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Distance Learning

Hilary Achauer explores the advantages and disadvantages of remote coaching in a sport built on community and personal interaction.

By Hilary Achauer

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Traditionally, coaching involves a great deal of immediate interaction between trainer and athlete.

An athlete bangs out five thrusters before stumbling forward on the sixth. Frustrated, she drops the bar, and her coach is talking to her before it stops bouncing. The trainer tells the athlete to get the weight back on the heels and pull the chest up tall to keep the bar over the base of support. The athlete nods, refocuses and works to make the corrections that will result in better movement and more powerful reps.

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It's a feedback loop designed to maximize training time by eliminating errors immediately so the athlete can move forward on every attempt, and it's no doubt been the norm since the first coach paired up with the first athlete.

Carlee Acevedo Fuller's process is a bit different. After finishing her reps, she picks up her phone and sends the video to her coach, Bryan Boorstein, who is more than 200 miles away. As soon as he has a chance, which is usually within 24 hours, Boorstein responds via email and dissects her lifts in detail. Then, the next time she performs the movement, Fuller pulls up Boorstein's email before approaching the barbell.

"I hear (Boorstein's) voice in my head," Fuller said. "He breaks it down so I understand it, and I am able to apply (his coaching) to the lift."

Fuller is part of a trend in CrossFit: remote coaching. Whether it's for CrossFit programming, Olympic lifting, nutrition, endurance or any combination thereof, a number of CrossFit athletes have decided access to their ideal coach outweighs the lack of hands-on, in-person coaching.

Is even a minute too long to wait for feedback?

It's not cheap. The cost for remote coaching depends on the experience of the coach and the level of coaching offered, but it usually ranges from \$150 to \$300 per month. That price can include programming, nutrition advice and video analysis but not face-to-face, in-person contact.

For some athletes, that doesn't matter. As the sport grows and becomes more competitive, athletes are seeking out the best coaches they can find, and that may mean a coach who is not located in the same area, or even the same state or country.



Kelli Somers

Fuller doesn't know if her form needs adjusting until after she's done working out and her coach has reviewed her video.



Rob Hammer

Boorstein enjoys writing programming for his remote athletes but says coaching from afar can be frustrating.

But at least one drawback is blindingly clear when it comes to movement: is even a minute too long to wait for feedback? That question says nothing of the intangible value of a coach who can motivate an athlete daily, monitor for signs of overtraining and even read body language to determine exactly what the athlete needs for success in a training session.

Would Gabby Douglas be wearing an Olympic gold medal if she hadn't moved to Iowa to train under the eye of Liang Chow?

How It Began

Boorstein didn't set out to be a remote coach. He is the co-owner of CrossFit Pacific Beach, in San Diego, Calif., a growing, successful affiliate with two locations. Boorstein had been doing programming and coaching for his friend Ryan Fischer, who placed fourth at the 2012 Southern California Regional. Boorstein is in San Diego, and Fischer lives in Orange County, about an hour and a half away.

"I had been coaching Fischer for free, and he wrote a Facebook post about how much his CrossFit had changed since working with me," Boorstein said.

"I do have to say that my CrossFitting has changed dramatically since meeting my coach Bryan Boorstein a year ago," Fischer wrote on Facebook on Oct. 9, 2012. "Huge shout out to that man for molding me into what I am right now! Can't thank him enough ... If anyone out there is looking for personal coaching, I highly recommend contacting him and seeing what he can do for you."

Within two hours, Boorstein was in the remote-coaching business.

Fuller was one of his first clients. The 32-year-old mother of two sends Boorstein upwards of four videos a day. She admits she gets anxious if he doesn't respond right away and will often text him to ask how she did.

Fuller reached out to Boorstein because she felt she wasn't getting the coaching she needed at her affiliate in Bakersfield, Calif. For a while, she made the almost-two-hour drive from Bakersfield to Los Angeles once a week to work with Andrea Ager, but she felt like she hit a wall and decided to start working with Boorstein.

Raymond Ciria, a coach at CrossFit Crown City, in Pasadena, Calif., is another one of Boorstein's athletes. The 34-year-old had been doing CrossFit for two-and-a-half years and started competing in local competitions in the last 12 months.

"I got addicted to the competition side of (CrossFit)," he said. "I knew Fischer through a seminar I attended, and he told me about Bryan. I wanted to see if I could make it to Regionals."

