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**CrossFit**  
JOURNAL ARTICLES

## Implementing CrossFit at East Fork Fire

Jon Gilson



Firefighting is a field of spontaneous physical demands. Success is predicated on meeting these demands quickly and competently, and human life often swings in the balance.

Firefighters must be prepared to deal with any number of eventualities—lugging equipment, carrying another person, knocking down a wall, scaling a building, crawling, dragging, rappelling, running, or any combination of these, usually while bearing some sort of load. Tasks are presented in a random sequence, and firefighters must be able to deal with them as they come.

CrossFit mimics and trains for the spontaneous nature of working in the field. Like firefighting, CrossFit relies on a finite set of skills ordered in an infinite number of combinations. A firefighter may respond to a chemical fire one day and a structure fire or wildland blaze the next, one in a school zone one day and in a rural

area with poor access to water the next. While the firefighter's skill set is finite, the contexts in which those skills are brought to bear are anything but.

The CrossFit community has long recognized the connection between the demands of the firefighter's job and the stimulus and adaptations provided by our brand of fitness. CrossFit is now employed by firefighters across the country and around the world. Often, the choice to become a CrossFitter is made by individual firefighters who recognize the benefits of training with constantly varied functional movement executed at high intensity. In such cases, these individuals find local affiliates on their own or make do with whatever facilities are available. More and more frequently, however, entire stations, shifts, or even departments have adopted CrossFit, providing dedicated training and equipment to their personnel. These departments have transferred the burden of finding qualified instruction

1 of 3

## Implementing CrossFit at East Fork Fire (continued...)

from the individual to the institution, ensuring that their crews have access to top-notch physical training and thus obviating the problem of underconditioned firefighters.

East Fork Fire in Nevada is among these departments. The department's territory is 750 square miles in the shadow of the Sierra Nevada, providing emergency medical response, firefighting, and hazardous materials response services to the citizens of northern Nevada. Averaging 4400 calls per year, their 200-member force of professionals and volunteers is kept extremely busy providing a diverse range of services.

I recently sat down with Battalion Chief Ron Haskins and several of his colleagues to discuss the arrival of CrossFit at East Fork and the ensuing department-wide implementation of the program. As key players in this grass-roots fitness insurgency in the department, they have a unique perspective on the institutionalization of CrossFit and the difficulties that lie along the way.

CrossFit came to East Fork by way of necessity. Many otherwise qualified career applicants were failing to achieve passing scores on the department's CPAT-like obstacle course, a realistic simulation of the tasks these soon-to-be-firefighters would face in the field. These men and women were gassing early and often, whether dragging a dummy down a narrow hallway, pulling a 150-foot hose, or simulating a forcible entry with a sledgehammer.

As the man holding the stopwatch for the test, Ron knew something had to change. Luckily for East Fork, he already had the solution in hand.

An off-the-cuff remark from a trainer at the Phoenix Fire Department's annual "Health, Safety, and Fitness Symposium" led Ron to CrossFit.com, where he began studying the various movements at the core of CrossFit programming. A subsequent trip to a CrossFit Certification Seminar at the Orange County Fire Authority in California solidified his understanding and confirmed what he already knew—that the intense, full-body workouts of CrossFit parallel the demands of fighting fires and handling unpredictable rescues and would provide the conditioning his firefighters needed.

Implementation presented its own set of challenges. East Fork is a publicly funded institution, with a budget provided by the tax dollars of the district's citizens. An expensive fitness program would be rejected out of

hand, as Ron knew firsthand from a previous attempt to institutionalize a conventional fitness regimen. Before finding CrossFit, he'd asked for sixty thousand dollars to outfit a single station with traditional cardio equipment, a request that the County Commissioners—understandably—had found untenable.

His second request, made in early 2007, was met with more enthusiasm. With the support of his chief and a mere two thousand dollars in hand, Ron equipped four stations with rings, slam balls, medicine balls, and pull-up bars, officially making CrossFit tools available to the fifty full-time members of his department. With plans to add four thousand dollars worth of barbells, bumpers, and power cages in July of this year, East Fork will fully CrossFit-equip all its career stations for a tenth of the cost of Ron's original request.

