

# the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

## Basically Barbells

### The CrossFit Basic Barbell Certification Seminar

“CCT Joey”



A great American and patriot once said, “There are known knowns. These are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don’t know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don’t know we don’t know.”

As I entered CrossFit San Diego to attend a CrossFit Basic Barbell Certification seminar, I knew what I knew, I knew some things I didn’t know, but I really had no idea what I didn’t know I didn’t know. So much so, it was startling.

The Basic Barbell Certification is a rather new arrow in the ever-growing quiver of CrossFit knowledge imparted in seminar format. Enter Mark Rippetoe and Lon Kilgore from stage right. I could go on and on about Coach Rip and his ability to teach the lifts and work a crowd, but you probably know that. I could go on and on about how Professor Kilgore is a walking almanac of strength training facts and figures, but unless you just walked out of a forest, you probably already know that as well. Both have a list of credentials I cannot begin to cover (perhaps the most immediately relevant, though, being their authorship of

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the books *Starting Strength* and *Practical Programming for Strength Training*). This certification is another offering by CrossFit to give you what you need to get better at those things “best in life.”

And this is about life. The most important thing in life, as Rip is always saying, is physical strength. The rest is gravy. In answer to the question “What is best in life?” Conan the Barbarian said it best, “To crush your enemies, see them driven before you, and to hear the lamentation of the women!” Conan was clearly a genius of a man, who thought through second- and third-order effects. To do what he recommends takes strength. Easy enough for Conan, but not so much for many people in this world. Do you think Stephen Hawking would rather study black holes or walk to work? That may sound cruel to some and funny to others; however, it is neither. It is reality. Black holes and their effect on light particles mean jack squat to a weak, old person who is stuck on the toilet without a handrail.

So, I must strive to impart what you will learn, unlearn, relearn, learn the hard way, learn to accept, and learn to teach. The last in the list is key.

### Learn

We will begin with the learning. The basis of the entire seminar revolves around five key lifts: squat, deadlift, bench press, press, and power clean. This is about barbells, not kettlebells, clubbells, dumbbells, or Hell’s Bells (though I do have AC/DC playing in the background at the moment). Barbells are the very basic and best device for developing pure strength. With their almost limitless ability to scale up or down in weight, you can use them with the time-proven best exercises to ensure you can move you and your stuff for the rest of your life. To teach this stuff, Coach Rippetoe will be doing a lot of talking and it is well worth listening to closely; just don’t expect to be sitting down much or talking pure theory. Eighty percent of the learning at this certification takes place on your feet with a barbell in hand, or watching and cueing another person with a barbell. You will be placed into groups of 4 to 5 people of similar strength levels for a particular lift at a platform. Expect to work technique with light weight and then build up to a few heavy sets for each exercise, and to coach others to do the same.

The rest of this article is about the process of learning as you begin to be able to recognize the fundamentals of proper movement in yourself and others. Half of this

battle is having the will to let go of your preconceived notions of what “right” is supposed to look like.

### Unlearn and relearn

First out of the hopper is unlearning. Unlearning seems counterintuitive. Why not just learn new information over the other stuff? I don’t know, but for that matter, why can’t I just plug in to the matrix and have some guy dressed as a street person sitting behind a computer “download” all this stuff directly into my skull? (Actually, Tony Budding and Brian Mulvaney from HQ are already working on that. ...) For now though, it does not work that way. You are going to feel all-over confusion as your mental picture, the verbal cues, and the actual physical movements you perform and witness fail to resemble one another. The way you apply your particular physical structure to move the weight will be tweaked to the point that you will say to yourself, “Are they serious?” They will be serious, and they will be right, or they will see what they needed to see to make another correction in your technique.

Stay with me now. As an example, here is how things might go on the first heavy set of squats.

Rep 1: You will have an epiphany (a five-dollar word for “the lightbulb came on”) and it will probably happen under the load of a barbell. You will realize that you have already heard or read about this at the precise moment you lock out the weight far easier than you are used to. This is “relearning” slipping into the mix. It is sneaky that way, and it might make you think you are suffering from exercise-induced Alzheimer’s.



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Rep 2: Get ready to screw it up again, as you have forgotten, in your excitement, how to unlearn what you taught yourself lifting in front of a mirror at the local YMCA.

Rep 3: Wait! He said “Heels!” That means to keep the combined center of gravity of your body and the barbell over the mid-foot, thus keeping the heels of your feet on the floor. This or another properly placed cue will help you lift properly. Amazing—you just got done with rep #3 and you are 2 for 1.

