

FACE OFF: FRONING STARES DOWN HIS ANGRY ALTER EGO.

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STAY AHEAD OF THE GAME

WOD GOD

Arguably the greatest athlete in the history of the CrossFit Games, four-time champion Rich Froning manages to retain an air of calm at all times. It's a quality that infuriates his competition yet endears him to his teammates and brands alike. It turns out 10 years of hoisting barbells overhead is the perfect preparation for carrying the weight of an entire sport on your shoulders

BY SCOTT HENDERSON PHOTOGRAPHY BY JASON LEE



WALKING INTO Brisbane's notorious CrossFit Torian gym on a sweltering day, it isn't multiple CrossFit Games champion Rich Froning who catches my attention. Well, it is and it isn't. My gaze is immediately drawn to a 2.5-metre high mural of Froning's face, a striking tribute to one of the sport's pioneers, and a suitably imposing image to confront upon entering one of this country's foremost CrossFit boxes.

"I don't know why they chose a shot of me looking so cross," muses Froning, his laidback attitude jarring with the ferocious intent captured in his painted visage. There are only two murals on the wall of Torian. Froning's and that of local CrossFit hero Tia Toomey, who's also here today gazing up at her own painted image.

It's not really surprising that Froning's face adorns the wall of a gym on the other side of the globe from his native Tennessee. The sport of CrossFit wouldn't be the cult it is today without him.

The term GOAT gets thrown around far too freely these days, and in a sport as young as CrossFit, it's perhaps foolish to laud one athlete over all others. But given the incredible physical demands of the 'sport of fitness', perhaps an exception can be made. After all, it takes a man blessed with singular determination and a unique capacity for hard work to reach the dizzying heights Froning has achieved.

CrossFit has been the fastest-growing sport in the world over the last 10 years, creating cult-like communities across the globe and superstars out of its athletes. "I was just kind of doing my job and I wanted >

to compete,” Froning says casually between 100kg ‘warm up’ snatches. That’s seriously downplaying his position as possibly the fittest all-round athlete ever to walk the earth, but perhaps no surprise – his commitment to humility is literally tattooed on his body. “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,” reads Galatians 6:14, the bible verse inscribed down his side, often hidden beneath his mountainous biceps.

As humble as he may be, though, only one other man has dominated the CrossFit competition floor to the extent Froning has: Mat Fraser. And while the Froning vs Fraser debate remains

unsettled (in 2019 Fraser equalled Froning’s record of four consecutive Games titles), no one can argue with the profile and prestige Froning brought to the sport in its formative years, even if he didn’t realise it at the time.

And it’s perhaps this ambivalence about his influence that truly defines Froning. This is a man at the top of his sport, answering questions between muscle-ups, posing for selfies with fans and keeping his Reebok bosses at bay. It’s how you imagine a champion of fitness to behave – always training. Because for Froning, being the fittest man on Earth is more than just a career. It’s his way of life.

TEAM PLAYER: FRONING REMAINS HUMBLE DESPITE HIS ACHIEVEMENTS.

MH: Let’s go back to the beginning. What first drew you to CrossFit?

RF: Growing up playing sports says a lot about who I am as a competitor. I’m one of 32 first cousins on my mum’s side, 25 of us are boys and the girls are just as competitive as us. And so, my whole life has just involved some type of competition. After college, I was a firefighter and I was kind of missing that competitive piece. Then I found CrossFit.

Honestly, I just enjoyed working out. My undergrad degree was in exercise science and I didn’t even know there was a competition until about a month or two into doing CrossFit.

I was like, “Oh, all right, let’s see how this goes”. As they say, “The rest is history”.

MH: Why do you think CrossFit fosters a ‘cult’ community more than other sports?

RF: Well, the cool thing is I’ve been all over the world to different CrossFit gyms, spoken different languages and things like that, but it’s the same community and it attracts the same type of people. It’s a super supportive community.

And I think there’s that shared suffering. You’re doing a similar workout and you know everybody’s suffering together.

