

Fitness+Muscle

Give yourself a performance goal and train for it daily, and you'll never plateau, says Smith.

TRAINING WITH THE FITTEST MAN ON EARTH

CrossFit Games champion Ben Smith reveals his fitness secrets. By Michael Easter

If you ran into the Fittest Man on Earth at the supermarket, you could mistake him for the guy who finished your basement, or a math teacher who also instructs gym class.

Ben Smith, 25, just doesn't look the part: He's 5'11" and 195 pounds and has the kind of solid physique you might build doing manual labor. But he's as legit as they come. Smith earned the title by winning the 2015 CrossFit Games in July.

This guy is the fittest we've got?

I'm about to witness why. I'm with Smith at the box he owns, CrossFit Krypton in Chesapeake, Virginia. Bro-country star Cole Swindell's "Let Me See Ya Girl" blares as Smith stands with a 375-pound barbell resting on his back.

In an entirely fluid motion, he shifts his hips, bends his knees, and drops his ass to his ankles. His torso remains rigid and vertical. Then he shoots back to standing, the reverse movement just as smooth, just as flawless. ▶



No excuses: Smith trains outside rain or shine—or blizzard.

He does two more precise reps and returns the 375-pound barbell to the rack. He repeats this every minute for 25 minutes. That means Smith just lifted 8 tons in the time it takes to watch a *Modern Family* episode. This is an impossible feat for most guys—the poor sucker lifting with him (who has 40 pounds of muscle on Smith but uses a 315-pound bar) is totally wrecked. Smith isn't sweating or breathing hard.

Now you get it. The fittest indeed.

The 40 men who qualify for the CrossFit Games each year are freaks of fitness. They all squat and deadlift in the 400-pound range. They all crush Fran, a workout composed of 45 pullups and 45 barbell thrusters, in roughly two and a half minutes—or less. In short, they all push the limits of human potential. Each has a rare combination of mutant genes and savage drive. Otherwise they couldn't sustain the motivation to train for the Games, which requires grinding through three to five workouts a day for months or even years. Smith won on his seventh attempt.

So how, after the CrossFit Games' 13 brutal workouts, did Smith manage to edge out the other guys? One word: efficiency. It all starts with those perfect reps.

"The cleaner your mechanics, the less effort you have to expend with each rep," says Kelly Starrett, D.P.T., creator of the fitness blog MobilityWOD. "Over the course of a competition like the CrossFit Games, consistently clean movement is how you win."

Think of it this way: Doing cleaner reps is like using higher-octane gas in your car. Each rep creates a bit more power and takes a little less out of your tank. Smith says that during the final workouts, he knew he was going to win because he wasn't as burned out as the other guys. "We were all exhausted both mentally and physically by the last day of the competition," he says. "I felt confident going into the final day because I am used to my tough training days."

Good form is like good cardio. You may be able to run marathons now, but if you stop running long distances, you'll quickly lose that ability. Likewise, muscles weaken and tighten if you don't use them. That's why in every workout, Smith, who's training to defend his title this summer, puts his body in the positions CrossFit requires: squatting, hanging, lifting his arms overhead, and carrying heavy objects.

If he's lacking range of motion anywhere, he does daily drills to mobilize the area.

But there's another key to Smith's success, an X factor of sorts. He surrounds himself with people who make him better.

Smith exercises every morning with his two younger brothers, who are both competitive CrossFitters. Then he has lunch at a local organic burrito joint with buddies, after which he does two or three more workouts. Throughout the day Mom, Dad, and friends drop by to hang out, check on things, and maybe join a workout.

Though he's intense while exercising, Smith also knows how to relax, and a laid-back lifestyle can help contribute to fitness. For athletes who train regularly, stressors such as academics or work can lead to injury just as often as physical stress can, say researchers at the University of Missouri. Other studies have shown that stress can impair your body's ability to recover from hard workouts and make gains. "If you surround yourself with positivity," says Smith, "you position yourself for success." His preferred chill-out activities: playing sports and spending time with his friends and family.

Use the four tips on the next page to upgrade your efficiency. Then try Smith's workout on page 132. Soon you'll notice improvement in your mobility and be able to lift more.



Brothers in big arms: Smith and his sibling Dane push each other to press on in the gym.



1/ Find a Gym You Love

The right gym can play a huge motivational role and also help you work out more consistently—true fitness game changers. If you live near CrossFit Krypton, problem solved. If not, seek out a place with a fun, empowering atmosphere. Do some homework: Explore all your local facilities, and don't be afraid to travel a bit farther for the right one. Try a CrossFit box, a powerlifting gym, or a boot camp. And think about training with a like-minded lifting partner. The bonds you create will push you to make even bigger gains.

2/ Reach for the Sky

Your high school gym teacher's weightlifting pointers—"arch your back," "extend your hips"—could actually be hindering your progress. When you focus internally on isolated body parts, you run the risk of overthinking the exercise. Instead, imagine the external environment changing with your movement: You're pressing the floor away, squeezing the bar into dust, reaching for the sky. This trick often leads to increased performance, according to research in the *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research*.

3/ Expand Your Core Curriculum

If mobility is the yin, then stability is the yang. Indeed, your limbs need a solid base from which to generate power. Add five 10-second sets of isometric planks, side planks, and bird dogs to each workout. These exercises strengthen your core, and a strong core is paramount: It can prevent back pain and improve everything from your running speed to your lifting power, say Canadian researchers. Want to make the moves even more powerful? Breathe slowly and deeply during each set, Smith suggests.

4/ Roll the Tightness Away

Everyone is tight somewhere. But if you sit all day in an office, you're probably tight everywhere. That can sabotage your athletic performance whether you're competing in the CrossFit Games or playing in a pickup basketball game. To improve the efficiency of your movements, you need to free up that tension, Starrett says. The solution is simple: As you're winding down for the evening in front of the TV, pick a muscle group that feels tight—your hips, glutes, shoulders—and then roll it out with a softball for 10 minutes.

The Fittest Man's Favorite Workout Gear



Reebok CrossFit Nano 5.0

These lightweight yet stable training shoes are on Smith's feet pretty much all day, every day. He especially likes them for doing high-intensity conditioning circuits and intervals. \$130, reebok.com



Progenex More Muscle

Smith keeps a shaker bottle of this whey protein powder on hand at all times. It delivers 30 grams of protein—the perfect dose for jumpstarting muscle growth. \$70, progenex.com



Rogue Olympic WL Bar

As one of CrossFit's best Olympic lifters, Smith turns to this bar often. He finds it comfortable, and it has great "whip," helping his lifts feel smoother and more powerful. \$525, roguefitness.com



Sling Shot Neoprene Knee Sleeves

These knee-hugging sleeves can minimize swelling and promote bloodflow. With regular use, they may reduce pain and boost performance. \$65, howmuchyabench.net