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**CrossFit**  
JOURNAL ARTICLES

## Partnering with a Martial Arts Dojo

Matt Swift



Spend time browsing the threads on the affiliate section of the CrossFit message board and you will quickly discover that many new affiliates sooner or later face the same dilemma: “Should I set up my own box or work out of an existing gym?” Neither option appears particularly attractive when starting out. Setting up your own box seems dauntingly expensive and sends waves of doubt through even the most hardened business mind. “What if no one turns up?” Likewise, working out of a gym is fraught with frustration when the realization sinks in that very few gyms will allow chalk, handstands on the wall, grunting, or dropping weights. So, although having your own box is the ultimate dream of most new affiliates, and renting space from a gym is an obvious stepping stone, in the beginning, neither option really appeals.

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Well there is another option, and it's one that we at CrossFit Brisbane stumbled on by accident. It has proven to be the best of both worlds, providing the feel of our own box while minimizing our initial outlay. While we were in the midst of trying to resolve the "where should we set up shop" dilemma, one of our clients suggested that we talk to the local martial arts dojo, and from the moment we walked in, it was clear that we had found the ideal home for our start-up phase.

To a CrossFitter, there is something inherently attractive about martial arts dojos. We have come to realize that they may be the long lost siblings of CrossFit. They are noisy, confronting environments where sweating is encouraged and people love to bang things. Martial artists seek out performance and recognize that pain is an essential artifact of the process. Every day, people turn up for no other reason than to be better at what they do and improve their technique, and they are willing to suffer to do it. Sound familiar?

But not all dojos are the same. The martial arts industry has been infected by the same greed-based commercialism that led to the explosion of globo gyms. "McDojos" are everywhere. So, how do you partner with the right one—one that aligns with your approach and will foster your goals and methods? We were lucky enough to walk into what turned out to be a highly CrossFit-compatible environment, and with the benefit of hindsight, we can provide a simple shopping guide.

1. Pick a dojo that has a ring. Rings exist only in places where people fight and are symbolic of seriousness. You do not need a ring to spar, but you do if you are going to produce genuine fighters. Fight-based dojos are the real deal and are homes to people who like to train hard. The ring is to the martial arts what the lifting platform is to CrossFit. Find a dojo with a ring and it improves the chance that it is CrossFit-compatible.
2. Carefully read the class schedules and pick a dojo that typically has class times that don't conflict with when you want to run CrossFit sessions. Don't compete for the same times; there is no future in a conflicting schedule. Most dojos run sessions in the evening, so there is a great opportunity to gain unencumbered access to the space in the morning and for much of the day.
3. Make sure the owner is passionate about his (her) art. Purists are less likely to sell out. They are also

more likely to appreciate and support your passion for what you do.

4. Look for a facility with plenty of open space, and, ideally, a separate area you can use. We found a dojo with a gym attached that provided multiple work areas. Space is the most important commodity when client numbers start to ramp up. Remember that the dojo will grow, you will grow, and sooner or later you will start to compete for space.
5. It needs to be a full-time dojo where the owner holds the lease or title to the building.
6. Use your instincts: Does the place have the right vibe?

Sound simple? Well maybe not simple, but it is doable. Look around and you will likely find a compatible dojo in your local area, and I am willing to bet a dollar that they are under-utilizing their facility. However, finding the right dojo is the easy bit in comparison to the next steps. Nothing worth doing ever comes without hard work, and the real challenge lies first in convincing the owner that running CrossFit sessions out of his facility is a good thing to do, and, second, in integrating with the existing operation without driving the owner nuts.

Patience is a virtue, and successfully operating CrossFit classes out of a dojo can take plenty. Over the past twelve months, we have transformed our environment inch by inch. Understandably, the owner was initially indifferent to CrossFit ("You do what?") and had no interest in including it within his program ("I already run group fitness sessions"). The negotiations for us were complicated by the fact that the owner was also a personal trainer and has a gym area attached to the dojo. There were existing gym and personal training clients in addition to the martial arts clients, and to some extent there was a conflict of interest. However, although not particularly interested in CrossFit, he was interested in extra revenue, so we negotiated use of the gym for two sessions a week at times when martial arts classes were not being run. It was better than nothing, but incredibly frustrating to be limited to those times. On one hand, we were encouraging people to train three days on/one day off, as with the CrossFit Workout of the Day, but, on the other, telling them that they could turn up to work with us only twice a week.

