

CrossFit Controversy: The Canada East Qualifier

By Mathieu Lalonde

I entered the arena in Fredericton, New Brunswick, at about 7:15 a.m. It was cold and damp, as if the ice on the rink had melted only yesterday. Perfect! For this Canuck, nothing says “welcome home” like a hockey rink.

I registered at the front desk and grabbed my bib. I pinned No. 39 to my shirt and headed for the scale to get weighed. Shortly after 8 a.m., the first event was announced: 1 RM deadlift. There were no weight classes, but body weight would be used as a tiebreaker.

At this point I just knew I didn't stand a chance. My max deadlift was only 410 lbs, and plenty of heavy athletes were in the competition. I'm not an athlete, and I have no previous athletic background. Heck, I've been a typical sedentary North American male for the greater part of my life. I train at a school gym using the main site WODs. Olympic weightlifting is not allowed. There are no kettlebells or no climbing ropes. I run on treadmills. I still have too many weaknesses.

I didn't get much of a chance to contemplate any of that because controversy was brewing. It turns out Anthony and Jodi Bainbridge, who organized the event, were both known for their heavy deadlifts, and many athletes were crying foul. Many wondered why other lifts had not been chosen, but it quickly became apparent that logistics were an issue. There were an insufficient number of racks to perform other lifts or a CrossFit Total, and we barely had enough judges for the event. Some athletes ended up playing a dual role as both competitors and judges, which sparked even more controversy.

When the event started, Lars Bredahl, a CrossFitter from Ontario, made a 515-pound deadlift look easy. That served as inspiration for my lift, which came up next. I started light with 385 pounds. That felt good, so I tried 415, a weight I had previously barely failed to lock out. It went up as well. I looked at the numbers on the sheet and decided to go all out with 430 for the final round. I'm sure it was ugly, but I managed to deadlift the weight. The event was off to a good start...or so I thought.

Anthony and Jodi both lifted in the last heat. Jodi pushed hard and beat her previous Canadian national record with a 315-pound lift, which was truly inspiring. Unfortunately, Anthony's deadlift further fueled the controversy because he was one of few athletes, if not the only, to use a sumo stance.

The sumo stance shortens the distance the bar must travel, which is precisely why many powerlifters use it. Anthony proceeded with his three attempts and ended up winning the competition with a deadlift of 525 pounds. Many athletes were upset that Anthony lifted last, used a sumo stance and only lifted 10 pounds above the top score even though his PR was higher.

The next event was five rounds for time of five clean and jerks (135 pounds for men, 95 for women) and five muscle-ups, with a 10-minute time limit. Again, complaints arose as the event was announced.

“Aren’t Anthony and Jodi known for their high number of max-rep muscle-ups?”

Some of the heavy athletes who had performed really well on the deadlift were having a hard time with the muscle-ups. I became increasingly anxious when I noticed many athletes could not finish the WOD in the allotted time.

My judge for the event was a woman named Jeanette from Moncton, New Brunswick. Jeanette is the kind of trainer whose mere presence allows you to push beyond any perceived or conceived capabilities. I was glad to have her judge the event. I heard “Three, two, one—go!” and the rest is a blur. I started at a blistering pace but slowed down as I started to fail on the muscle-ups in the fourth round. With the support of a wildly cheering spectator named Philippe Boisclair from St-Jean sur Richelieu, Quebec, I managed to finish WOD 2 in 7:44.

As the remainder of the athletes tackled the couplet, more controversy arose with respect to the muscle-ups. A few male and female athletes could perform neither strict nor kipping muscle-ups. As a result, they resorted to what looked like an inverted L-sit followed by a huge swing of the legs and a forward flip that landed them above the rings. Some athletes argued that the movement was not a muscle-up and conferred an unfair advantage. However, the rules stated that the muscle-up started with arms completely extended at the bottom and fully locked out at the top, and this modified version of the muscle-up fit the description.

When the magnesium carbonate dust settled at the end of WOD 2, only 12 of 49 male athletes had completed the WOD in less than 10 minutes, and none of the 21 female athletes had finished. Zero points were given to athletes who required more than 10 minutes to complete the WOD, so the women’s ranking would essentially be based on only three events, and only 12 males were left competing for the top three spots.

Nevertheless, we moved on to WOD 3: 21, 15 and 9 reps for time of burpees and kettlebell swings (1.5 poods). This time around, the competitors seemed to be much more satisfied with the workout.