Even with the necessary equipment and knowledge in place, obstacles remain. East Fork runs on a 48-hour-on/96-hours-off schedule, putting its firefighters and CrossFit equipment in the same place for only two days at a time. Combined with less-than-stellar participation levels among the Department's bodybuilding holdouts, this schedule has limited the institutionalization of the classic 3-on/1-off CrossFit programming.

Captain Jeff Costa, a ten-year East Fork veteran and an avid CrossFitter, believes that a department-wide education and outreach effort could increase participation dramatically. According to Jeff, it is primarily inertia that is working against the institutionalization of CrossFit. Many department members are unwilling to reconsider their established views on training and hold tight to the notion that the prototypical firefighter is necessarily a "big and bulky walk-through-walls type." Bringing these individuals off the sidelines will require educational resources and physical proof that the program is effective and applicable to their profession.

Providing the educational proof is a challenge because the firefighters of East Fork are dispersed both geographically and temporally, making group instruction impracticable. Currently, East Fork has two CrossFit-certified instructors on staff—Ron Haskins and Roby Safford—and they work on the same shift. Deploying these men to other stations and other shifts would require significant overtime cost to the county, a no-go given East Fork's already-constrained budget.

Captain Costa believes the answer, both logistically and fiscally, lies in an "educate the educators" approach.

## Implementing CrossFit at East Fork Fire (continued...)

Sending three to five additional firefighters to CrossFit certification seminars, one from each of East Fork's three shifts, would increase and disseminate the pool of available instructors, lowering one of the barriers to a department-wide education effort and preventing additional overtime costs.

The physical proof of CrossFit's efficacy, of course, is easier to come by. Those in the department have a concrete example right under their noses, in the form of Ron himself. A year ago, he underwent a mandatory annual physical exam, including a stress EKG test and a pulmonary function test. The results, Ron says, "were an absolute nightmare." A combination of elevated triglycerides, high cholesterol, and EKG abnormalities made him a prime candidate for heart problems, and subsequent cardiac testing forced him to file a worker's compensation claim under Nevada's Heart/Lung Bill. Today, after eight months of dedicated CrossFitting and careful nutrition, Ron is 53 pounds lighter, and his labs are one hundred percent normal.

Firefighter, paramedic, and acting Captain Heidi Neilson serves as another example. Eight months removed from a total knee replacement, Neilson has found tremendous physical success through CrossFit. Only four months into the program, this former ultra-runner has reclaimed most of the range of motion in her damaged knee, performing weighted squats on a regular basis. She has also gained significant strength in her upper body, a trait that has improved her performance in the field.

She'll soon have a chance to demonstrate her increased physical prowess in a measurable setting, as the department is about to embark on a series of timed "evolutions." These simulations test each crew's ability to accomplish a standard firefighting mission, such as getting water on a structure fire. With the stopwatch running, the crew must complete a series of tasks, starting at the hydrant and ending at the front door. This testing phase marks the first time that evolutions have been timed at East Fork, and presents a fantastic opportunity to demonstrate the relationship between CrossFit and professional competency to a skeptical constituency.

The experience of Battalion Chief Haskins and his small group of CrossFitters provides significant hope for the future of East Fork. Only six months old, the program is still in its infancy, and the department's benchmark

of athletic ability—the obstacle course—has yet to be rerun. Combined with the upcoming evolutions, Ron is confident that the performances of the CrossFitting firefighters will serve as a catalyst within East Fork, conclusively demonstrating the efficacy and appeal of CrossFit and increasing participation.

The problems that CrossFit faces at East Fork are not unique. Creating large-scale change within an entrenched community is always difficult, even among the most fitness-dependent organizations and professions on the planet. Regardless, there are at least eight firefighters at East Fork with the capacity and desire to blast through their next attempt at the obstacle course and to perform their duties with improved health and fitness, and at least one man with the authority and wherewithal to extend the means to the rest of the department.



Jon Gilson is the owner of [AgainFaster.com](http://AgainFaster.com) and the general manager of [CrossFit Boston](http://CrossFit Boston). He is a level-I CrossFit trainer and a level-I USA Track and Field coach, specializing in group instruction and equipment sales. He learned of East Fork Fire's CrossFit Program when Ron contacted him to provide equipment for the department, and he continues to support their efforts through advice and consulting. Jon can be reached anytime at [jon@againfaster.com](mailto:jon@againfaster.com).