Ciria had been doing his own programming, focusing on his weaknesses.

"I was good at endurance, and I wasn't strong enough. (Then) I programmed too much strength, and my endurance wasn't there," Ciria said.



Courtesy of Raymond Ciria

When he was programming for himself, Ciria had trouble finding a balance between building up his strength and maintaining his endurance.

The Process

As a coach, Boorstein is precise and detailed in his feedback, with an almost Rain Man-like ability to remember his athletes' scores and every lift they ever hit. He cares deeply about coaching and admits it's hard to communicate his type of detailed feedback in writing.

"It's frustrating at times," he said. "I'd much rather have them do it here (at CrossFit Pacific Beach)."

The process begins with Boorstein asking his clients to test a host of skills, including one-rep-max Olympic lifts, max touch-and-go reps at 65 percent, and max pull-ups, handstand push-ups, ring dips, wall-balls and double-unders. All in all, he requires his athletes to test 25 different exercises.

The programming, which is individualized for each client, is time consuming, especially for someone as detail-oriented as Boorstein.

"Writing the programming is super awesome," Boorstein said. "I love trying to individualize something that is so generic. It's the manner in which you combine the elements that (makes) them effective. It sucks not being able to give (my clients) tactile cues, but they are making ridiculous progress," he said.

In eight weeks, Ciria went from a 175-lb. snatch and a 255-lb. clean and jerk to a 205-lb. snatch and a 295-lb. clean and jerk. He also improved his time in a 7-round WOD that include muscle-ups and hang squat snatches from 28 minutes to 11 minutes.

In 12 weeks, Fuller improved her clean and jerk from a sloppy 130 lb. to 150 lb, her snatch went from 85 lb. to 115 lb., and her overhead squat increased from 115 lb. to 140 lb. She also got a muscle-up and improved her conditioning.

She recognizes that her progress could have been faster if she worked with Boorstein in person.

"I finally figured out how to drive my knees back when I'm snatching," Fuller said. "I finally got it, but it could have been sped up in person. It took a few weeks, and it could probably have been fixed in an hour in person."

Ciria said for him the downside of remote coaching is working out on his own. He coaches classes at CrossFit Crown City but does the workouts Boorstein programs by himself.

"I don't have another athlete pushing me," Ciria said, "and I don't have the physical interaction. Discipline is key."

Fuller agrees it's difficult to gauge how she's doing in a particular workout, and she misses one of the finest joys of CrossFit: lying dazed on the floor and talking about how awful a WOD was and how you maybe could have done it a bit better.

A Ripple Effect

Ron Turner has over 15 years of experience coaching team sports, including university-level basketball. He's a coach at CrossFit VO2 Max in Grande Prairie, Alta.

Last year, a CrossFit VO2 Max athlete finished in the top 20 at the Canada West Regional. Soon after, the athlete hired a well-known remote coach and stopped following her affiliate's programming.

She kept coming into the gym but didn't work out with the rest of the athletes. She would show up and do her remote coach's workouts, which Turner said were remarkably similar to his gym's programming.

"You're paying \$200 a month for this?" Turner said he remembers thinking. "Holy fuck. I can make you a better CrossFit athlete in 30 seconds. I'd start by fixing your muscle-up."

"She's so young, and so strong, it wouldn't matter what she did," Turner said. "She could have gone off and played basketball for three months, and she would have improved."



Staff/CrossFit Journal

So much is communicated in the eye-to-eye, face-to-face interaction between athlete and coach.

**"If your hip is not moving correctly,
it should be corrected right then
and there, not four hours later."**

—Ron Turner

The athlete saw improvement in some areas, but in separating herself from the gym's community, she missed out on the camaraderie and face-to-face competition that is integral to CrossFit.

Turner feels that although remote coaching can be effective for some athletes, it has a negative impact on the CrossFit community as a whole. CrossFit is an individual as well as a team sport, but athletes who choose to follow another coach's programming should be aware of the effect it has on their relationship with their community.

Are the gains worth sacrificing those relationships?

Turner said when athletes stop following his programming, it's harder for him to evolve as a programmer. Just as the athlete needs the feedback loop, so does a programmer—to see what works and what doesn't.

"Some people are just paying \$200 a month to get the signature of a (well-known) coach. Why don't you just go on their website (for the programming)?" Turner said.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Stacie Tovar, who placed 12th at the CrossFit Games in 2012, has known her coach since college.

