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THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Hack It Up?

Chris Cooper examines belts, squat suits and knee wraps for CrossFit athletes.

By Chris Cooper

July 2013



This year at the CrossFit Games, athletes will bolster their courage with meditation, concentration, HTFU and sometimes prayer.

Some will also brace their backs with leather, their wrists with reinforced nylon or their asses with polyester briefs.

But should they?

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Support Me

Supportive gear—belts, wraps and physio tape—might help an athlete lift more weight, do more reps and fatigue more slowly. For example, a lifting belt can provide backup for the transverse abdominis, in theory allowing for more load to be moved before postural breakdown. Some athletes swear that physio tape, properly applied, can ease the eccentric portion of a cyclic exercise such as high-rep overhead presses, though science has not backed that claim. Supportive briefs may provide a little help with hip extension And so on.

But do these “aids” actually provide an advantage? If so, is it an unfair advantage?

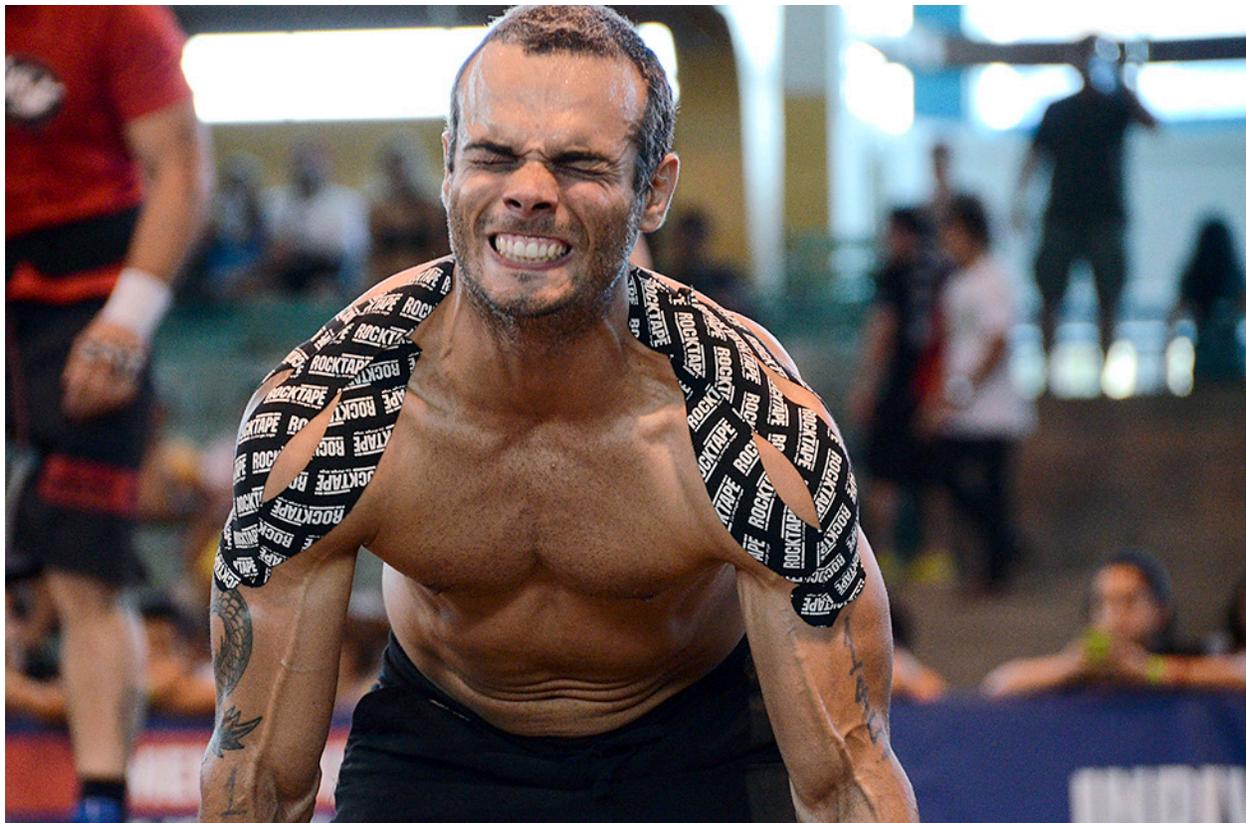
Powerlifters are the kings of “equipped athletics.” From the earliest Inzer bench-press shirts, powerlifters have introduced supportive gear in the name of safety and tweaked it in the name of progress. Different powerlifting federations allow different levels of gear—including drugs—to be used during meets, and neophytes often need more

than a bit of help in understanding why two burly men are helping pull a third into a squat suit before the latter waddles over to the monolift for his attempt.

“We take every precaution we can, and we take every advantage.”

—Louie Simmons

Louie Simmons, owner of Westside Barbell and one of the most respected names in powerlifting, believes supportive gear is more than fine, even when training for competitions that don’t allow the gear used in training.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Science has not revealed whether physio tape is anything more than a placebo or fashion accessory.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

When the weight gets heavy, many CrossFit athletes break out belts, knee sleeves and wrist wraps.

“Even if we can’t use it in competition later, it will make you stronger if you use it in training,” Simmons said. “CrossFitters training with weight should be using squat briefs. Even if they’re not competing in powerlifting, they still need some kind of protection. The bottom of my briefs is at my thigh; the top is at my belly. If I could train with 50 percent more weight all the time, everywhere else but the briefs (is) going to get stronger. You’re handling weights immediately that it might take you three years to build up to otherwise.”

Simmons isn’t talking about standard compression shorts but rather squat briefs: dense single- or double-ply polyester briefs that usually have to be pulled over your legs with assistance.

“We take every precaution we can, and we take every advantage. ‘If it’s not an advantage it’s a disadvantage’—that’s a quote from Shane Sweatt,” Simmons said, referencing a trainer who is also married to elite female powerlifter Laura Phelps-Sweatt.

Freebirds

Not all powerlifters believe that equipped lifts are the best test of strength. The American Amateur Powerlifting Federation (AAPF) is the unequipped, steroid-tested little brother of the American Powerlifting Federation. At the AAPF Nationals event on April 27, 2013, powerlifting enthusiasts were treated to a new show: a fitness competition held by CrossFit 616.

On the main stage, lifters in Inzer and Titan singlets and belts squatted out of a massive red monolift with weights approaching 600 lb. Across the room, crowds cheered more loudly as young women in sports bras attempted cleans and jerks below 170 lb.

Ezra Salmon, event promoter for the AAPF meet, had his own opinion on CrossFit athletes using gear in competition.

“If they’re going to use supportive gear, they’d have to train in it. You can’t just put on a squat suit and expect magic,” Salmon said.



Chris Cooper



Chris Cooper

Two extremes: a female lifting with no supportive gear (top) and a male powerlifter preparing for a max-effort squat.

This is the crux of the argument against training with supportive gear: that the lifter must adjust and tune core movement to the nuances of the equipment. While uneducated critics of powerlifting will claim “the equipment does all the work,” lifters are quick to point out that a shirted bench press isn’t equivalent to an aided raw bench press. You can’t just magically put on a bench shirt and put 200 lb. on your PR, a point illustrated in the *CrossFit Journal* video [The Two-Ply Shirt](#), published Feb. 4, 2011.

“It’s a fine balance between what will help and what will stop me from moving efficiently.”

—Corey Franklin

At the CrossFit 616 event, affiliate owner Corey Franklin said he doesn’t believe supportive gear offers an unfair advantage—or much of an advantage to CrossFit athletes at all.

“We did allow belts for the lifting portion this weekend—max clean and jerk,” Franklin said. “We had a guy wear a belt for the deadlifts in the deadlift/burpee/sprint triplet yesterday. I don’t think it gives them an unfair advantage. Some people like them; some don’t. I don’t think it’s going to add weight to their total like a shirt or suit would. Most of the time, CrossFitters want to be free and clear. He wore it through the burpees and everything, which you think would be difficult.”

Franklin wears knee sleeves in training.

“I’m 48, and I wear knee sleeves to keep my knees warm. But for the most part people want to move without restrictions. It’s a fine balance between what will help and what will stop me from moving efficiently. If someone trains with (various pieces of equipment) every day, I’d encourage them to use them in comp as well, or they won’t know how to use them.”

Mike Carroll is a competitive powerlifter who qualified for Regional competition with his team, and he was at the 616 event. He knows the difference supportive gear can make.

"When I first started powerlifting in 2005, I was equipped with two-ply gear in the APF. I knew that it came with the sport. But when I got into CrossFit, the reason I was attracted was its purity: taking your abilities that you've trained through years and years and applying that without the help of a shirt, suit or deadlift suit," Caroll said. "For myself, getting into a weight belt restricts my range of motion. I like to feel loose and get anchored."

He added: "I think you should not use a belt as much as you can, especially in CrossFit, where we do a lot of front squats and snatches and incorporate stability into everything. If you were to wear a belt in training all the time and then take it off in a comp, you might miss a lift or not get as many reps."

Gear at the Games

"There are very few elements that we test singularly," said Justin Bergh, General Manager of the CrossFit Games. "Any type of device—grip, shoe, belt—you have to deal with that same product through multiple exercises, not just a single heavy lift. An athlete won't know the events in advance, so it's hard to rehearse. Especially at this level, a couple of seconds or an equipment malfunction could cost a podium spot."