People may not be able to do the exact same movements, but they can do a similar type of workout and scale it and they just feel more connected. Back home you could play football and go play out in the yard, but you can’t strap the pads on and see where you

line up against the professionals. With CrossFit, you can actually do a workout that we do and see where you stack up, which gives you a little bit more connection. Because you understand what we’re going through as top-of-the-line athletes. But as top-of-the-line athletes, we understand what somebody who’s just walking into the gym feels like too. It’s pretty cool.

MH: You’re vocal about your faith. How does that play into CrossFit?

RF: My faith is a huge part of who I am and why I do what I do. I feel like the talents that I’ve been given are my way to glorify God. I don’t want to say that God makes me win or anything like that. But it lets me separate my athletic profession. Because I know I’m going to be okay no matter what happens. My faith in Christ, that’s what defines who I am, not where I finish on the podium or if I finish on the podium.

MH: There have been recent changes in the structure of the competition [controversial new competition calendars have eliminated certain events] but across your CrossFit career, what are the biggest changes you’ve seen in the sport?

RF: That’s the biggest change. When I started there were things called Sectionals. Now it’s Sanctionals, which are similar to the Sectional model except that Sectionals fed Regionals before the Open. I think the changes are good for the athletes. You have more opportunities to compete. If you qualify but you still want to go make some money, you can go to

“THAT’S ONE OF CROSSFIT’S MAIN THINGS: ‘HEY, GET OUT THERE AND USE YOUR FITNESS’”

some of these local Sanctionals and/or have sponsors pay for you to go. It’s another way to make money and get some exposure. You know, for athletes to monetise being athletes.

I do think there needs to be some type of standardisation, not really to the workouts themselves but somebody needs to be checking on how the workouts are conducted because you’ve got to have a balanced test or it’s not fair. You can change who wins an event through the programming, especially in the teams’ category. You can gear it more towards the female with heavy stuff or light stuff. There needs to be some type of standardisation.

MH: Do you see the new structure having an impact on the events that we’re seeing in competition?

RF: I don’t think so. I think as long as Dave [Castro] is the one programming across the Games, you’ll still see a well-rounded, well-balanced test.

MH: In professional sport in 2019, there’s a huge emphasis on partnerships, especially with brands supporting athletes. And now you have gear designed specifically by athletes. How important is it for athletes to have that direct input into the gear they’re using?

RF: It’s huge. Reebok and Rogue are some of my longest sponsors and both of them have a direct impact on the CrossFit Games because we use Rogue equipment and we wear Reebok apparel and shoes.

Rogue has been a CrossFit company from day one and it’s just grown as we’ve grown. With Reebok, it’s been cool to see them actually take the input we’ve given them as athletes. They’ll come to us with something and we’re like, “No”. And they’re like, “Oh, okay”. And then they totally redo it. If we can’t perform in it, we can’t wear it.

MH: What’s the strangest event you’ve seen at the CrossFit Games?

RF: There are many things that we’ve done where you’re like, “Wow, that was interesting”. Having played baseball, the softball toss for me [in the 2011 CrossFit Games], was fine. I was completely okay with that.

But you look at something like the handstand walk obstacle. You’ve got pegboards and some of that stuff. Every year I feel like there’s something new that’s added. That’s a testament to the athletes in that we have to be ready for anything. You need to learn and play new sports. That’s one of CrossFit’s main things: “Hey, get out and actually use your fitness”. And I think that’s what a lot of people get too >

CULT FIGURE: FRONING INSPIRES AWE AND RESPECT IN THE CROSSFIT COMMUNITY.



caught up in – being in the gym and not getting out and playing sports.

MH: How has your approach to fitness changed over your career?

RF: It's definitely evolved. Because every year I think it changes just a little bit because of the different demands of the sport.

Over the years it's been a learning experience and that's the difference today. I feel like everybody does something similar in their training because they've all learned from what some of us who were there at the beginning have done. I've been doing it for 10 or 11 years now and I still enjoy trying to figure things out.

MH: With time pressure, what do you prioritise in your training?

RF: You try not to prioritise anything. You try to be as well-rounded as you can. My weaknesses are usually in some of the endurance-type stuff, so that's what I concentrate a bit more on.

I try to get in, warm up, get moving, maybe build some endurance stuff into my warm-up and then you can do a workout. Especially with three kids, that's been the fun part.

