

the **CrossFit**
JOURNAL ARTICLES

National Champion

Under Development

Matt DeMinico



Andrew Astalos, an athlete at Motor City CrossFit, has recently astounded us with some of his performances in the world of speedskating. At 13 years of age, in the middle of Michigan's winter, he elected to skip his family's long-planned Caribbean vacation and instead travel to Lake Placid to compete in the U.S. National Long Track Speedskating Championships. It's a good thing he did, because that weekend, he not only won the national championship in his age division, but he broke every single national record in his age class doing so. Then, to top it off, he traveled to

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Milwaukee the next weekend to compete in the North American Long Track Speedskating Championships, where he also won every race in his division and, based on his times, would have placed second in the next division up.

What makes these achievements even more incredible is the fact that Andrew is primarily a short track speedskater (think Apolo Anton Ohno), which is a very different type of racing than long track (think Dan Jansen, Bonnie Blair, etc.). And, given the fact that there are only two indoor and three outdoor ovals in the country (the closest of which is around a seven-hour drive from his home), Andrew rarely gets to practice his long track technique.

I don't dare take any of the credit for his successes (Andrew was a great athlete to begin with), but his parents have told me time and time again that they believe his CrossFit training is what made the breakthrough difference for him this year. One thing I can say for sure is that he's got a ton of explosive power now, and his endurance in the longer races has gotten many times better. At the Michigan state meet this year,

he skated one of the "extra" races at the end, which happened to be a 3000-meter race (27 laps around a 111-meter track; see insert at end of article for more details). Typically this race is done in a large group at slow speed. He sat in the pack for about seven laps and then out of nowhere just took off, eventually lapping the second-place skater at least twice and the majority of the pack three or four times.

I've watched Andrew develop from a capable athlete when I met him two years ago into a truly world class athlete today. One of the coolest things about Andrew is the fact that he's still just a kid, and his parents and coaches aren't forcing him beyond what he wants to do. Sure, when he's there for a practice, they make sure he goes hard and don't let him slack off, but he's not stuffed into the rink for hours on end every day, and he has a life of his own outside of skating. Don't get me wrong—he loves what he does, and he'll talk speedskating with you for hours, but it doesn't consume his life. This is the point I think a lot of parents and coaches miss when they're developing rising-star athletes, and then they wonder why the kids turn 16 years old, gain some freedom, and suddenly lose interest in the sport they "love."

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On the topic of coaches, Andrew has been blessed to learn under the tutelage of Sue Ellis, the coach of the 2002 U.S. Olympic Short Track Team. For those of you who read Mark Eaton's "Good Coach, Bad Coach" article in the CrossFit Journal last month, picture all the "Good Coach" characteristics, throw in a few more for good measure, and you're starting to scratch the surface of who Sue Ellis is. She truly is the John Wooden of the world of speedskating. She has coached a large number of the top age-class and elite-level skaters in the U.S. and Canada, but not everybody benefits from her coaching the way Andrew has, because not everybody is willing to listen like he does (see "Characteristics of a World-Class Trainee" in this issue). It's true what they say: "When the student is ready, the teacher appears."

Andrew has worked with Sue in much the same way many CrossFitters have learned proper technique from Coaches Glassman, Rippetoe, Burgener, and others. It goes to show that success in one field has much in common with success as in any other field. When those coaches teach the squat or the clean, they don't slap 250 pounds on the bar, step back, and say "go for it." They give you a length of PVC pipe or unloaded bar and drill the basics. Some people look at them and their insistence on fundamentals and think "Are you nuts?" but the best of the best know what needs to be done, and those who trust them and the process end up going farther than they ever could have imagined.