One good example came in the 2010 CrossFit Games, when athletes were put through an extended version of Helen that approached 20 minutes. Immediately after completing that event, athletes had but 90 seconds to register a max shoulders-to-overhead lift. Even taking time to strap on a belt would have cost precious seconds, and there's no guarantee doing so would have added a single pound to the lift.

"The CrossFit Games is a test of the Fittest on Earth. It's a test of human capacity, not a test of equipment," Bergh said.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

In official CrossFit competitions, gear is allowed provided it is for safety or comfort and does not confer an advantage.

How to Use a Belt

The primary function of a belt is to act as a second transverse abdominis.

Powerlifters know that a wider base of support equals a safer spine. Chiropractors call this "the ship's mast model": on a schooner, the guy wires supporting the mast should extend as far to the edges of the boat as possible.

Paul Chek used another analogy: when pitching a tent, you tie a line between two vertical sticks and drape a tarp overtop. To make it sturdy, do you peg down the ends close to the sticks (narrow) or as far away as possible (wide)? Of course, the answer is wide.

To that end, a lifter shouldn't narrow his or her base of support by drawing the abs in with the belt. The ideal belt set-up is one that holds the trunk tightly but creates the widest base possible. Set a belt snugly, but constriction should be felt mostly when the abs are pushed out against it.

This abdominal action serves another function: it pushes the diaphragm up and the pelvic floor down, tightening supporting musculature around the thoracic and lumbar regions of your spine. When these are all tight, a lifter has good support. When any muscle group is less tight than the others, it is obviously a weak spot.

A good belt shouldn't be narrow in front and wide in the back. Lower-back muscles are supported by a trunk that is tight all the way around, not because they, specifically, are covered. To that end, a wide belt all the way around is ideal. You wouldn't see powerlifters wearing a "flared" belt. In fact, they laugh at those guys. It may be harder to fit a Superman logo on a 3-inch or 5-inch belt of consistent width, but the support is better.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Some top CrossFit athletes keep gear to an absolute minimum, even during the arduous tests of the CrossFit Games.

A.J. Roberts, who holds the world record for the greatest powerlifting total of all time (1,205-lb. squat, 910-lb. bench and 815-lb. deadlift as a superheavyweight), trained at Westside Barbell with Simmons. He competed with supportive gear from the beginning and became, according to Simmons, masterful in its use. He's since switched to CrossFit training and competitions, and his attitude has similarly changed.

"When you start to add in a significant amount of gear, your training begins to change. You can't throw stuff on and expect magic. Even knee wraps change your technique," said Roberts. "If you're squatting 16 times a month, and you wear equipment once per week, you're down to 12 times a month without equipment. It's a different movement pattern; you begin to train for the gear. That's not synonymous with the CrossFit mentality."

Simmons, on the other hand, is all about strength and sees no problem with equipment in a sport focused only on maximum efforts in three lifts only.

"You want to leave it all up and be Mormons, that's fine. That would be CrossFit's rules. Tape is probably helping people the most right now," Simmons said in his inimitable style.

**"Belt, knee sleeves—but
anything else is too much."**

—A.J. Roberts

But if Roberts had no issues suiting up for a monster squat, he isn't comfortable with using equipment in CrossFit competitions.

"You're going to get away from 'Fittest on Earth.' You want to test the true human potential without help. ... The skill of using the equipment, that variable is part of the game. When you're getting into CrossFit, that's not what you're testing. 'For the swim, can we wear the super suits? Why can't I bring my own bike?' It's a can of worms that you can't control. It's better to keep it out. Belt, knee sleeves—but anything else is too much. I can figure out hacks and ways to cheat it with equipment."

Many would echo Roberts' sentiments, including Bergh.

"There's an elegance in good programming" Bergh said. "There's nothing elegant about watching a guy walk out in knee sleeves, a squat suit, a belt, elbow wraps and a neck guard. This isn't *American Gladiators*. It's about testing athletes in a series of unknown yet measurable physical tasks. It's the human body expressing power."

In 2013, athletes at the CrossFit Games will be permitted to use some supportive gear. According to the [CrossFit Games Competition Rule Book](#): "Subject to CrossFit's prior approval, non-branded belts, non-tacky gloves, hand tape, neoprene joint sleeves and common fitness wear may be allowed during competition. However, no grip assistance or weight support may be derived from any device worn. In general, gear is allowed that improves safety and/or comfort, but does not confer advantage."

For example, leather gymnastics "grips" are allowed, as they protect the athlete's hands from rips. Devices that help the athlete maintain their grip on the bar are disallowed, such as gymnastics grips containing dowels that make gripping a bar far easier. Viewers at Regional events may have noticed judges rubbing the palms of all competitors before events involving pull-ups: they were checking for sticking agents.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

"This isn't *American Gladiators*." —Justin Bergh, General Manager of the CrossFit Games.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Physio tape may be like high-end workout apparel: it looks cool but doesn't provide any physical advantage.

Physio tape is similarly allowed because it doesn't provide an advantage. In fact, it might not do anything at all.

"It does look awesome," said Leslie Trotter, president of RockTape, a sponsor of the CrossFit Games in 2013. She attests that taping provides a proprioceptive cue when the athlete is moving incorrectly; it doesn't support the joint directly.

"The use of kinesiology tape likely does 'help' athletes There is too much anecdotal support to reject it. Research just doesn't point exactly to the mechanism yet, so applying tape is still as much art as science," she said.

Researchers would agree, at least on the last part of Trotter's statement, and some have even suggested the tape is actually just a placebo or fashion trend. ([The bizarre tape that has adorned Olympic athletes: Researchers say there is "no evidence" it works.](#))

Gear Down?

Under the hot California sun in 2013, some of the world's fittest will cinch up their lifting belts in the final moments before competition. Others will be bound only by the philosophy of the athlete as a whole and complete being, unsupported by leather, polyester or rigid cotton. Indeed, ancient Greek athletes competed naked.

The use of supportive gear, where permitted, is a strategy that may be as flimsy as a security blanket or as solid as a back brace depending on the athlete. But with CrossFit's minimalist approach to equipment and various tests of overall fitness, A.J. Roberts' words still ring true:

"The best athletes will always be the best athletes."



About the Author

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THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Women's Wait

In this two-part series, Andréa Maria Cecil explores women in sports and what supporters and critics have to say about the contentious Title IX legislation. In Part 1, Cecil investigates the past, present and future of female athletes.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

July 2013



Staff/CrossFit Journal

In sixth grade, Jean Stewart became unpopular with the neighbors. She hit a boy. And she didn't just hit him; she "knocked his block off."

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"I really didn't hurt him. I think he was probably off balance ... but he fell down. And, of course, little boys back then didn't like to cry," remembers 83-year-old Stewart, laughing. "I was shunned in the neighborhood for a while. But that was all right. The boys were afraid of me and the little girls didn't know how to react."

Arguably, her father was to blame.

An athletic man, James W. Stewart had been an amateur boxer before taking a job with U.S. Steel Corp.

"Of course, as soon as I was old enough to pick up a boxing glove, he taught me how to do these things probably for my own self-protection," Stewart says. "He taught me good health habits and things like that, and how important activities and athletics were."

So when young Jean encountered the boy in her Los Angeles neighborhood who said girls didn't know how to box, it seemed like a good time to teach him a lesson.

Her stepmother was not amused.

"She was really upset," Stewart recalls.

Dad, on the other hand, found entertainment value in the incident.

**"We weren't expected to run
and jump and play."**

—Jean Stewart

"My stepmother made him take me into the bedroom and talk to me about it," Stewart says. "He kind of smiled at me and winked."

She adds: "Dad and I didn't say anything more about it. And, of course, the gloves were taken away from me."



Desert CrossFit

Stewart became known in the CrossFit community as the "deadlifting grandma" when she pulled 153 lb.



Desert CrossFit

Kept out of sports for most of her life, Stewart is making up for lost time.

Stewart channeled that athleticism and ornery nature into softball and what was then nine-court basketball in junior high school; she played field hockey in her high-school years. But that's where it ended for most women of that era. Professional female athletes weren't the norm.

"There was such a difference. Women couldn't participate in sports," Stewart explains. "I wished I could do it, but it was the time. We weren't expected to run and jump and play."

Grace Larsen can relate.

"It was really like that. Girls just didn't do that sort of thing. We weren't supposed to play boys' sports," the 87-year-old says. "It just wasn't socially accepted for girls. It wasn't offered. It wasn't accepted."

Clearly amused, Larsen adds: "I don't remember punching a kid, but I certainly wanted to."

Growing up in the 1930s, Larsen didn't entertain the idea of playing basketball, her favorite sport.

"It just wasn't available, so you more or less forgot about it,"

she explains. "I figured, 'I'm not going to be able to play.' So you put it in the back of your mind."

But things change in 80 years.

Today, Stewart is widely known in the CrossFit community as "the deadlifting grandma," able to hoist 153 lb. off the ground. And Larsen plays shooting guard on the San Diego Splash 80-plus women's basketball team, which has won six gold medals in 16 years at the National Senior Games.

"It's just so much easier for (women) to get into sports now since Title IX. Girls just have all sorts of opportunity," Larsen says. "That's something we never had."

Certainly women around the globe have gained ground in sports over the years. But to say their struggle is over is missing much of the story.

It wasn't until the 1984 Summer Olympics that women were allowed to run marathons—18 years after Roberta Gibb hid behind a bush before sneaking onto the course to become the first known woman to run the Boston Marathon.

Sixteen years later, women were finally allowed to compete in weightlifting at the Olympic level.

