

Embodied Thought of the Month: April 2017

17.5⁽¹⁾

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Several members of SBC took part in the CrossFit Open this year and in this month's ETM, Ian provides a personal account of some of his experiences while participating in this event. Although the focus here is CrossFit, the intention is to highlight the broader aspects of taking part in a physical activity or, more precisely, the 'whole package' of sport that reveals it as more than just 'playing' the game. As such, the notion of the build up to, taking part and the reflections after can apply to any sporting or physical activity – and, possibly, give us a greater insight into the many manifestations of sporting participation.

Before

It is the last event of this year's CrossFit Open. I've managed to get through the first four and if I can get through this one, it means I will have completed all RX ⁽²⁾. I'm surprised how much this means to me, especially as I know that it probably doesn't hold much significance to anybody else other than a diehard CrossFitter. However, that I do find this an achievement is probably an indication of how much the activity has become such an important aspect in my life.

17.5 will be announced online in the early hours of Thursday morning, UK time. As the whole Open is organised in America, it means that although they announce it at 5pm their time, we get it at around 2am in the morning. For the last four events, it is as if I have acquired an internal body clock that locks into Pacific Central Time and have been duly woken up to look at the computer. I said to myself that I wouldn't do it this time, but my body clock kicks in and before I know it, I am sitting at the computer, logging on to CrossFit.com – it is 3am!

10 rounds of 35 Double-unders and 9 thrusters ⁽³⁾

I'm not sure how to react. I know I can do these but it will be tough, especially as it works out that to complete it I will have to do, in total, 350 double-unders and 90 thrusters. There is a time limit of 40 minutes. Automatically, I am working out different permutations for how I should attempt this. Maybe try to go fast to start with, to allow more time for the later rounds or adopt a steady pace throughout? Should I set target times for each round? But what happens if I don't achieve these – would it have a negative effect on motivation? All these questions (and many more) are kick started by this simple announcement. I go back to bed, but instead of counting sheep I count double-unders before I drift off to sleep again.

In the morning, I get ready for work and take the dog out for a walk. Luckily my dog knows the route by heart, which is a good thing as I am so preoccupied with all the possible strategies to adopt later that I don't really know what he is up to. Before I head into work there is still time to look at CrossFit.com. Over the last few weeks I have been looking at their online advice with guidance about how to approach each

event. There have been video tips from Nicole at CrossFit headquarters – I like Nicole, she is calm and offers some useful hints.

At work, I track down my colleagues who are also taking part. They have been up at the crack of dawn to look at the announcements too. We laugh at how stupid we are, but also acknowledge that we enjoy getting caught up in the whole process. It is like a secret club. The plan is to have some practice that evening, maybe do a trial run and then do it properly at the weekend.

During

I have locked the door to the lab. This time I have decided to do this on my own. After the practice the other day, I feel that I really need to focus upon the strategy I have worked out and I want to get on with it without any distractions. I set up the equipment and arrange my laptop in a position so that it can video me (I have to send this in after so that CrossFit can validate my time). At the same time, I set the timer to zero.

I feel a sense of excitement and a rush of nervousness races through my body. I do a couple of jumps and take a deep breath. I switch the timer to start and it counts down, 10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1 followed by a long beep. As the timer counts down I go through all the planning in my head. *Remember to pace yourself. Don't go like the clappers at the start. Remember what happened in practice session.*

I start with the thrusters. They seem pretty easy, but I'm not going to be lulled into a false sense of security at this stage – it is going to get much harder. I make the transition to the double-unders, manage to do 25 straight off and then another 10. One round done! Another one completed, only another 8 to go - easy! I'm not fooled. I know that in the next few rounds I'm going to slow down. It is ironic that as much as I promote the merits of an embodied approach it seems that sometimes the mind doesn't translate the same messages as the body. It is almost as if 'I' become an intermediary between the two.

I'm now starting to go beyond the target times that I had set myself for completing each round and now panic is setting in that I might not complete all the rounds in the time allowed. The time cap for this event has been set at 40 minutes. This seemed such a long time and in the build up to doing this I have harboured (albeit quietly) a strong sense of dread at the prospect of actually failing to get within this time. This sense of possible failure is now permeating my thought processes and attacking my remaining positive energy. I wish I could switch off my mind sometimes and just get on with it.

It's the fifth round now and I'm feeling pretty sore. Thrusters are not as easy as they were in the first few rounds and rather than being seamless movements, they are now less technically sound and rather shaky with pauses between the squats and the thrusts. The important thing, however, is that I'm still going. I get to the eighth round and I tell myself that I only have two more to do. The end is in sight and it is still around 20 minutes. I can do this. The double-unders are now being broken into

15/10/ 10. I've had to readjust the plan that I had painstakingly worked out before and revise as I'm going along. But, then again, this happens all the time. I am struck by a sense of excitement now as I can see the finish line - just one more round to go. I'm aware that I'm racing against the clock. Recognition of the finish has galvanised a fresh burst of energy from somewhere – although I'm not sure where. Halfway through, I had resigned myself to barely finishing within the time frame. Now, there was the possibility for a faster time. I can do this! It looks like I will be able to break the 30 minute mark. I complete my last double under and look up to the clock. 27.54.

After



I'm sprawled out on the floor. The pounding of my heart gradually starts to reduce to a steady beat and although I feel knackered, beaten up and bedraggled, I feel strangely at ease with the world. Maybe it is relief that the competition is finished for another year.

I sit underneath the whiteboard and enjoy the physical afterglow. I'm not sure what this actually is but it feels like a mixture of relaxation, relief and what seems like a pleasurable form of exhaustion. However, as my body calms down and my scrambled mind starts to refocus, I begin to dwell upon what I've just done. 28 mins isn't that great I tell myself – I could've done better if I hadn't made such a meal of the middle section. I could've pushed myself harder. I suppose it is easier to think this after, rather than in the middle of it when every facet of one's body is saying the opposite. I'm still not sure whether I need to control my mind better, or whether I need to work on the training more. I laugh at myself for thinking about the next time when I have barely just finished this one.

But rather than seeing my self-criticism in a negative light, I am actually enjoying this post-mortem analysis of my performance. It is reaffirming to me that I can do this, I might even be able to get better – and because of this, I want to do it again. I'm even looking forward to doing more training in preparation for next year.

Later that morning I see a colleague who completed this event the day before. We exchanged detailed accounts of our experiences and without any prompting from me he mentioned what he planned to do for next year's Open. I thought about how nice it was that someone else was on the same wavelength. I wasn't the only 'freak' that put oneself through what might be seen by others as torture.

Notes

- (1) In the CrossFit Open, there are 5 events (17.1 to 17.5) with one announced each week – over a period of 5 weeks. For each event participants have to perform the event at a CrossFit box with a qualified CF judge or record their attempt and send it to CrossFit headquarters for validation. Results are posted on the main site leaderboard. (See www.crossfit.com)
- (2) RX is a term used to indicate the standard regarded as the appropriate level for an activity. It is derived from the medical description of rx which relates to ‘prescribed’ – as in a dosage. In CrossFit, this often relates to a weight used when performing a movement. For instance, the rx weight for the bar used in a thruster is 95lbs for a male and 65lbs for a female. The weights can be scaled down to accommodate those who might find the movement too heavy at the prescribed standard – but would not be considered rx.
- (3) A double-under is a skipping movement where the rope travels two times under the feet in a single jump. A thruster combines a movement from a front squat (breaking parallel) using a weighted bar to a standing push press (where the arms are locked out above the head).