When my turn came up, I was still feeling full after having too much food after WOD 2. Kettlebell swings and burpees are also weak movements for me, so I really wasn’t looking forward to the event. I typically don’t pace myself very well and started to gas in the second round. I collapsed after completing the workout with a time of 3:48. I couldn’t get up for a good five minutes.

When the Day 1 results were posted later, the rankings had changed. So few competitors had completed WOD 2 that it was later decided the score would be determined by number of rounds completed. The 12 competitors who had completed the workout were ranked with respect to time.

Some athletes had serious reservations about the last-minute changes. It seemed like WOD 2 had done a good job of identifying the top male athletes, so why change the scoring system now? The question led to a heated debate. Even the change in the women's scores was contested because it now placed Jodi Bainbridge in first as opposed to second. On the men's side, the new scores placed male athletes who could barely do muscle-ups in the Top 10.

If the changed rankings weren't enough, apparently some extra events were added along the five kilometer trail run scheduled for Sunday. What gives?

I was ranked ninth after the first day, and I was going to need some rest if I wanted to keep that position. As Brian Mackenzie of CrossFit Endurance will confirm, my running really sucks.

The crowd was quite sour on Sunday morning when we gathered to get directions to the trail. We had to drive onto farmland and then walk up a hill to reach the starting point. Due to technical difficulties, two of the three extra events in the trail run became optional. After a little bit of complaining, we started to warm up for the race.

The sun started to shine and it lifted the fog to offer a beautiful view of the surrounding landscape. One athlete started the race every minute on the minute. I started the race at 9:37 a.m., ran across a small field and entered the forest. I can't really say there was a trail. Rather, it was mud, rocks, trees, roots, branches, logs, streams—you name it. I think I saw a moose.

The only way to stay on the course was to pay attention to the little pink and blue ribbons that had been tied to various trees and branches. I tried to focus on my Pose running, but the mud just made it impossible. Every time my foot hit the ground it sank ankle-deep in muck.

I finally came out of the woods after about 28 minutes. I was soaked, covered in mud and gasping for air when I noticed one of the judges standing right beside me.

"Pick up a sandbag and haul it up the hill."

Then I saw bunch of athletes schlepping sandbags up a slope, occasionally slamming the bags to the ground to take a break. There was nothing else to do but grab a bag and start climbing. My best lift by far is the back squat, and that really helped me make it up the hill in a timely fashion. Fortunately, Philippe was waiting for me at the top and the 150-meter sprint to the finish.

"C'mon, Matt, it's a 150-meter sprint to the end. I'll run with you, brother! Let's go!"

Next thing I knew, I crossed the finish line and collapsed in the tall grass. What I thought would be the worst event ended up being the best. I probably wasn't the only one who thought so. I heard laughter all around. People were smiling even

though they had just suffered through a grueling run. For a moment, it seemed like none of the controversy mattered. We all gathered for a group picture.

I reflected on the events of the weekend during the drive home. I met some awesome people: Anthony and Jodi Bainbridge, Ian Haya, Chad Furey, Lars Bredahl, B.J., Jeanette, Jeremy (who did a wonderful job coordinating the event), Alexandre Bureau, Philippe Boisclair, as well as everyone from CrossFit affiliates in Saint-Jean, Montreal, Mississauga, P.E.I. and Fredericton. I told myself that drama and controversy are probably to be expected when you pit a lot of type-A personalities against one another. The event was enjoyable nevertheless.

After the long drive home, I quickly unpacked and ran to check out the final results. I was pleased at the fact that I managed to hold on to ninth place, albeit in a triple tie. I was also pleased to see that Furey finished in third place. Or was that second?

It turned out Anthony and Jodi Bainbridge removed themselves from the competition. Part of me felt like Eastern Canada was losing its strongest athletes. Jodi and Anthony likely would have qualified no matter what came out of the hopper. You can argue that some of the events catered to their strengths, but you can also argue that years of CrossFit will eliminate most weaknesses. The arena limited the types of movements that could be programmed into WODs, and the organizers did the best they could.

For those who could have qualified had the event been scored differently, there is one last chance to qualify via a WOD to be announced at the end of May on the CrossFit Games website. Athletes will be required to film themselves, and CrossFit HQ staff will strictly judge the performances. Alexandre Bureau is owner and trainer at CrossFit Saint-Jean, and he's a real beast. I know he's going to give it a try, as will Jodi and Anthony Bainbridge.

I'm looking forward to seeing what comes out of the event, and I hope Alex, Anthony and Jodi all make it to the Games to join the athletes who qualified from Eastern Canada. If that happens, I think our part of the world will be well represented.