But it was only three years ago that female ski jumpers petitioned the Supreme Court of Canada to be included in the 2010 Winter Olympics. The court denied their entry.

At the 2012 Olympics, women competed in boxing for the first time—15 years after the British Boxing Board of Control said women's menstrual cycles made them too unstable to participate in the sport.

And at the 2012 Olympics, women competed in boxing for the first time—15 years after the British Boxing Board of Control said women's menstrual cycles made them too unstable to participate in the sport. And besides, no one wanted to see a pretty girl get socked.

"There's a perception that we've done all we can do, and we've reached the pinnacle of what we can do, and there's no need to fight for equity in sport anymore," says Lynda Ransdell, president of the board of directors of the National Association for Girls and Women in Sport.

"And the reality is there's still a lot of inequity."

Illusion of Equality?

When Kirsten Cummings was a girl, her grandmother had a piece of advice: "Don't let anyone ever tell you that it's unladylike to play sports."

Grandma wanted to be sure that the fiction her own grandmother had told her didn't endure in her bloodline.

"I thought, 'OK, I'll be a tomboy because grandma said it was OK,'" 49-year-old Cummings recalls.

In 1982, 10 years after the U.S. government enacted Title IX, she became a member of the first college freshman basketball team that had 10 players who received full scholarships. Title IX prohibits discrimination based on sex in education programs that receive federal money;



Paul Boca

Breaking gender and age stereotypes, one jump shot at a time.

it's been both credited and accused of having profound effects on high-school and collegiate athletics—for women and men. (Please read Part 2 for more on Title IX.)

"Historically, this means that anyone older than me didn't receive scholarships ... mandated by the NCAA," Cummings explains. "Anyone younger than me received scholarships much like what we see today."

She describes the time as "a pivotal moment."

Cummings' experience growing up in the '70s differed from that of Stewart and Larsen—she grew up in San Diego, a great city for youth sports, with her dad as her coach. Still, it was not a stark contrast to what Stewart and Larsen had seen in their childhoods.

"The boys were expected to do well. Being a professional player was unheard of when I was growing up," says the founder and CEO of the National Senior Women's Basketball Association.

Yet, that's exactly what she did. After playing for California State University, Long Beach, Cummings went on to play basketball professionally for 14 years in top divisions in France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Japan and the U.S.

"My first contract that I got for basketball was \$14,000, and I only got half of it," she says. "By the time I retired, (women) were making ... \$100,000, and some of us were making \$300,000. Still, compared to what the NBA guys make, it's not even close."

Kobe Bryant, a Los Angeles Lakers shooting guard and the highest-paid National Basketball Association player in 2012-2013, earned more than \$27.8 million that season, according to ESPN.

You'll find progress over the years if you read "[Women in Intercollegiate Sport: A Longitudinal, National Study, Thirty-Five Year Update, 1977-2012](#)" by R. Vivian Acosta and Linda Jean Carpenter. Both women are professors emerita at Brooklyn College.

According to the study, nearly 1,100 colleges nationwide last year reported 9,274 women's intercollegiate teams—the highest number ever. Also among the findings: an

average of 8.73 women's teams per school during the same year and about 200,000 female intercollegiate athletes—the highest in history.

Still, there's that pesky fact: Female athletes just aren't treated the same as men, much less equally.

"It's the uneven nature of change," says Michael A. Messner, professor of sociology and gender studies at the University of Southern California. "It's really gotten so much better. But, at the same time, it's far from equal and there's still quite a long way to go."

Girls on Film

Researchers say basketball and tennis are two examples of sports that are more symmetrical when it comes to treatment of the sexes. But you wouldn't know it by watching mainstream sports TV.

"In terms of equity, I think there's still some ways in which school sports, youth-based sports, professional sports, college sports favor men," Messner says. "There are more resources, (there is) more honor, more attention, more status that boys and men get. Nowhere is that more evident than in the mass media."



Fred Greaves

The legendary San Diego Splash. They've won six gold medals in 16 years at the National Senior Games.



Fred Greaves

Title IX has equalized federal funding, but the gender divide is still pronounced in media coverage of college and professional sports.

Messner—along with Cheryl Cooky, an assistant professor at Purdue University—co-authored a study called “Gender in Televised Sports, News and Highlight Shows, 1989-2009.” The study, their most-recent iteration, presented some abysmal findings. The professors analyzed six weeks of televised sports-news coverage on three Los Angeles network affiliates, and they also studied ESPN’s SportsCenter.

What they found was this: men’s sports received 96.3 percent of the airtime. Women’s sports: 1.6 percent—the lowest level in any year measured during the past two decades, Messner and Cooky say. SportsCenter’s coverage of women’s sports dropped in 2009 to 1.4 percent—slightly lower than the combined coverage of the three network news shows, according to the study.

“This is a precipitous decline in the coverage of women’s sports since 2004, when 6.3 percent of the airtime was devoted to women’s sports, and the lowest proportion ever recorded in this study,” the authors write. “Reporters continually devoted airtime to men’s sports that were out of season—pro and college football in March and July, pro baseball in November, or pro basketball in July—while failing to report on women’s sports that were currently in season.”

In the study’s sample, 100 percent of SportsCenter programs and 100 percent of the sports-news shows began with a men’s sports topic as the lead story.

In their past studies, Messner and Cooky had found that female athletes and female spectators alike were frequently depicted as sexual objects or “as the brunt of commentators’ sarcastic humor.”

And three network-news affiliates and SportsCenter gave scant coverage in main reports to the Women’s National Basketball Association even though it was in season, according to the study.

In their past studies, Messner and Cooky had found that female athletes and female spectators alike were frequently depicted as sexual objects or “as the brunt of commentators’ sarcastic humor in stories on marginal pseudo-sports.”

Although that changed, the situation didn’t necessarily get much better.

“There was far less of this sort of sexist humor about women in 2009, though this may in part reflect that women in any form were increasingly absent from the broadcasts,” Messner and Cooky write. “On the rare occasions when women were featured in sports news and highlights shows, they were usually presented in stereotypical ways: as wives or girlfriends of famous male athletes or as mothers.”

This was not the case with coverage of their male counterparts, Messner notes.

And the study did find a few examples of stories that “made fun of men athletes, sexualized them, or focused on their transgressions” on the three network affiliates.

“The main difference in how these negative or derogatory stories about (male) athletes were presented, as compared with those on women, was that they were embedded within a seemingly unending flow of respectful and celebratory stories about men’s sports and male athletes,” Messner and Cooky write. “By contrast, a negative story on a woman athlete usually stood alone as the only women’s sports story in a particular broadcast.”

In the end, the two professors come to a deflating conclusion: “Twenty years later, this optimistic prediction of an evolutionary rise in TV news coverage of women’s sports has proven to be wrong.”

Coverage of women’s sports is “paltry” on network news and “anemic” on SportsCenter, they say.

“Television news and highlights shows remain two extremely important sources of sports information,” they write. “Their continued tendency to ignore or marginalize women’s sports helps to maintain the myth that sports are exclusively by, about, and for men.”

Despite the disappointing findings, Messner tells the *CrossFit Journal* there has been some positive change of late.

“The actual coverage of women’s sports and of college basketball on news and highlight shows is still terrible. I mean it’s almost non-existent. But nowadays you can almost watch any game on any channel,” he explains. “Back



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Women and men are given equal airtime at the CrossFit Games.

in 1994, only championship games and finals were on tape delay. Now there’s high-quality live coverage, (but it’s) not (like the) wall-to-wall coverage of men’s games.”

Messner is hopeful.

“I’d like to think that people who are the decision-makers and gatekeepers in the mass media might broaden their thinking about these things,” he says, “tapping into new audiences and broadening their audiences.”

While tennis opened the door and continues to be a leader in women’s sports, there’s still much to be desired, says tennis legend Billie Jean King. She was the first female to be awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, in August 2009.

“But beyond that, I am quite disappointed because things are not as good as you might think and we just have so much left to do,” she told the *Journal* via an email sent by her publicist. “The X Games are making inroads for women and the WNBA is coming into its own, but we are still struggling in soccer and other high-profile professional sports.”



Staff/CrossFit Journal

In 2012, the CrossFit Games kicked off with an event in which men and women competed side by side.



Jonathan Exley

Billie Jean King

Named among the 100 Most Important Americans of the 20th Century by *Life Magazine* in 1990, King is best known for her 1973 defeat of male tennis player Bobby Riggs in the Battle of the Sexes match at the Houston Astrodome

“I am quite disappointed because things are not as good as you might think and we just have so much left to do.”

—Billie Jean King

in Texas. Riggs—considered the No. 1 male tennis player in the world in the 1940s—at the time claimed the women's tennis game was so inferior to the men's that even a 55-year-old like him could beat the current top female players. King, the world's top female tennis player in 1966,



Staff/CrossFit Kids

While Title IX is well intentioned, critics believe it has increased female sports opportunities at the expense of opportunities for males.

beat Riggs, claiming \$100,000 in the winner-take-all match. She went on to found the Women's Sports Foundation in 1974.

"We needed a voice in the marketplace," King says. "I am proud of the work we have done and how we have become the guardians of Title IX in this country."

But Title IX is a double-edged sword.

For as much as it has given, critics say, it has taken away—not because it seeks equal opportunity, but because of how entities like the U.S. Department of Education have interpreted the law.

"For more than a decade there has been a war over the federal law known as Title IX," wrote Leo Kocher in a 2011 column published in *Wrestling Insider Newsmagazine*. Kocher is president of the American Sports Council.

