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Older, Wiser, Fitter

More and more seniors are using CrossFit to ensure the golden years are rich with vitality. Marty Cej reports.

By Marty Cej

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Courtesy of Ted Gough and Joe Celso/CrossFit Rochester

Ted Gough is one of many seniors who are using CrossFit to preserve a high quality of life.

First, Lu Quast talks about the cancer and the knee surgeries. Then she talks about the back injury, which happened first but so long ago the accident can be told with a smile slipping into her voice.

She fell from a ladder when painting a ceiling. She picked herself up and carried on but was left with chronic back pain for years afterwards.

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She can't remember exactly when she fell because it was more than 40 years ago, and since she began focusing on her deadlift, squat and kettlebell swing, the pain is a memory, too. Quast, who turned 78 on Feb. 19, is almost certain she's the oldest athlete at Bayou City Crossfit in Houston, Texas.

"Being physical is just part of being well," she says. "I do CrossFit because it makes me feel better. Not just physically, but emotionally and psychologically as well."

Quast is just one of many seniors who are discovering something perhaps best summarized by Aaron Carr in the *CrossFit Journal* article [A Brief Letter From a Representative of the Silent Masses](#):

"CrossFit will likely add years to my life from the health and fitness perspective, but in the here and now, CrossFit is adding life to my years as I have the physical capacity to perform and compete to my heart's desire."



Lori Reilly

Quast refuses to let age get in the way of her health and fitness.

Passing on Decrepitude

Jean Perkins was in her early 20s when Quast was painting ceilings, falling from ladders, performing chamber music on the harpsichord and raising two children in Guatemala. Perkins is a photographer and director of the Kehler Liddell Gallery in New Haven, Conn. And she's pretty certain she's the oldest athlete at Shoreline CrossFit in nearby Branford.

Perkins says she came to CrossFit after years of being physically inactive, years in which she moved from New York City to Wichita, from Wichita to Chicago, and from Chicago to New Haven. Her photography career took off in the early 1990s, but so did her eating and drinking.

"I ended up in Chicago in 1997, and I was overweight," she says. "I was unhappy with my life. I was depressed. I tried dieting but it didn't work."

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unless it's to take pictures.
I want to be fitter and stronger."**

—Ted Gough

The transformation was strange to her, almost inexplicable to someone who had been so active as a child and young woman. When she was in the third grade, her family moved from her tiny farm town in Michigan to a slightly bigger farm town. Nearby, the construction of a paved highway left behind great towering mounds of dirt.

"I ran up and down those hills all the time just to see how fast I could do it," she says, "just to feel my heart beating."

By the mid-2000s, she had a new and satisfying job but many of the same bad habits. Then everything changed in 2008 when she lost that job.

"It was devastating, but I realized that I had to get a hold of myself, that I could control something: I could control my body and everything that goes into my mouth," Perkins says. "I saw the name 'Shoreline CrossFit' on a coffee mug, asked some questions, and I think I was one of the first 10 members."

The decision to change her life may have saved it or, at the very least, improved her quality of life when a stroke nearly killed her a few years later.

And while Perkins was shuttling between cities and careers in the mid-1980s, Ted Gough, 62, was building a career at Xerox in Rochester, N.Y., first as a transportation manager, then in information technology.

Gough, now retired, has taken up professional photography and laughs when he says his greatest athletic achievement was once bowling a score of 300. His only exercise was jumping up and down on the sidelines as his son, Matthew, wrestled in high school. Ted is older now, but much stronger, and his and his wife Roberta's expectations have changed thanks to CrossFit Rochester.

"Lifting a 40-lb. bag of dog food with no effort is a good feeling these days," he says. "I'm 219 lb. now and I want to get down to 200. But I don't want to go to the Games, unless it's to take pictures. I want to be fitter and stronger."

The Golden Years of Fitness

Gough, Quast and Perkins are among the too few of their generation who refuse to reduce their expectations for an active and productive life with the flip of a calendar page or yield their independence to the widely held belief that advancing age and decrepitude are one and the same.

"Some of the best of fitness is wasted on the young," says Greg Glassman, Founder and CEO of CrossFit Inc. "The commitment on the other end of the spectrum simply isn't there."

Indeed, while people in the most-developed nations are living longer, a greater number of them are spending their last decades in illness. A study released in early February by the *Journal of the American Medical Association Internal Medicine* found the Baby Boomer generation suffers more from chronic sickness and disability than the previous generation.



Carol Ritchie



Chris Bruno Photography

Perkins started CrossFit in 2008; she was one of the first members of Shoreline CrossFit.

The study shows that Baby Boomers—some 78 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964—are more sedentary, more obese, and consequently more susceptible to diabetes, hypertension and illnesses related to high cholesterol. Americans are getting sicker at a younger age and suffering longer.

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“The decrepitude monster starts coming after you after the age of 30, and you can push it back or let it take you over,” Glassman explains. “You need to fight decrepitude, not surrender to it.”

The decision made by Quast, Perkins, Gough and thousands of other Boomers sweating alongside athletes a quarter of their age in CrossFit boxes around the world is not unlike the decisions they made as teenagers and young adults when they first demanded and embraced their independence and began taking responsibility for their actions.

“I probably was born with some sort of independence gene,” Quast says. “I like handling my own affairs, deciding the paths I’ll take, the schedule I’ll keep, and how I’ll spend my time.”

Since January 2010, Quast has had two major surgeries and two courses of chemotherapy to combat ovarian cancer. She has continued to work out through her treatment, something she says has sped her recovery and helped her counter the affects of neuropathy—a condition that sometimes arises from chemo and causes tingling or numbness in the extremities, or sharp shooting pains and difficulty with balance.

