

the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

Consistency Before Intensity

Scott Semple

I relish the feeling of using all my strength and power until I'm spent. My favorite boulder problems—short, intense series of climbing moves—are the ones that demand everything I have but let me just sneak by successfully—the climbing equivalent of a one-rep max. But regularly training at that intensity is a mistake. As has been said before, training to failure (all the time) is failing to train. Last winter, after throwing myself into CrossFit with my usual enthusiasm, I tanked. I wore myself out, and I was sick for six weeks. It was months before I fully recovered.

I was introduced to CrossFit in early 2004. Like most, I was skeptical that a short-duration, high-intensity protocol could offer significant benefits to long-duration endurance events such as my sports of choice, ice and alpine climbing. After half-heartedly throwing a CrossFit workout into my training here and there, I finally committed in November of 2004 and went full steam ahead. I was ecstatic. After a couple weeks of regular 3-days on/ 1-day-off workout cycles, I felt like Superman. Whether it was the peak heart rates I achieved or the neuroendocrine response, I felt stronger, faster, better, and more confident in my abilities than at any other time in my life. And the joy of a newfound physical and psychological power made me go harder and faster still.

Although cautioned otherwise, I started doing two CrossFit workouts a day, sometimes along with a session at the bouldering gym or solid days of ice climbing. After all, if a little is good, then a lot is better, right?

I started coughing in week five. By the end of week six, my morning heart rates were 10 to 15 beats higher than

normal and successive rest days didn't return them to normal. The snap and spring I had enjoyed for the first four weeks of my new regimen were gone. After week six, my performances in both CrossFit and climbing fell off steeply, and, despite a greatly reduced training load, I was sick with either a cold or flu for the remainder of the winter.

In retrospect, my obsessive approach seems quite silly and an obvious mistake. But even now, despite my passing on the caution that I received, I see friends new to CrossFit doing the same thing I did. The benefits of CrossFit are significant, and when those benefits come from such a small investment in time, the money-for-nothing proposition is, for most, too good to pass up.

I have since fully recovered and my morning heart rates have finally returned to normal. (They stayed high for so long after I blew up that I started doubting the record-low heart rates that CrossFit had given me.) The spring and snap in my workouts is back, and I look forward to the Workout of the Day (WOD) as much as I did in my first weeks of the program. My enthusiasm is back to an ideal level, but the spanking I got last winter is still a vivid memory. Thankfully, that memory allows me to resist the always-go-to-complete-exhaustion temptation that I am so susceptible to. As a result of my mistakes—and with the gritted-teeth thought of the time I wasted—I have come up with four rules for myself that I think all newcomers to CrossFit can benefit from.

1. Focus on the volume of work prescribed, not on the loads. The Workout of the Day is designed for the fittest of the fit. Unless you've been doing CrossFit for years—or unless your genetic code has

1 of 2

Consistency Before Intensity (continued...)

something that mine doesn't—I suggest making reps a higher priority than loads. The cardiorespiratory stimulus of completing the prescribed reps at a reduced load seems to be equivalent to or greater than that of taking the significant extra time and rest to get through too-heavy loads, and this strategy leaves something in the tank, which I think is essential for healthy, long-term training. For example, “Diane” consists of 21, 15, and 9-rep rounds of 225-pound deadlifts and handstand push-ups. I recommend disregarding “225-pound” and “handstand” if they feel unmanageable and instead choosing loads that allow you to complete the workout, whether in complete sets or reasonably broken ones. (“Handstand” in this case is essentially a load designation. Piked [inverted and bent at the waist], feet-raised [toward a handstand], standard [horizontal], and feet-lowered [as in upward-facing stair push-ups] are all legitimate ways to scale push-up loads.)

2. Scale prescribed workouts according to bodyweight. If full-load workouts are nearly within reach, I suggest scaling them according to bodyweight before attempting the full prescription. In general, I assume that the WODs are designed around a 175-pound male and then scale the loads appropriately for my bodyweight. To determine my personalized WOD load, I multiply the prescribed load by a modifier of 0.88 (my 154-pound weight divided by the 175-pound model weight). So for me, “Diane” would consist of a 198-pound deadlift and handstand pushups. (Age and gender may also be sensible modifiers.)
3. Use speed as an intensifier before weight. Once a personalized WOD has been achieved, I make a faster result, rather than an increase in weight, my goal on subsequent performances of that WOD. I find it much more rewarding to shave seconds than to struggle under more plates. Subsequently, faster times increase my motivation for each workout. The thought “my work-to-weight ratio is higher” is a better motivator than “I’m not as strong as I want to be.” (However, this is a personal bias based on my sport of choice. Focus on weight if that’s where your priorities lie.)
4. Most importantly, low motivation does not necessarily mean that you’re lazy. Lowered motivation may be your body’s way of recruiting

your emotions as a messenger that it needs a break. I suspect that most CrossFitters are action-oriented people, so a day or two of sloth or lethargy may not mean you’re a slacker. It could be precisely the necessary Workout of the Day for you. When I can ignore my ambition and listen to my body on days like this, I often discover that “yeah, my legs are pretty heavy” or “man, it hurts just to lift a Coke can.” Best of all, a few extra rest days mixed into a full workout schedule often brings the snap back. It could be the difference between a workout that is a chore and one that sets a new personal record.

I lost more than half a season to unrealistic expectations and a childish “more is better” approach to climbing and CrossFit. Now that I’ve committed to the process rather than the result and can be consistent in my workouts, my training is more effective and even more enjoyable. My gains are slower in the short term, but over a longer timeline they are far greater due to my ability to be constant.

Coach Glassman issued the warning in an [earlier issue](#) of the *CrossFit Journal*: “We have counseled in ‘Getting Started’ and repeatedly elsewhere that the WOD is designed to exceed the capacities of the world’s fittest humans and that starting CrossFit by throwing yourself at the WOD 100% will result in devastating failure. We’ve recommended that anyone attempting CrossFit first get through a month of ‘going through the motions’ before diving in with full intensity—establish consistency before intensity. Countless bad-asses from sporting and special operations communities, long regarded as bulletproof, have been burned at the stake of ego and intensity.”

So what’s my excuse? That journal didn’t come out until after I blew up.