The council describes itself as the lead organization seeking reform of Title IX regulations "that have led to the widespread elimination of opportunities for male athletes."

"It's a well-intentioned law," Kocher tells the *Journal*. "It's been turned into something that needs to be reformed."

In Part 2, Andréa Maria Cecil investigates the effects of Title IX on women and men and explains CrossFit's approach.



About the Author

Andréa Maria Cecil is a CrossFit Journal staff writer and editor.

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Poor Diet Sinks U.S. in Health Rankings

Researchers of a study that looked at U.S. health over 20 years were surprised to find diet played a dominant role in burden-of-disease risk, surpassing tobacco use.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

July 2013



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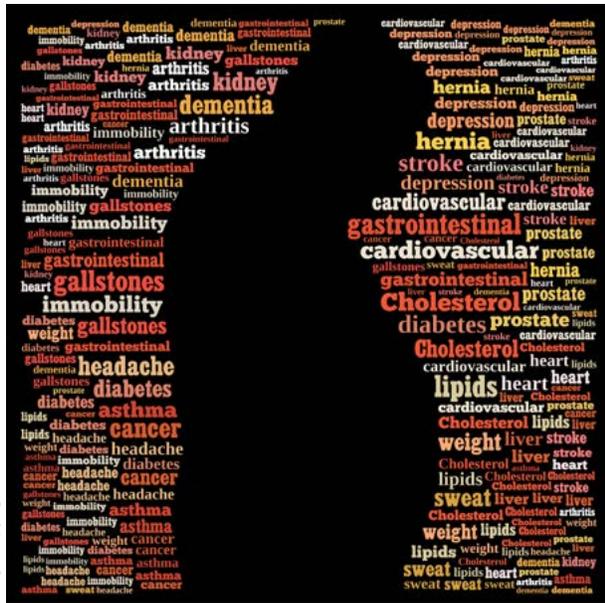
Americans are dying younger and living their later years with more diseases than citizens of poorer countries that spend far less than the U.S. on health care, according to a new study.

The most surprising finding, the researchers said, was that the No. 1 risk factor contributing to the burden of disease is the simplest of things: diet.

“That was very powerful for us—something we did not expect,” Ali Mokdad told the *Journal*.

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Poor diet, no or low physical activity, smoking and excessive alcohol consumption are “really contributing” to an unhealthy life, he added.

Morbidity and chronic disability accounted for nearly half of the country’s health burden.

While the U.S. has dropped in the rankings over 20 years, the country has actually improved its life expectancy—just not as much as its economic peers.

“For us, that’s something that we should address in the United States by having policies and programs to encourage behaviors ... to catch up with the rest of the world,” Mokdad said.

The study examined 291 diseases and injuries, 1,160 after-effects of the diseases and injuries, as well as 67 risk factors or clusters of risk factors for 187 countries.

When it came to diet composition, specifically, scientists examined 14 components.

“The most important dietary risks in the United States are diets low in fruits, low in nuts and seeds, high in sodium, high in processed meats, low in vegetables, and high in trans fats,” study authors wrote.

He was one of 500 scientists from around the world who worked on the study titled *The State of US Health, 1990-2010: Burden of Diseases, Injuries, and Risk Factors*. The *Journal of the American Medical Association* published the study July 10.

Mokdad is director of Middle Eastern initiatives and a professor of global health at the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington in Seattle. The institute led the work on the study.

The U.S. death rate, after standardization for age, fell to 27th in 2010 from 18th in 1990 among the 34 countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in 2010. Less prosperous countries—based on gross domestic product per capita—that included South Korea (18), Slovenia (22), Portugal (24) and Chile (25) had lower mortality rates, and all spend less on health care.

Scientists were expecting tobacco and high blood pressure to continue to be the usual suspects, Mokdad said. Instead, tobacco ranked second, followed by obesity, high blood pressure, high fasting plasma glucose level and physical inactivity or low activity.

“What we eat, what we put in our mouth is the major cause of morbidity and mortality,” Mokdad said. “It makes sense. For us to be able to document it and to go back in (the) past and show how this has been changing over the past two decades is very powerful.”

“What we eat, what we put in our mouth is the major cause of morbidity and mortality.”

—Ali Mokdad

For Dr. Mike Ray, the study’s findings were not shocking.

Diseases the study identified as contributing to “lost health,” he said, are ones “we’ve long seen as the big ones.” Heart disease, stroke and lung cancer, among other conditions, are “profoundly influenced by lifestyle,” he added.

Ray, a practicing physician in Arizona, has been the medical director of the CrossFit Games since 2008 and runs CrossFit Flagstaff with his wife, Lisa. Over the years, he said, he has tried to understand “not just the presence of disease but the development of health.”



Staff/CrossFit Journal

According to Dr. Mike Ray (left), it's more important to focus on improving health now rather than treating disease later.

He added: "That's the biggest thing: I think maybe some of this is because one of the biggest issues we need to address in medicine is there's so much of a focus on treating sickness as opposed to actively promoting health."

They sound the same but require a different mindset, Ray explained.

He pointed to the study's closing sentence: "In many cases, the best investments for improving population health would likely be public health programs and multisectoral action to address risks such as physical inactivity, diet, ambient particulate pollution, and alcohol and tobacco consumption."

"That's bold," Ray said.

The next step, he continued, is to widely distribute the study.

"As much as possible, get this information out there to as many people and health care providers as possible and

involve them in these kind of efforts," Ray said. "There's all this talk about health-care reform in this country right now, and part of that needs to be a shift in emphasis to focusing on things that lead to health instead of desperately trying to extend unhealthy life once sickness has taken hold. And that needs to be a shared responsibility between people, patients and health-care providers."

Mokdad echoed those sentiments, saying healthier lives are made via simple lifestyle choices.

"It's very true. It's all about how we carry out our life and find a balance of what we eat and consume and physical activity," he said. "A balanced life is very important."



About the Author

Andréa Maria Cecil is a CrossFit Journal staff writer and editor.

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

A Mandate and an Opportunity

In this two-part series, Andréa Maria Cecil explores women in sports and what supporters and critics have to say about the contentious Title IX legislation. In Part 2, Cecil investigates the effects of Title IX on women and men and explains CrossFit's approach.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

July 2013



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Former U.S. Sen. Birch Bayh once said, "Title IX is rather simple: don't discriminate on the basis of sex." But the federal legislation has been anything but.

1 of 9

While there is no shortage of people who credit the 41-year-old mandate with championing equal opportunities for girls and women, members of a growing constituency say interpretation of the law has had detrimental effects on boys' and men's sports.

Equality or Legislated Discrimination?

"I would describe it as a federal law that actually changed the whole landscape and culture in the United States," says Kathy DeBoer, executive director of the American Volleyball Coaches Association. DeBoer spent 23 years in intercollegiate athletics as a coach, administrator and fundraiser.

"There is no other country that comes even close to producing the number of opportunities for women to participate in sport as the United States," she says.

She adds: "I think it's impossible to look at the culture of the United States in terms of women's education attainment and women's professional attainment without looking at Title IX. It was groundbreaking. It was landmark. It's never been replicated anywhere in the world."

Part of the Education Amendments of 1972, Title IX says: "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance."

Leo Kocher is fine with that language.

"No one wants to see sex discrimination. But (Title IX) eventually got twisted by special interests."

—Leo Kocher

"It was the kind of law that no one had a problem with," explains the president of the American Sports Council, a 10-year-old organization seeking reform of Title IX regulations.

"No one wants to see sex discrimination. But it eventually got twisted by special interests," he says.

In 1979, the U.S. Department of Health Education and Welfare—predecessor to today's Department of Education—released a policy interpretation in an attempt to clarify Title IX's equal-opportunity mandate. That interpretation included three independent ways schools can show that students of both sexes have equal opportunities:

1. The percentage of male and female athletes is substantially proportionate to the percentage of male and female students enrolled in the school. This is often referred to as the "proportionality test."
2. The school has a history and a continuing practice of expanding opportunities for female students because their gender is usually the one excluded from sports.
3. The school is fully and effectively meeting its female students' interests and abilities to participate in sports.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

In the CrossFit Games in 2012, women and men competed side by side in the Camp Pendleton event. The top eight women all finished ahead of 18 male athletes.

It's No. 1—the proportionality test—that raises ire. The reason is because it's not about how much interest either sex has in a particular sport but how many opportunities the school is offering. If a school's student population is 52 percent male and 48 percent female, athletic participation must also be exactly 52 percent male and 48 percent female—no matter what.

Kocher explains it in simple terms: take a school with an equal number of boys and girls, and 200 athletic opportunities to offer. If 100 girls want to play sports and 1,000 boys want to play sports, the proportionality test says the school must give 100 opportunities to the girls and 100 to the boys. When all is said and done, 100 percent of the girls are accommodated but only 10 percent of the boys.

"(Special-interest groups have) morphed it into a law that virtually guarantees sex discrimination against males," he says. "You could have many ... more males interested in sports who are denied opportunity than females. But if males aren't the underrepresented gender in sports, they're considered non-existent. Basically the interpretation ... can only be due to discrimination."

Among the male sports that have taken a hit over the decades: gymnastics and wrestling.

In the case of gymnastics, the numbers tell a devastating story.

In 1981-82, 1,367 male collegiate athletes participated in gymnastics, according to the NCAA's *Sports Sponsorship and Participation Rates Report 1981-82-2011-12*. Thirty years later, the most recently completed school year, that number suffered a precipitous drop to a mere 341 athletes: a 75 percent decrease, the report said. Meanwhile, men's collegiate wrestling went from 7,914 athletes in 1981-82 to 6,622 in 2011-12, according to the report. That's a 16 percent decline.