Do you think you will curb your enthusiasm and get reps #4 and #5 right? Unlearning and relearning are at each other's throats. So it goes, for several sets of the five exercises and several flaws in your technique. Somewhere along the way, you give up on lifting heavy and refocus on just lifting properly with the weight you have. That way, maybe the next time you show up you can slightly increase the weight and do it right again. Ah, yes, it's called progress.

### Learn the hard way

This, of course, brings us around to learning the hard way. This is something I excel at. Learning the hard way is a syndrome that typically affects the male of the species when other males are around. It gets worse if you throw in some (but disproportionately few) attractive females. The worst of the worst is a guy like me who needs to prove something to himself. (Normally, a chiropractor gets involved at this point.) The “hard way” approach is a completely voluntary step in the process, not part of the formal instruction plan, and it is preached against at the Basic Barbell Certification. However, if you must learn the hard way, it might well be allowed in order to teach the other attendees what silliness looks like and how to deal with it. (Not that I would know from personal experience or anything.) This reminds me of another point. At the end of each exercise, each attendee will demonstrate, for the group to critique, how to do the lift for a heavy set. Grow some thick skin for this, as 25 people will nitpick your form to the nth degree as they and you learn to recognize, prioritize, and correct flaws in your mechanics.

### Learn to accept

Learning to accept is your next step in personal growth through the medium of barbells at the Rippetoe and Kilgore School for the Strength Challenged. Your body has



its own specific angles created by your joints and by the lengths of the limbs that meet to create the joints, coupled with how and where your muscles attach to them... lever arms...efficiency of movement...throughout the ver-ti-cal plane...zz....zzz....zzzz—

Wake up!!

Look, this is easy. The point is: Everyone is different. I am not talking about that cultural diversity stuff. I am talking about how your physical proportions relate to how you move the barbell. Example: I have long femurs in relation to my lower legs. That means my back will be near horizontal at the beginning of a deadlift in order to get the lifting mechanics right—extended back, flat heel, shoulder blades over the bar. No amount of squirming or contorting is going to change that if I want to pick up the Conan-worthy weights. These same proportions mean that I can lift significantly more weight in a low-bar squat than in a high-bar squat because I am not straining my lower back to try, unnecessarily, to stay upright. However, without accepting this way of thinking about things, I would still be trying sit upright at the start of my deadlifts and doing good mornings at the end of my heavy high-bar squats. And I would still be lifting way below my potential. I had to learn to accept that I am not built like

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the compact Brett Marshall. Accepting your proportions puts you on the fast track to lifting more, as you quickly come to understand your biomechanical strengths and weaknesses. This is a primary focus of the seminar and is continually pointed out in a variety of contexts. One size does not fit all—and one set of predetermined angles does not fit all bodies.

### Learn to teach

In the hope that I still have at least half of the readers' attention after describing how long my femurs are, I transition to the other primary point of the seminar: Learn how to teach. Anyone can bark out pre-fab cues all day, every day, and even actually make some headway with some trainees. However, the more effectively and efficiently a trainer or coach can impart the information he understands to the person lifting the bar, the more effective the process is.

The seminar ensures that you understand how to teach by making you demonstrate these techniques on the other attendees. You will learn how and when to cue a trainee. You will learn how to look at a trainee's proportions and ensure they are putting those proportions in the correct alignment in order to move effectively under load. You will learn how to deal with common problems. (One of the memorable things I learned from Rip is that a lack

of the proper use of yelling has contributed to much of the silliness found in the modern gym.) Sensitivity be damned.

The Basic Barbell Certification is as much about how to coach the lifts as it is about how to do them. Rippetoe and Kilgore, along with a host of senior CrossFit coaches and trainers, will be in your mug making sure you get it right in your lifting and in your coaching. After all, isn't this why you would come to a certification? If you could read a book and get it as quickly and accurately (and while having as much fun), then exercise scientists would all make good coaches, and we could learn this stuff just as well from the comfort of our La-Z-Boys with a good reading lamp. Alas, it ain't so. Good, solid hands-on learning makes for good, solid hands-on coaching. The kind of coaching that will both help people stay strong enough to be able to get off the toilet without a handrail and thus remain independent, and also enable our warriors to "crush their enemies, see them driven before them, and to hear the lamentation of the women!" After all, isn't this what is "best in life"?



CrossFit Basic Barbell  
Certification Seminar pt. 1



CrossFit Basic Barbell  
Certification Seminar pt. 2



"CCTJoey" is a member of the United States Air Force and a Level-2 CrossFit Trainer.