“There have been studies done that when men work out with other men their performance goes up by 30 percent,” Turner said. So while people who have remote coaches are seeing their numbers going up, they are missing out on that primal fuel—competing with the person next to you and sweating together on the gym floor.

“It’s not optimal to go online,” Turner said. “If your hip is not moving correctly, it should be corrected right then and there, not four hours later.”

He added: “If you can get better through remote coaching, then you don’t need it. Everything is online. Get the workouts from CrossFit.com, read the *CrossFit Journal*, and go on YouTube and watch Olympic-lifting videos.”

When asked why he thinks remote coaching is becoming so popular, Turner said that the difficulty of CrossFit is part of the cause. CrossFit crushes athletes in new and different ways each day. For some, having their weaknesses highlighted creates a feeling of inadequacy.

“It doesn’t matter how fit you are, you think, ‘Wow, I need more cardio.’ It just fuels the obsession,” Turner said.

This feeling drives many people to hire a remote coach. Instead of patiently working hard with their affiliate’s

coach, they hire a new coach in the hope it will help them improve faster. Athletes who frequently switch coaches in the pursuit of a magic formula for success miss out on something that can only be created over time: a strong bond between coach and athlete.

“I have such a special relationship with Joe. ... You have to have that with your coach.”

—Stacie Tovar

Stacie Tovar, who finished 12th overall at the CrossFit Games in 2012, has known her coach, Joe Westerlin, since 2003. Westerlin, owner and head coach at CrossFit Omaha, was Tovar’s strength and conditioning coach when she played volleyball in college. Westerlin also coaches Kyle Kasperbauer, who placed third at the 2012 Games.



Some people just aren't meant for remote coaching.

"I have such a special relationship with Joe," Tovar said. "He's a really close friend. You have to have that with your coach."

Westerlin agrees.

"I've known (Tovar) for many years," he said. "We've built up a mutual trust. She does everything I ask of her. She's very coachable."

"Joe is sitting there, watching me, giving me immediate feedback," Tovar said. He is able to assess how she's feeling and make changes as needed. "He really wants to know how we're feeling. We're honest with him, and he listens and responds."

A member of the Level 1 Seminar Staff, Westerlin does not have any remote CrossFit clients. He has had the opportunity but declined for several reasons. First, he doesn't have time. Second, "Remote coaching never appealed to

me because of never seeing the person work out. (There's the) fear that they'll do additional stuff or not wholeheartedly follow the programming," he said.

Westerlin said he's heard athletes talking about adding in extra workouts and going against the advice of their coach. This has the potential to lead to overtraining, and Westerlin says "it's not a valid way to assess the impact of the programming. (Programming) is only as effective as its implementation."

How can a coach know if programming is effective if he or she isn't sure the athlete is following it to the letter?

Mike Burgener, the man who runs the CrossFit Olympic Lifting Trainer Course, is regularly tagged in Facebook videos of athletes lifting, and he'll often chime in with feedback.

"A lot of people make a lot of money with (remote coaching). And with technology, you can send videos, and the coach can do a good job correcting form. What the coach cannot discern is the attitude, the information between the ears. That is the critical aspect," he said.

Burgener said he would much rather have athletes in the gym, one on one.

"You can see the technique, how they handle information and the load I give them," he said.

The Distance Advantage

Some athletes find themselves hiring their former in-person coach as a remote coach when life takes them away from their home gym.

Richard Mascaro, a 34-year-old father of two, has been doing CrossFit since 2009. He loved his hands-on training with Paul Beckwith of Carolina CrossFit.

Then Mascaro went back into the military and had to leave South Carolina. Mascaro had seen such improvement working with Beckwith that he decided to hire him as a remote coach.

Beckwith "did all my programming, and I sent him videos," Mascaro said. "He helped with my diet. I would send him the results of my WODs, and then he would critique them and program accordingly."

Mascaro says his improvement did not slow down, even on the highly technical Olympic lifts.

"My numbers skyrocketed," Mascaro said. "When working in-person with (Beckwith), I snatched 205 lb. Now I can snatch 235 lb.," he said.



Westerlin likes to keep an eye on his athletes to make sure they are not adding in workouts or altering his programming.

Mascaro said he did have an onsite coach who would offer pointers, and then he would send his videos to Beckwith. He admits that the delay in feedback was not ideal.

“With on-site coaching, the coach can adjust my body immediately,” he said. “With remote coaching, there is a delay.”