"(The proportionality test) just puts in some really distorted and perverse incentives by how they determine what is discrimination," says Kocher, who is also the head wrestling coach at the University of Chicago. He's been coaching wrestling at the college for 28 years.

"By the way, I am just full-bore excited and happy about any additional women that play sports," he says.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

The hill doesn't become less steep because you are male or female.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

In CrossFit.com programming, women are not told to do less work than men. Women can scale workouts as needed, but many have no need to do so.

He adds with a laugh: "I wish more women were playing sports because men wouldn't be getting hurt by the quota so much."

"I wish more women were playing sports because men wouldn't be getting hurt by the quota so much."

—Leo Kocher

By the Numbers

Karen Morrison disagrees that Title IX has had negative effects on men's sports programs.

"The data says otherwise," the NCAA director of gender inclusion says via email. "The law provides schools with flexibility to choose which sports to offer and how to allocate their resources, so long as that is not done in a discriminatory fashion."

The National Collegiate Athletic Association is a nonprofit group of nearly 1,300 institutions, conferences, organizations and individuals that organizes the athletic programs of many colleges and universities in the United States and Canada.

But according to the NCAA's report, member institutions dropped 68 men's teams and 46 women's teams in 2011-12. Since 1988-89, institutions dropped 2,816 men's teams and 1,989 women's teams; each specific academic year, the institutions dropped more men's teams than women's teams except the 2010-11 year, when 10 more women's teams than men's teams were dropped, according to the report.

NCAA spokeswoman Gail Dent explains those numbers as a reflection of the fact that there have historically been more men's teams than women's teams.

"When the NCAA combined with the (Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women) in 1981-82, there were 2,000 more men's sports than women's," she explains. "So it stands to reason that they have more room to drop sports than the women do. So, when you consider the unbalanced numbers, it appears that many more men's sports are being dropped, but the overall numbers are still not the same as the women's sports."

Opportunities for men to participate in high-school and college sports are at "record levels," Morrison says.

"In fact in the last several years, men's intercollegiate opportunities have risen at a slightly higher rate than women's opportunities," she continues.

"In the last several years, men's intercollegiate opportunities have risen at a slightly higher rate than women's opportunities."

—Gail Dent

But according to the same NCAA report, member institutions added 187 men's teams and 231 women's teams in 2011-12. Since 1988-89, those institutions added 3,450 men's teams and 4,872 women's teams; each specific academic year, the institutions added more women's teams than men's teams.

"In each division separately, with only a few exceptions, the general trend of adding more women's teams than men's teams each year continued," it says.

And men are now the underrepresented sex on the college level. In 2009, the latest year for which statistics have been published, 57 percent of women in the U.S. graduated from colleges compared with 43 percent of men, according to the Census Bureau.

Still, while male gymnastics and wrestling have been on the decline, male lacrosse and soccer have seen tremendous growth. Wrestling stands as a particularly interesting example: there are few female wrestlers, which means men's teams are often untenable.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

One of Coach Greg Glassman's original athletes, Annie Sakamoto has shown that women are far more capable than some would have thought.

In 1971-72, there were 171 boys playing lacrosse at U.S. high schools, according to the National Federation of State High School Associations. Forty years later, 100,641 boys are playing lacrosse. Meanwhile, 2,290 boys were playing high-school soccer in 1971-72, the report says. In 2011-12, the number ballooned to 411,757.

At the collegiate level, 4,193 men played lacrosse in 1981-82, according to the NCAA report. In 2011-12, the number catapulted 160 percent to 10,903 athletes. And soccer has grown 77 percent—from 12,957 college men playing in 1981-82 to 22,987 in 2011-12.

"Does Title IX get credit for growing men's soccer and lacrosse?" DeBoer asks.

"Certain sports definitely have not fared well since the 1970s. The unknown in the debate is if you wouldn't have had opportunities for women, would men's lacrosse still



Staff/CrossFit Journal

“CrossFit is as close to leveling the field as we can.” —Greg Glassman

be replacing men’s wrestling programs, for instance? That’s the unanswered question.”

Title IX, she says, has kept schools from adding programs “on the men’s side and on the women’s side.”

Beyond numbers, though, are the intangibles: social mores.

“People still associate sports with gender,” says Diana Parente, director of Title IX operations for the New York City Department of Education. The city’s school district is the largest in the country.

Often, Parente hears talk of boys playing “girly sports” or girls playing “boys’ sports.”

“There is this larger societal issue,” she says. “I do think that’s one of the reasons why Title IX is so important.”

Parente adds: “I always say to people, ‘You’ll know that ... Title IX is no longer needed when you don’t look at sports that way.’”

The 30-year-old started playing soccer at the age of 4. Most people called her a “tomboy.” That was 1986.

“These boundaries have not been broken yet. It takes an extremely long time,” notes Parente, who trains at CrossFit Long Island City.

And while she agrees that some universities have misinterpreted Title IX regulations, she says institutions don’t need to cut men’s sports to expand women’s.

“When I took this position, I didn’t cut any programs,” Parente says. “I didn’t want to discriminate against boys and perpetuate something that isn’t absolutely 100 percent accurate against Title IX.”

She continues: “Title IX achieved so much for women in sports. So it is a very important piece of legislation. You might not even get the Brandi Chastains at the World Cup.”



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Sakamoto was one of three women featured in the Nasty Girls video, which many women have named as their inspiration for pursuing functional fitness.

CrossFit: All Things Being Equal

Three years before the first CrossFit Games were held in 2007, Annie Sakamoto started experimenting with a fitness program called CrossFit in Santa Cruz, Calif., with a man named Greg Glassman. Glassman is CrossFit Inc.'s Founder and CEO. And Sakamoto, now 37, is considered a legend in the CrossFit community.

Along with Nicole Carroll and Eva Twardokens, Sakamoto appeared in a [video doing the workout Nasty Girls](#): 3 rounds for time of 50 squats, 7 muscle-ups and 10 hang power cleans at 95 lb. The clip became one of the most popular videos on CrossFit.com, and the trio has been credited with inspiring women to push their physical boundaries.

Since that time, Sakamoto recalls, CrossFit treated women the same as men. Glassman, she says, saw the potential in all humans.

When women put big weights overhead and did the muscle-ups gymnastics coaches told them they were too

weak to manage, pictures of the feats were posted on CrossFit.com for the world to see. Title IX had nothing to do with that.

“I think it set a culture that has always really respected the female athlete.”

—Annie Sakamoto

“I think it set a culture that has always really respected the female athlete,” Sakamoto says. “And not in a way that’s,

‘Look at these girls. Aren’t they so cute?’ but, ‘Look at these women and look what they can do.’

Ransdell says CrossFit is a way to revolutionize sport.

“And break down barriers and say, ‘Ya know, women can do this,’” explains the dean of Montana State University’s College of Education, Health and Human Development.

“I’ve done it and it’s challenged me on a level that I haven’t been in a long time.”

Of the nearly 140,000 people who registered for this year’s CrossFit Games Open, about 40 percent were women—women who perform pull-ups, muscle-ups, snatches and deadlifts, just like their male counterparts.

At the Games, men and women compete in practically identical events and sometimes side by side—as in last year’s surprise swim-bike-run event at Camp Pendleton. It was there that Julie Foucher, who placed second overall at the end of the competition, beat all 42 female competitors and all but eight of the 45 men in the endurance test. Top

female finishers receive the same amount of prize money as top male finishers, and when the Games are broadcast on ESPN platforms, there are equal numbers of segments dedicated to both sexes.

And at the world’s 17 Regional competitions this year, the opening event, Jackie, called for both men and women to use the same loading: a 45-lb. barbell for 50 repetitions after a 1,000-meter row and before 30 pull-ups. In many regions, top females would have stood ahead of some male competitors had the two sexes been ranked together.

The sport of CrossFit is helping women realize their capabilities, says Kirsten Cummings, 49, a former pro basketball player and founder and CEO of the National Senior Women’s Basketball Association.

“The nature of CrossFit has shown that women are far stronger than people realize,” she continues. “And so when you’ve got a few women who have that mentality and succeed, then other women say, ‘I want to do that.’”



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Few male CrossFit athletes have not been humbled by an outstanding female athlete at some point.



CrossFit Kids

Whatever effects Title IX has on collegiate sports, no one in CrossFit will ever tell this young athlete she can't do a pull-up.

Through its approach and visibility, CrossFit is showcasing women's potential better than any other sport, she emphasizes.

"Little girls can now dream of CrossFit," Cummings says.

But perhaps most importantly, CrossFit.com programming has never prescribed women's weight for workouts. The lack of recommended loads for females is a contentious issue within the CrossFit community. It has been both lauded as removing boundaries for women and attacked for ignoring women's needs.

"I don't find it offensive in any form," Parente says.

When weights are prescribed for workouts at CrossFit Long Island City, she interprets them as suggestions.

Besides, the affiliate's coaches are "never pushing me to do RX—they're always pushing me more to do more."

RX loads in competition make sense, Parente adds.

"(They're) used to compare ... athletes to see where (they) measure up."

"CrossFit is as close to leveling the field as we can."

—Greg Glassman

The subtlety in CrossFit's approach—providing opportunity versus Title IX's government-mandated equality—is an important one for Glassman.