MH: You're notorious for your chocolate milk-based diet. Has your approach to diet changed?

RF: The last year I've also taken to intermittent fasting. I love it. I do the 16-8. I feel great. Blood work has been

done and come back a couple of times and I've done really well. It's also worked really well for my schedule. My big problem was I would eat in the morning, get busy throughout the day and wouldn't eat until night.

Now, we'll start training about 9:30, go to about 12:30-1, then again from 3:30 until about 5:30-6. I start eating at 1 and then I'll try to eat once or twice or take a shake or two within that two-or-three-hour period between training sessions. That was the big thing. Now I feel good for that second training session where I used to just feel run down.

MH: What do you credit your CrossFit longevity to? Is it the diet?

RF: I think genetics is a huge part of it. But also trying to take care of my body, especially the last couple of years as I've got a little older. And just being able to go get some body work done once a week versus waiting until things snowball so bad that I'm pushing an injury.

MH: And what kind of body work are you doing?

RF: I worked with a chiro and he does some manual therapy type stuff, some acupuncture. I'll do some dry needling, anything all-encompassing. Like I said, the big thing is doing that on a regular basis versus waiting to get hurt and then going and doing it.

MH: You're now competing in the teams' events rather than individual. How does that differ?

RF: It's way more fun. Just being able to share it with other people. You know, everybody's like, "You should come back as an individual". I just don't have that. I don't want to do that anymore.

[Competing as an individual] was fun in the moment. But it's super nerve-wracking and it got old. Being able to train with the team day in, day out and see the sacrifice they put in every day to push that much harder on the floor is amazing.

I grew up a team-sports guy. I played baseball, some football. I was always on a team, so competing as an individual was miserable for years. But I obviously enjoyed it.

MH: With all that you've achieved, what are your goals now?

RF: We always joke that it's kind of like Christmas when you're a kid where you have all this build-up, then at the end of the year Christmas happens and you're like, "Wow, that was awesome". But, the next day it's like, "Aw, Christmas is another 364 days away". And it's just the way it is for us with the Games. As soon as the Games are over, the goal for next year is to win the CrossFit Games.

I want to keep competing as long as I'm still healthy, I'm not a burden on my team or a burden on my family and I still enjoy what I'm doing. Every year the goal is to win the CrossFit Games and that's it.

MH: With three kids, how do you balance family life and being a professional athlete?

RF: It's tough. There are some days where I do a really good job of it and other days I'm really bad at it. And so, I try not to get too high on myself when I think I've done a great job or too low on myself when I've done a bad job.

I get to spend a lot more time with my kids than most 9 to 5 parents. If they can, and they want to, I'll take my kids wherever I'm going. Luckily, at our

"AS SOON AS THE GAMES ARE OVER, THE GOAL FOR NEXT YEAR IS TO WIN THE CROSSFIT GAMES"



EYES ON THE PRIZE: FRONING SAYS CROSSFITTERS WILL CONTINUE TO PUSH THE LIMITS.

your job. Because they're the reason I get to do what I do and make a living from it. So, you want to give back in those situations.

As long as it's not in the middle of a workout, I'm good. I always joke, "One day, nobody's going to want a picture with me so I might as well take a couple while they do".

MH: People are getting stronger and fitter. Where do you think the limit of human performance is?

RF: Good question. I'm sure there's obviously a top level, it happens in most sports. Especially with CrossFit, it's like, what is that? What is that balance? You're obviously going to see people get super strong, but are they going to be able to run? Or people might get super-fast, but their strength numbers may come down. I'm not really sure. I think we'll continue to see people moving forward. When somebody does something else, there's a new bar to reach and that motivates people. ■



Favourite movement?

Snatch or muscle-up

Least favourite movement?

Running. 100 per cent

Cheat meal?

Apple pie

Top workout song?

I like worship music, so anything by Kristian Stanfill.

What do you do on your rest day?

I don't really have one. I feel better when I move every day. Even if it's just a swim or a bike.



RAISING THE BAR: THE CROSSFIT GAMES ARE LIKE CHRISTMAS FOR FRONING.