However, Mascaro said there were some unexpected benefits from remote coaching.

“Some people get too personal with coaches,” he said. “They wear their emotions on their sleeves. If they get negative feedback in person, it could derail them for a week. At a distance, there is time for you to make things more objective.”

That, of course, perhaps indicates a problem with the actual coach-athlete relationship as opposed to the geographic proximity of the coach to the athlete.

Mascaro admits that it requires discipline to make remote coaching work, but his bond with Beckwith outweighs the downside of remote coaching.

“Paul is one of the best dudes I’ve ever met in my life,” Mascaro said. “He has a special gift.”

The Future of Remote Coaching

CrossFit is a young sport that’s experiencing explosive growth. Can other, more established sports tell us something about the future of remote coaching and CrossFit?

Despite obvious differences, triathlons and CrossFit share some similarities. Both sports combine multiple disciplines that require athletes to push themselves to the limits of their abilities. The modern-day triathlon has been around since the 1970s and debuted at the Olympics in 2000. However, it’s still not a mainstream sport, and elite coaches are not in every city. As a result, many serious triathletes use remote coaches.

Jim Vance is a USA Triathlon Level 2 certified coach, a former elite triathlete with an Ironman PR of 8:37:09, and an elite coach for TrainingBible Coaching. He has also done CrossFit, so he understands the similarities between the two.

Vance said triathletes have used remote coaching for years, but recent advances in technology have made the

experience even better. He has been coaching triathletes since 2003 and said that most of his clients are remote.

“With technology, we can identify training stress. Using power meters and GPS we can track output, and using video we can break everything down,” he said.

Vance uses Training Peaks, a training and nutrition software that allows coaches to turn raw data like heart rate, power, pace, stroke rate and other data into easily understood graphs and charts.

“I really think (software like Training Peaks) is the wave of the future,” Vance said.

“Remote coaching for CrossFit is only going to take off,” he added.

Vance thinks software like this is essential to make the process more efficient and meet the demand. Although triathletes rely more on power, pace and stroke numbers than CrossFit athletes, automating some of the process would make analysis more precise and allow coaches to work with more athletes. Vance admits there are some

things that can't be gleaned from a piece of software, no matter how advanced.

A remote coach has to rely on the athlete's honesty about his or her physical state.

“The one thing is just fatigue level, seeing it in an athlete and knowing when to tell them when they need to take it easy. When you're a hands-on coach, you can see that with your eyes,” he said.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Is this athlete working on his box-jump technique or his AV skills?



Staff/CrossFit Journal

A cell phone can't no-rep your press, while a skilled instructor can improve movement dramatically in seconds.

Vance said that a remote coach has to rely on the athlete's honesty about his or her physical state.

"Accountability is a major thing. It is difficult (for the athlete) to want to back off," he said.

And as any CrossFit trainer can tell you, athletes are prone to doing too much too often, skipping workouts due to life events, lying about injuries or fatigue, ignoring weaknesses, changing programs halfway through, chasing PRs when they shouldn't and generally not doing what they're told. With a coach 500 miles away, all those issues can be hidden, only to come to light when something goes wrong and performance is lacking.

The Human Touch

The Internet has changed the way coaches can choose to operate, and some have success by fostering online relationships based on video and email. For select CrossFit athletes, remote coaching provides access to a level of expertise they can't find close by, and for them perhaps the lack of face-to-face interaction and immediate feedback is worth having a talented coach provide individualized programming and after-the-fact movement review from afar.

But other athletes and coaches prefer the traditional method, where the athlete moves and the trainer makes immediate corrections. That trainer is also the athlete's critic, supporter, psychologist and motivator wrapped into one. Trainers can change a workout with a few words of

encouragement or adjust programming based on their perception of the athlete's energy level. They can call out and correct form errors immediately and create personal relationships based on trust and dedication.

Hiring a remote coach may improve an athlete's performance, but it can also erode the feeling of community that is so integral to CrossFit. For Games-level athletes, this might be a worthwhile sacrifice, particularly for those who don't have access to the level of in-person coaching they need. However, CrossFit athletes should consider the effect of their decision to hire a remote coach. Are the gains worth it, and could they have been made with a bit more work and focused effort?

Overall, the web might offer new opportunities for coaches and athletes, but it remains to be seen whether it can ever replace a coach who can spot and correct a muted hip from across the gym.



About the Author

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