During an impromptu discussion at CrossFit Headquarters in Scotts Valley, Calif., Glassman addresses the programming controversy simply.

Criticism of CrossFit.com programming, Glassman observes, "presumes women need weight prescribed for them."

He adds: "Let them figure it out. My girls are so fuckin' smart."

There are no prescribed loads for seniors, children or the guy who hurt his back and is just returning to the gym after a few weeks off, Glassman notes.

"CrossFit is as close to leveling the field as we can," he continues.

"People will figure it out."



About the Author

Andréa Maria Cecil is a CrossFit Journal staff writer and editor.

Will vs. Web

Eleanor Brown asks if the Internet is killing our ability to concentrate and analyze.

THE
CrossFit JOURNAL



THINK FOR TIME
ELEANOR BROWN

SOMETHING STRANGE IS HAPPENING TO MY BRAIN: IT CAN'T KEEP STILL.

And not in a good way. My mind is restless, hungry, desperate for a constant flood of input. At traffic lights, I reach for my phone to check Twitter. I click a hyperlink to an article that sounds interesting and give up halfway through because it's too long and I can't stay focused. Instead, I post something on Facebook, then return again and again to see how many likes and comments it has gotten.

I am jittery, anxious, unable to concentrate.

I'm guessing that a number of you recognize these symptoms in yourself. As a novelist and reader, their effects are disturbingly obvious to me, but our new frantic, distractible consciousness affects us all.

When former *Wired* writer Nicholas Carr documented these changes in an article for *The Atlantic*, he titled it: "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" His research turned up an unsettling answer: yes.

He expanded that research into a book that was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize: *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (W.W. Norton and Company, 2011). I approached reading it with a sense of relief and dread. Finally, I thought, someone can explain why my mind is changing. But finally, I feared, someone will tell me that the Internet has destroyed my capacity to think.



All the knowledge in the world is at your fingertips, but so is a video of a squirrel on waterskis.

THE MODERN BRAIN

The fact is the Internet is actually changing our brains. This in itself is not surprising. Carr devotes an entire chapter to explaining the ways in which our brains can be re-mapped and re-formed when they are challenged in different ways. But the most important thing to understand is this: our brains are flexible and adaptable, like plastic. This neuroplasticity means we can change and adapt to new circumstances: as we learn to manage new experiences, we create new connections and pathways in our brains.

By explaining the role memory plays in learning, Carr shows the effects of the Internet on our brains and the way it connects to our behavior and our increasing difficulty focusing.

When I was working in education, I spent a lot of time arguing against the importance of having students memorize things. In this brave new world, with humanity's accumulated knowledge literally at our fingertips, I argued, it is more useful to learn how to access information than it is to spend that same time memorizing said information. At the most basic level, why should we need to memorize

phone numbers if we have devices that will give us access to them immediately?

But Carr explains that memory is more than just a tool for remembering locker combinations and song lyrics. Our “working memory,” the shortest of short-term access, is highly limited: we can process only two to four pieces of information at any time, and every additional demand on our attention reduces our performance (despite our claims that we are excellent multitaskers).

The multiple media options on a typical web page could exceed our working memory's limit by itself, and when we are connected to the Internet, it is guaranteed that we will overwhelm our working memory with the uncontrolled flood of stimuli.

And that's where Google is making us stupid.

First, when our working memory is overloaded, we lose the ability to evaluate each bit of incoming information. Each new piece of stimuli starts to feel like an attack, and our memories work to withstand them rather than identify and manage them, causing confusion and anxiety.

Second, that overload hampers our ability to transfer information to our long-term memory, which is, yes, where you file away your joyful recollection of that time you caught the fly ball and won the big game, but it's also the place where we make connections and create knowledge.

You can sit down to look up one thing, fall down a rabbit hole of hyperlinks and related searches, and emerge an hour later, dazed and glazed.

Without the time to evaluate the information that is being delivered to us, let alone make it part of our greater schema of understanding, being online is like being buffeted by an endless wind. This is how you can sit down to look up one thing, fall down a rabbit hole of hyperlinks and related searches, and emerge an hour later, dazed and glazed, staring at the Wikipedia entry about cheese, with no memory of how you got there or of anything you encountered along the way.

Each “intellectual technology” (Carr's term for things such as maps and clocks that help support our mental powers) affects the way we think and behave and ultimately how we function as a society.

But we are poised at a fairly seismic divide between two very different intellectual technologies: the book and the Internet.

ENGAGING VS. DECODING

Engaging with books produces a specific kind of thought because of their length. Because reading is generally a solitary activity, that thought is individual, and the connections we make to books are deeply personal (ask any *Twilight* fan). Books are long form, allowing writers space to develop (and readers to follow) complex arguments or theories. Carr describes the type of thinking books encourage as “contemplative, reflective, and imaginative.” That personal, reflective style of thinking has been with us for literally hundreds of years—since the printing press made books accessible and available to the general public.

The Internet, however, is designed for distraction. Web pages are filled with media: text, links, images, video,

audio, flashing sidebars. Parsing an unfamiliar web page can feel like a game of pinball.

In fact, though we call interacting with a web page or a printed page the same thing—“reading”—they are two very different activities. Carr cites studies that show we use completely different areas of our brains when we are reading online or in a book.

When we read on the Internet, we use the parts of our brains that deal with “decision making and problem solving,” but not, ironically, the parts that manage “language, memory, and visual processing,” according to Carr. Those latter parts are engaged when we read books.

This made the most sense to me when I started to observe myself reading web pages. I pulled up a news site and found myself forced to begin choosing what to concentrate on immediately. Where did I want to look first? The large video in the center of the screen? The red “breaking news” banner above it? The headlines? Before I even begin to read, I have made a dozen decisions.

Early writing, Carr explains, was *scripta continua*: uninterrupted lines of text with no breaks between words, sentences and paragraphs. Reading in that format was an act of decoding, not of analysis. When a standardized system of spelling and punctuation came into being, we began to read differently. Instead of expending all our energy on simply understanding what we were reading, we could really become involved in the argument or the story.

The number of interruptions on the web—in the form of multiple media options, notifications and hyperlinks—means that we are never engaging. Instead, we are constantly decoding.

But reading online returns us to an era of *scripta continua*. The number of interruptions on the web—in the form of multiple media options, notifications and hyperlinks—means that we are never engaging. Instead, we are constantly decoding.

Hyperlinks, in fact, are a major issue in reading. If you are reading a longer piece with a high level of concentration, stumbling over a hyperlink will immediately send you back into decision-making mode, removing you from that book-like “contemplative” thinking.

Don't believe me? Try this: Read a Wikipedia article (nearly any one will do, but the more hyperlinks, the better). Pay attention to what your brain does as you are reading. You will likely notice yourself shifting back and forth—very quickly—between attempting to read for content and making decisions about whether or not to follow the links.

What if I entirely lose my ability to read anything longer than 140 characters? What if all of us do?

Because of the constant interruptions and the visual chaos of the Internet, we read differently online. Studies show that rather than moving through every word in a linear fashion, as we typically do on a printed page, we skim. Instead of reading closely, we scan along “in a pattern that (resembles) the letter ‘F,’” Carr writes.

(Your next experiment: the next time you read a long blog post or article online—maybe even this one—try to catch yourself reading in that pattern. It happens as we focus in on the first and last sentences of paragraphs and skim for key words.)

I find myself scanning this way in longer pieces of text online, even ones I have chosen to read for a purpose. The only cure for me is to print out the content and read it on paper, often with highlighter in hand. No matter how much I try to focus, if I am reading online, I find myself skimming in that F formation, barely taking in the content.

This is incredibly frustrating to me. My will and my interest are unable to overcome the way my brain has been re-trained by the Internet. As someone who has spent much of her life lost in books, who has been accused repeatedly of ignoring her loved ones in favor of the printed page (guilty, oh-so-unapologetically guilty), my inability to focus saddens and terrifies me.

Is Google making me stupid? What if I entirely lose my ability to read anything longer than 140 characters? What if all of us do?

SLAVES TO THE WEB?

Many of us spend enormous amounts of time on the Internet. We work, play and socialize there. And the Internet has taught us that it is not rewarding to read deeply but to dip in here and there, searching for the information we need and leaving as soon as we find it.

Google is constantly refining its algorithms to increase the speed of this process, to get us the “best” results more precisely and more quickly—but to what end?

As Facebook and Google increasingly become the centers of our digital lives (and arguably our entire existence), it's worth pausing to think about their motivations. We think about the content we encounter on Google or Facebook, but we rarely think about the corporations behind it. Despite their lofty mission statements, these companies trade and profit in the quick reward—the more Google searches we conduct, the more we refresh our Facebook wall, the more ads we see.

Facebook and Google have no interest in encouraging us to become contemplative thinkers.

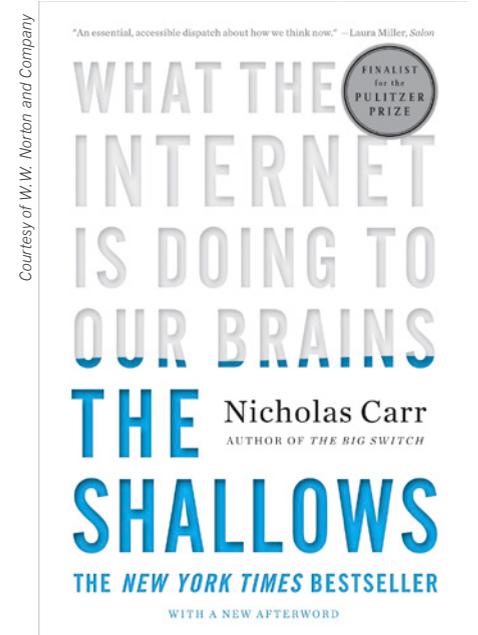
Facebook and Google, as well as other commercial websites, have no interest in encouraging us to become (or stay) contemplative thinkers. In fact, that is exactly the opposite of what they need of us as consumers, and their software, which influences the way we think, is designed to prevent lengthy contemplation. Our interactions with platforms like Facebook and Google and the ways they reward us—with bite-sized answers to our questions—make the Internet resemble nothing more than a vast and highly addictive slot machine.