I can tell you from firsthand experience that the same thing happens in clinics with Coach Ellis. Before anyone even steps on the ice, there's usually a couple of hours of discussion, video review, and drilling the basic skating position. After that, there's a good half hour of work on skating movements using Techni-Cords (bands used to hold us up while we lean sideways and every which way—basically, think of resistance bands on crack). Then when we finally do step on the ice, the first 60 minutes (sometimes even the first two sessions, 90 minutes each) are devoted to doing basic drills back and forth from one end of the rink to the other, doing nothing that really resembles "speed" skating to an outside observer. But the guru knows that what she is building in her students here are the basic movements and patterns that will allow them to exceed what they could have done otherwise, and to get there faster in the long run. A real athlete knows this and patiently follows along, doing exactly what is instructed.

Short Track Speedskating 101

"Regularly learn and play new sports"

– From CrossFit's "World-Class Fitness in 100 Words," by Greg Glassman

Coach is always encouraging us to get out there and try new sports. Many of us, before we started CrossFit, looked at parallettes and gymnastics rings and thought "as if I'll ever be able to do anything with those." We looked at the Olympic weightlifters and thought "they must be genetic freaks to be able to lift that over their head." And we thought there was no way we'd ever be able to run 10k without stopping. But most of us by now have done all these things to some degree, because we were open and able to try new things, thanks to CrossFit.

Well, I'm here to tell you, if there's one sport that will teach you cardiovascular/respiratory endurance, stamina, strength, flexibility, power, coordination, agility, balance, and accuracy, it is short track speedskating. The races last anywhere from 41.066 seconds (until a new 500-meter record is set), to in excess of five to seven minutes for the torturous 3000-meter distance. And, in a different style from CrossFit, the time it takes you to finish really doesn't matter, so long as you're the first one across the line.

It's a sport that requires technique more than anything else. It employs methods and principles similar to those described by the POSE method, where you utilize your weight to generate as much power as you can, conserving your muscles for when you need to make a pass or keep someone from passing you. You have to learn to maneuver your entire body and keep it all under control, all while accelerating at nearly five g's around the tightest part of a corner.

And not to mention it's stinkin' fun. I mean, who wouldn't be having a blast if it was their face in the picture above? Anyone can learn to skate. I had been on skates about four times in my life before I was 25 years old, and now, two years later, it's like second nature to me (well, almost).

If you've got an interest in trying out speedskating, look for a club in your area (to find one, go to www.usspeedskating.org in the U.S., or www.speedskating.ca in Canada. If you're elsewhere in the world, just search the Internet. I can't list them all, but they're out there.

And if you've got questions, or need help finding a club, send me an e-mail and I'll help you out: mdeminico@gmail.com.

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Andrew started training with us at Motor City CrossFit in the summer of 2007, before Motor City CrossFit really even existed. He performs WODs with some pretty intense weights for a guy his age and size and learns new movements not because they always come naturally to him (a lot of them don't), but because he works hard to learn them the right way. When it comes to intensity, he will not let himself be beaten, even by someone who's using half the weight he's using, and, if he is, it bothers him—not in a “tear the other guy down” kind of way, but in a spirit of “ok, let's go again; I'm gonna win this time.”

With this attitude and hunger to win, we're going to see some great things out of Andrew Astalos, and if he keeps up the good work, we should look for him in the Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, in 2014.



Online Video



In this video, Andrew is racing in the American Cup 3 race in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, in early 2008. He is skating against some of the top skaters in the country, the majority of whom are 5 to 10 years older.



All images provided courtesy of [Jerry Search](#)

Matt DeMinico is the owner of [Motor City CrossFit](#) in Sterling Heights, Michigan. He also owns a leadership development business and is a public speaker on the topics of leadership, personal development, business development, and Christian apologetics. He is also a research scientist in the area of robotics, and the father of three children under the age of four. He began speedskating in 2006 at the age of 25, and aspires to make the U.S. Olympic Short Track Speedskating Team in time for the 2014 Olympics in Sochi, at which point he will be 33 years old, which would make him one of the oldest (or possibly the oldest) short track skater in the Olympics. For putting up with this busy schedule, he wishes it to be known that his wife, Chrissy, is an absolute saint. Matt can be reached at mdeminico@gmail.com.