compare myself to 25-year-olds, and I also don't have the time, energy or availability to focus on something much less important than getting my kids to school on time or squeezing in a workout before getting to work. Maybe it's the same with the decline of the competitive spirit.

On the other hand, just today I was talking with a 24-year-old superstar, a coach at our gym, who has been CrossFitting for well over a year but only recently with much intensity. This woman is a natural athlete, but she holds back. That's allowed me to retain a number of spots on our leaderboard, but I have found myself frustrated by her seeming lack of passion and focus. In my mind she could be great at this stuff, but she doesn't seem to care.

As we talked about this very topic, I realized that perhaps I have the drive to improve at CrossFit because I know the clock is ticking: at some point in the next couple of years, my performance will plateau and my learning curve will level off as gains in technique are outweighed by the forces of aging. She, on the other hand, has time on her side, so what's the hurry?

Maybe, then, we older CrossFit athletes just need more masters competitions, or at least masters divisions to feed our competitive drives and force us to reckon with the reasons we might hold ourselves back. It's easy to say, "I'm too old." It's harder to say, "I just don't think I have the determination or focus for this," or, "Frankly I don't think I can work that hard."

Maybe we should be careful what we wish for, because if there is a masters division in CrossFit, we'd have one less excuse for not competing.

I say bring it on!



Courtesy of Allison Belger/TJ's Gym

#### About the Author

*Allison Belger lives with her husband, TJ, and their two young daughters in Marin County, Calif. They own and operate TJ's Gym, with two CrossFit affiliates up and running and a third set to open shortly. Allison is a clinical psychologist specializing in assessments of children, adolescents and young adults. She juggles management of the family business, her private psychology practice and her role as mom.*

*Although Allison recently began fitness coaching after finding CrossFit in 2008, she has a long history of involvement in athletics, as both a player and a coach. Allison played soccer at the Division I level in college and has since coached a number of youth soccer teams in the Bay Area. Allison has a bachelor's degree from Dartmouth College, a master's in learning disabilities from Northwestern University, and a doctorate in clinical psychology from the Wright Institute in Berkeley, Calif.*