I'll admit that halfway through *The Shallows* I was ready to join the Amish. At the very least, I thought, I should give up my smartphone and its painfully addictive siren song that divides us at social gatherings and makes us slaves to cheerful chirps of notification. It alarms me how much I am tied to my own phone, and it distresses me when I see the same behavior in other people. When I observe people in social situations checking their phones instead of interacting—intermittent reward, the gambler's addiction—I wonder what it is we are allowing ourselves to become.

If a book-centered society values the individual, the Internet-centered society values community. We create knowledge and meaning together (think Wikipedia or trending topics on Twitter), which is both wonderful and dangerous. But we are also increasingly fragmented, self-selecting the topics and information we surround ourselves with, dividing ourselves into smaller and smaller sub-societies, each of which becomes its own echo chamber.



Carr discovered the impact of the Internet is far-reaching: it's affected our memory, our reading habits and our self-esteem.



And we're more and more dependent on each other for our self-worth. There is no space for private thought on the Internet. Everything is social. Everything must be shared and commented on, largely without any thought or examination before doing so.

We come to value ourselves based on the external judgments of others: numbers of likes or comments on Facebook posts or retweets on Twitter. Outsourcing our self-esteem, Carr argues, intensifies the addictive nature of the Internet. Even when we're offline, he says, "Our social standing is, in one way or another, always in play, always at risk." We're compelled to return to check our follower counts again and again, to reassure ourselves that in the moments we have been away, we have not somehow been forgotten.

Our desire to stay connected at all times increases our distractibility. Smartphones and computers offer us multiple alerts, in both visual and audio form. Take our Pavlovian response to the chime of an email. That small sound can have a surprisingly large impact on our behavior.

Carr mentions a study in which office workers checked incoming email 30 to 40 times every hour, each time shifting their attention and their focus and harming their productivity. We click away to quickly read or answer an email, but we might not return to our original task until 20 or more minutes later, disoriented and frustrated by how little we seem to accomplish during a workday.

Lest you scoff and think that you are far less dependent on your email, the workers observed in those studies reported checking their email far less. The studies revealed 30 to 40 times an hour was how often they actually checked their mail.

As I read *The Shallows*, every time I found myself wanting to leave the book to go check something on the Internet, I made a mark on the side of the page. As fascinated as I was with the book, my mind has become so used to wandering that I found myself marking at least every other page. Because I was interested, these were not random desires to tune out and watch my Twitter stream go by. More often, they were places where I wanted to know more—studies or articles Carr cited that I wanted to read, the history of intellectual technologies that I wanted to learn about—in short, places where a hyperlink would have existed had I been reading online.

I found that exercise, along with the others I have mentioned throughout this article, both enlightening and upsetting. The number of times I wanted to abandon even

a book I was enjoying because my mind was wandering distressed me. But the reasons behind why I wanted to leave it interested me.

And ultimately, I think this is what Nicholas Carr wants us to do after reading *The Shallows*: to consider the question. He is not a Luddite who wishes to abandon the Internet, and neither am I. No writer would even think of such a thing because of the time it saves us in research and the water-cooler community it offers to such a solitary profession.

RECLAIMING THE BRAIN

There is a broad space between hurling ourselves unthinkingly into the Internet and becoming yak ranchers somewhere web-free in Mongolia.

Part of the solution is simple awareness. When I catch myself skimming something I genuinely want to read, I shake my head and refocus, forcing my mind to absorb every word. If it's longer, I print it out, which is perhaps less friendly to the environment but more friendly to my poor, overwhelmed working memory.

When I write, I use Internet-blocking software. This sounds punitive, but the product I use is called Freedom, and I find that, surprisingly, to be the precise feeling it evokes. I never realize how stressful I find the Internet until I disconnect from it entirely. If for some reason (typically research-related) I want to stay online, I find the simple act of closing my email client and browser refocuses me on what I'm doing by removing those visual cues to refresh, refresh, refresh.

In the car, I put my phone in the back seat. At dinner, I leave it in my bag, however tempting it is to produce it to solve some conversational impasse by consulting Uncle

Once, we weren't constantly connected. And once, we were all just fine.

Google. When I am reading a book, I turn on the phone's Do Not Disturb feature and leave it in the other room.

Once, we weren't constantly connected. And once, we were all just fine.



Words without web.

These are all behavioral fixes that do not resolve the way the Internet has rewired my brain, but they do contribute to changing it. The more I force my brain to function without the Internet, the more it relearns how to do so. And if nothing else, the effect on my mood and my stress level has been monumental.

But mostly, what all these things do is make me conscious again. Conscious of my thinking, my actions and my desires. Part of the issue is that the Internet is training us to be distracted, but to me the larger issue is that by allowing ourselves to lose focus, we are trading off certain types of thinking without even acknowledging it.

We're at a vital juncture where it is still possible to see the forms and values of both a traditional way of thinking and the new mind the Internet is shaping for us. Eventually, the purity of that comparison will be lost, so we must ask the question now, while we straddle the border between the book-mind and the Internet-mind: what do we value and what are we willing to do to keep it? ❖

ADDITIONAL READING

- *Hamlet's Blackberry: Building a Good Life in the Digital Age*, William Powers
- *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding From You*, Eli Pariser
- *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age*, Clay Shirky
- *Program or Be Programmed: Ten Commands for a Digital Age*, Douglas Rushkoff

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Growing Up CrossFit

Gauntlet events showcase how CrossFit Kids encourages lifelong fitness through fun rather than cutthroat competition.

By Chris Cooper

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All Photos: Chris Cooper

Shea-Lynn Gioia is 12. She traveled for eight hours to compete in her first CrossFit event.

Shea, her parents and her coach made the trip to CrossFit FirePower, a hub for CrossFit Kids seminars in Milton, Ont. Shea is joining 30 other kids aged 12-18 for one of the first CrossFit Kids Gauntlet competitions held outside California. Over two weekends in May, 10 Gauntlet events were held worldwide.

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Shea identifies herself as a CrossFit athlete, though she also competes in track and field and just broke city records in the 100 meters and high jump. She also just qualified for the provincial basketball team. Shea used to dance competitively but didn't like it and tried gymnastics with the same result.

Other athletes at the Gauntlet include an 18-year-old junior-level hockey player, a 12-year-old soccer player, and runners, volleyball players and gymnasts of various ages. Most compete in other sports; many say they'd choose CrossFit as their primary activity over their "main sport."

Some of the top adult CrossFit athletes in the world have been training for fewer than three years. Some of these kids already have more experience. How great could these athletes become as they grow up with CrossFit?

Long-Term Investments

Jeff Martin doesn't want a CrossFit Kids Games.

"What we've seen in other sports is this problem when kids are pushed to be competitive when they're too young," says Martin, who helped found CrossFit Kids. "That's not what we're about. We want to teach them to move well first. Let's not ruin their ability to progress in the long term."

To that end, Gauntlet events include tests of fitness that aren't always focused on lifting.

Kids test themselves on strict pull-ups, broad jumps, shuttle runs or even pulling a sandbag.

Though you'll see hang cleans and overhead squats from the young athletes at the Gauntlet event at the CrossFit Games, you're also likely to see some skill tests. In past years, muscle-ups, double-unders and broad jumps have all been tested as single-modality events.



The goal of CrossFit Kids is to create lifelong athletes, not hyper-competitive, overtrained children.



Before Gauntlet events, organizers ensure athletes have the technique to perform well in all movements.

Including these skills tests provides opportunity for different athletes to shine while still determining the best athlete overall. While a young girl who's just been through a growth spurt might have an advantage on a broad jump, her longer levers may make push-ups more challenging. Good programming for this age group will include a broad variety of movements to provide equal opportunity for every athlete to excel.

During the workouts, teens are monitored one-on-one by judges who enforce good technique and can institute mandatory rest breaks.

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"We don't want this to become like Little League," says Martin. "We want it to remain fun. We want to choose events we can judge without necessarily requiring a child to squat fast."

Gauntlet organizers make sure kids are suited to competition before the first event begins. That means the CrossFit philosophy of mechanics, consistency and intensity is front and center.

"What makes a kid ready for competition?" asks Martin. "Well, physicality is the first part—and it's the easy one. Next, are they moving well? Are they mature enough to handle hearing 'no rep!' from an adult? Are they focused? Does every rep look the same? Some of those are harder to measure than others."

For that reason, Martin encourages coaches to attend Gauntlet events with their teenage athletes. Though all

athletes are assessed on movement standards when they arrive, the decision to move up or down in competitive class is best handled by coaches.

"CrossFit Kids coaches get what we're trying to accomplish: moving well and safely, not just fast," says Martin. "It's better to have a coach stop an athlete than the referee. That's the essence of our program right there."