“It made me feel better, kept my spirits up and gave me a sense of normalcy; health rather than sickness, business as usual,” she says.

Quast has welcomed the support from her family and friends, but at no point has she questioned her own independence and self-reliance.

“At some point in my life, it occurred to me that I’d have to stay physically fit to stay independent and keep assuming responsibility for myself,” Quast says. “I remember thinking I wanted to be able, at any age, to run if a car came bearing down on me or something started chasing me. That, and the fact that I feel better when I work out is probably the driving factor in maintaining my exercise program.”

Gough, who wants to pedal in a cross-country bike ride for cancer research when he is 90—like his father does now—has a slightly different sentiment towards motor vehicles.

“If I can do it at 90, that’s a good goal,” Gough says. “I may still get hit by a bus before then, but the bus will have a bigger dent in it.”

Perkins echoes that sentiment.



Courtesy of Ted Gough

Gough with his son Matthew, who is now 27. Matthew encouraged Gough and his wife to start CrossFit, and now they can't imagine life without it.

Courtesy of Ted Gough and Joe Celso/CrossFit Rochester



With CrossFit, many seniors find they surpass levels of fitness held when they were much younger.

"I refuse to crumble into old age," Perkins says. "I loved running over the dirt hills when I was a girl, and I wanted that glorious feeling again."

"I refuse to crumble into old age."

—Jean Perkins

Having lost that feeling once, Perkins says she won't do it again. She remembers when a friend in the media industry invited her to a studio to watch the legendary Italian actress Sophia Loren shoot a commercial.

"I watched Sophia Loren rise off a deep sofa, and she was just so graceful and beautiful," Perkins remembers. "I went back to the set once everyone was gone, sat down, and I couldn't do it. I couldn't get up."



Courtesy of Ted Gough

She continues: "I was afraid, and I was embarrassed and mortified."

Then she joined Shoreline CrossFit.

And she refuses to let the clock turn back even after suffering a major stroke in August 2012.

It happened at 3:30 in the afternoon while on a 42-foot sailboat she pilots with her partner, Ralph, but she didn't act on it until the next morning, mistaking the blinding pain and lack of vision in her right eye for a migraine.

With her balance off and unable to see the right side of the television without turning her head, she called a doctor, who ordered her to a hospital where doctors began treating her for a severe migraine but also ordered a CAT scan.

"By the time the doctor came back, I had some of my vision back and no pain," Perkins recalls. "As I was saying thanks and how successful this treatment was, his face began looking more and more peculiar."

"My posture, presentation and ease of movement are tools of deception, and fitness makes that possible."

—Lu Quast

The specialist informed Perkins that the CAT scan revealed a major stroke and that she needed to transfer to the neurology floor of Yale-New Haven Hospital by ambulance. It was there that she started passing all the tests and puzzling the medical team further.

"The word the neurologists used most often when commenting on my case was 'perplexing' because I was passing all their tests, signifying there was no major damage, which they expected given the CAT scan and the MRI," she says.

They asked her if she exercised.



Courtesy of Ted Gough and Joe Celso/CrossFit Rochester

Improved fitness is a buffer against the effects of aging.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "I CrossFit! You want to see me deadlift 170 lb.?" she asked. "They said I shouldn't have come through it like this, that it was only because of my fitness."

Perkins was out of the hospital in 24 hours, back in the gym within a month and hiking through the mountains of northern Spain by the end of September.

"That's what happened to me because of CrossFit," she says. "And all I ever wanted was to rise from a sofa like Sophia Loren."

Living Well

The advantages of fitness in recovery from physical trauma are well documented, as are the psychological and emotional benefits of exercise in general, but less well examined are the positive effects that come simply from working out with like-minded people, whether or not they are the same age.

"Something important happens in a gym when our older athletes work out," Glassman says.

Paul Wirtz, who coaches classes for more mature athletes at Shoreline CrossFit, agrees.

"It's not so much what they do in the gym but what they take away from the gym for the other 22 hours of the day," Wirtz says. "The camaraderie is amazing. Sometimes they are standing around chatting so much that I can't even get them to warm up. C'mon, people!"

Courtesy of Ted Gough and Joe Celso/CrossFit Rochester



Fit for life: 67-year-old Ron Nigro, Ted Gough and his wife, Roberta (l-r).

“I may not have a handstand push-up yet, but I can pull the lines on a 42-foot sailboat, and not many can. And my ass still looks pretty good, too.”

—Jean Perkins

At CrossFit Rochester, Gough, who sports a beard, was asked to play Santa Claus at the Christmas party last year.

“On the Monday after the party, the mother of one of the little girls said her daughter thought Santa was a whole lot skinnier this year,” Gough says. “She had to explain to her that Santa’s been doing a lot more CrossFit, and that was good.”

Gough explains: “I traveled a lot in my career and had a lot of ‘talking’ friends, just people I was friendly with. Now we have a lot of real friends. The friendships are the most important.”

In the gym, the performance expectations for seniors may be more modest than some of the younger athletes, the volume and loads less heavy, but the practical application of fitness is perhaps more evident in the lives of the older athletes.

“In my daily life, I generally don’t reveal my age to clients or employers. I’m not sure they would hire a 78-year-old if they knew,” Quast admits. “My posture, presentation and ease of movement are tools of deception, and fitness makes that possible.”

Perkins doesn’t fret too much over what she can’t yet do in the gym but revels in what she can do outside of it.

“I may not have a handstand push-up yet, but I can pull the lines on a 42-foot sailboat, and not many can,” Perkins says. “And my ass still looks pretty good, too.”



About the Author

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