This movement-first approach will be on display at the 2013 Gauntlet event at the CrossFit Games. Some of the best movers in each age group at Gauntlet events earlier in the year received an invitation to participate in Carson. Though most of the athletes chosen for California won their division at a Gauntlet event, they were chosen by skill rather than by rank. Of course, the best movers often win.

Fun First

Standing on the sidelines of a Gauntlet event is exciting. The kids are legitimate athletes, whose passion and intensity rival that of adult Regional competitors. There's a big difference, though: they're having fun. That's not to say adult CrossFit athletes don't have fun, but competition is a bit different with a spot at the CrossFit Games on the line. While most adults are all business at the countdown, the kids approach the events with an attitude of play that's obvious.

The kids approach the events with an attitude of play that's obvious.

"Is she gonna smile the whole time?" one parent asks another after complimenting the young athlete's thruster technique. The two parents have just met.

"Yep. Probably," is the response.

There is no Little-Leaguening. The crowd is made up of dozens of smiling parents who are cheering but not goading or heckling umpires. A redhead is planted in the middle of the room, toes sneaking under the barricade with neck craning to see. She's leaning over as far onto the

event floor as she can, cheering for her older brother, Jake, as he does snatches. He's small but has great mechanics, and that moves him ahead of several others. When he finishes, they do a fist bump and she sits down to watch the rest.

She wishes she were out there but will cheer for Jake for now.

"I've been doing CrossFit for two years now," says Jake Underhill, who also plays hockey.

Jake was drawn to CrossFit by former NHL player Scott Thornton, who owns CrossFit Indestri. When Jake started at the gym, his mom, Sue, started with him. Though she doesn't want to compete, she says it's been great for Jake.

"Scott encouraged him right from the get-go," Sue says. "He's a little guy for his age, but he knows that he has really good form, and that gives him confidence. We see it on the rink, but we also see it in life."

The knuckle-bumping little sister says she wants to compete, too.

"It looks pretty cool," she says. "I'm proud of my brother."



The enthusiasm and joy of CrossFit Kids competitors is contagious, and the mood at Gauntlet events is relaxed and positive.

Building Athletes—and People

Following the CrossFit Kids mandate of “form first” has paid dividends for one of the original CrossFit Kids: Connor Martin, now 21 and a member of CrossFit’s Level 1 Seminar Staff, competed on the CrossFit Brand X Regional team in 2013. At 165 lb., he completed three unbroken sets of four 225-lb. squat cleans and rope climbs in Event 7. The majority of Regional-level men couldn’t match that feat.

Other teens brought up on CrossFit Kids programming are enjoying the benefits in other sports.

Jason Dasilva, an 18-year-old player in the Ontario Hockey League, pedals a stationary bike between Gauntlet events. He’s been coming to FirePower for seven years. Now, one step away from the NHL, Dasilva is competing in his first CrossFit competition.

“I think competing with people makes you a better person,” the Guelph Storm player says. “When I get drafted to the NHL, I’m going to find a CrossFit box in that city.”

And some young athletes have dreams of being the next Annie Thorisdottir. [Abbey Smith](#) of Australia was the youngest competitor in the 2013 Open. Smith turned 14 on the cutoff date, and her short-term goal was to complete all the Open workouts as prescribed. Indeed she did. Long-term, she’d like to make it to the CrossFit Games.

“I think competing with people makes you a better person.”

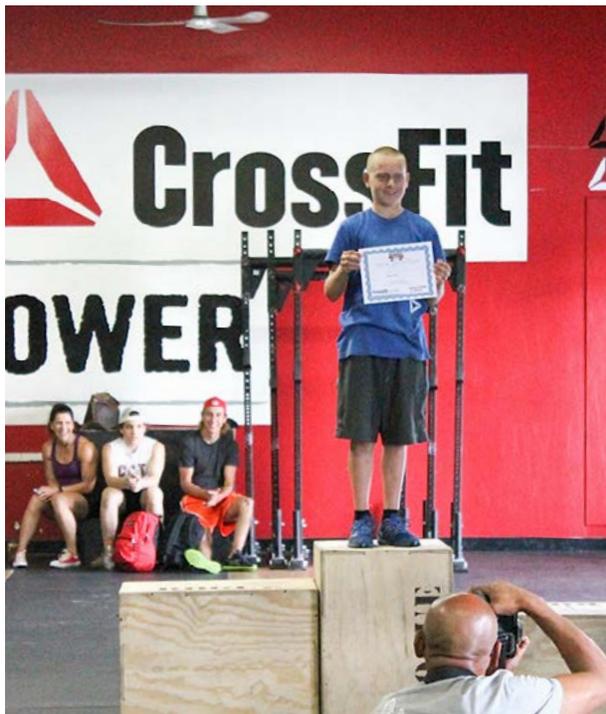
—Jason Dasilva



Unlike many sports, CrossFit is an activity the family can do together.



Competition is not a requirement of CrossFit Kids, but it's appealing to many young athletes, especially as they grow older.



This focus on competition is attractive to some teens—especially those who might grow up considering the sport of fitness their pastime of choice. But beyond the physical, CrossFit Kids competition might have positive emotional and psychological affects on developing athletes, according to Dr. Allison Belger, author of *The Power of Community: CrossFit and the Force of Human Connection*. With her husband, T.J., she owns TJ's Gym in Marin County. On April 21, 2013, the Belgers hosted the NorCal Teens event, a fitness competition that wasn't officially endorsed by CrossFit or CrossFit Kids.

"We had 12 girls and 38 boys, and probably 500 spectators," says Belger. "There was absolute raw and honest enthusiasm for these kids."

The winner of the older teen categories was an 18-year-old from TJ's Gym. Rich Froning is the background image on his phone.

In the crowd were coaches and athletes who came to watch and brought teens from their own gyms.

"Competition is so motivating for people. It's really missing from the lives of many teens now, especially girls," Belger says. "We had a girl who doesn't play conventional sports

who got to feel like a freaking rock star yesterday, and rightly so. She has this whole new forum for being awesome. To give that to a teenaged girl is really great."

Dr. John Ratey, Harvard researcher and author of *Spark!*, reinforces the idea that competition between kids is helpful for their development. He believes competition teaches kids to operate at their limits: "The best kind is a balance of competition and cooperation. When everyone is struggling to climb the rope, but they're cheering for you to climb the rope, you're going to climb the rope sooner."

Daughters Drawing In Dads

Kezia Romany brought her family with her to the Gauntlet event in Ontario. Kezia's older sister, Jordana, is a coach at CrossFit Markham. Jordana is excited for Kezia; their mother is not.

While Kezia does burpees, her mother paces. When she does power snatches, her mother can't watch. Afterward, Kezia is grinning; her mother is hiding.

"I like the competition even more than class," Kezia says. "It makes you want to train harder. I want to compete in CrossFit forever."

Jordana has noticed more than athletic improvement in her little sister.

"It's a perfect outlet for her, because she can apply her athletic abilities and see that she's getting better," Jordana says. "When they compete, they can see their training put into practice. Maybe they see that they're good at one thing or need to work on another."

"Success breeds success. When a kid is successful at one thing, it leads to something else."

—Gerard Romany

Kezia hopes to coach CrossFit someday, just like her big sister.

"I want to be a Games competitor, too," she says.

Kezia's mother is Fernanda. She's not scared that Kezia will be hurt; she's just nervous by nature.

"I knew she would do well. This has been great for her," Fernanda says. Kezia's passion has also helped influence her parents.

"She keeps me on my toes as to what to eat and what not to," Fernanda says.

Kezia's dad, Gerard, is new to CrossFit. Introduced by his daughters, he loves the workouts and their benefits in and out of the gym.

"My thing for her is that she has fun," he says. "But it's also helped her be more confident; she's not scared to try new things anymore. CrossFit has brought her personality out."

Gerard expands on his philosophy: "Success breeds success. When a kid is successful at one thing, it leads to something else, then something else One of the most important things you can teach your kids is that it's OK to fail. CrossFit does that for Kezia."

The Future of the Gauntlet

From its roots as an exhibition event for teens at the CrossFit Games, the Teen Gauntlet will maintain its goal of providing a fun, showcase-style event, and every quarter teens will be invited to participate in a challenge to raise funds for CrossFit for Hope.

A new interactive website—theteengauntlet.com—will provide a worldwide leaderboard to track progress. Teens will be able to compare their scores against other 14-year-old boys, for instance, or against other girls in their area or country—or in Kenya.

Workouts at Gauntlet events are standardized and come from CrossFit Kids HQ. Movement standards are drilled into coaches, and athletes are tested for good technique when they register. Coaches and teens are given the workouts before the events to allow for practice, strategy and familiarization. Gyms interested in hosting a Gauntlet event can email thegauntlet@crossfitkids.com.

Martin still holds tight to the reins; he wants to make sure Gauntlet events remain positive, formative experiences for kids. They're competitions, but they're not traditional sports events in which kids are pushed to limits beyond their years while parents bicker with coaches about playing time. The Gauntlets events are far different and very much



For many families, CrossFit is an intergenerational affair, and in some cases it's the kids who hook the parents.

fall in line with the CrossFit Kids philosophy of broad, general and inclusive fun—BIG fun—that encourages a lifelong pursuit of fitness.

“The events have been unlike any sporting event I’ve ever seen before,” Martin says. “They perfectly mirror what the CrossFit community can be: people supporting a kid working their butt off. Everything about it is positive. This is what we want to show the world.”



About the Author

About the Author: Chris Cooper is a writer for CrossFit. He owns CrossFit Catalyst in Sault Sainte Marie, Ont.