Luckily, CrossFit is infectious, and after a short time we noticed that training sessions being run by the

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owner started including wall ball shots and thrusters. Squats started to get deeper, and the existing group fitness sessions started to be run “for time.” Little by little we were influencing the environment and opening a space in the owner’s mind. Our patience was paying off. Before long, our sessions became well-known and we were referred to as “those crazy CrossFitters.” This hallmarked an acceptance by the owner that we “walk the walk,” and we seized on it to negotiate an additional session to bring us up to three sessions per week. Negotiating is much easier once you have gained respect.

The more that we were in the dojo, the more we got to talk about CrossFit. The more we talked about CrossFit, the more the owner became interested and the snowball started. After about three months we had our first win, with the owner agreeing to allow chalk in the gym, providing “we cleaned the crap up.” To me, this was a landmark moment. Teaching CrossFit without chalk is like teaching kickboxing without punching bags, and this analogy struck a chord with him.

To my mind, the acceptance of chalk symbolized that we were moving toward having a real CrossFit environment. Next was the whiteboard. The dojo owner is a clean freak and the whiteboard, which to me is a universal connector within the CrossFit community, to him was simply more mess. But like the chalk, it too

was eventually allowed, and we were well on our way to creating the environment we wanted. Our classes started to grow and within another two months we were regularly squeezing 10 to 14 people into the very small space allocated for CrossFit. Despite our mess and the obvious inconvenience of having so many of us crammed in there, the owner couldn’t help but like what he saw—a growing group of people who were willing to train as hard as his fighters and were getting results. The penny dropped.

Our defining moment came about two months later. If finding the right dojo was our first stroke of luck, our second came when the owner expanded the dojo just as we were busting at the seams in the small area allocated to us. His expansion included a large martial arts training area. By this stage we had become a valued tenant and, thanks to a voluntary rent increase, after our numbers grew, we were also an essential revenue stream in his business plan for the expansion. This meant that we also got considerable say in the design and layout of the new area. As a result, the expansion included purpose-built pull-up bars, wall ball targets, climbing ropes, and mountings for rings. We quickly capitalized on the changed environment and purchased as much CrossFit gear as we could afford—medicine balls, bars, rings, kettlebells, and parallettes.

Once we built it, they came. CrossFitters started turning up and within a short period of time, two great things happened. One, we had a lot of CrossFitters participating in each session, and, two, the sessions became true CrossFit. Within a year we had a truly viable operation. The atmosphere became so vibrant that the owner couldn’t help himself and started joining in himself. It took him just one workout (and a visit by Pukie), and I had another committed CrossFitter. Martial artists love competition and intensity and purposeful movement, so it is no surprise that they love CrossFit.

Once the owner was CrossFitting, negotiating additional session times became a breeze and we essentially got open access to the training area at any time when it wasn’t being used for martial arts. All of a sudden, after twelve months of being patient, I almost couldn’t keep up with the changes. The owner “got it” and started pushing hard to provide everything we needed to be able to do all of the sessions as prescribed. One day he turned up with 400 kilograms of secondhand bumpers that he found at an auction. Another day he brought in squat racks that he’d found on sale. He built homemade



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kettlebells, bench stands, and harnesses for weighted pull-ups. Additional pull-up bars were installed on the punching bag racks. He had storage cupboards built and changed the layout of the space to accommodate the CrossFit session requirements.

The most important change, though, was the total acceptance of CrossFit. We no longer got into trouble for doing handstand push-ups against the wall or deadlifting without shoes. The squat rack was moved away from the mirror. We were allowed to drop weights and CrossFit fitness standards were put up on the wall.

This has been a remarkable evolution. Fourteen months after affiliating, we have the box that we always wanted—even though it's not ours. Our outlays are similar to what they'd be if we rented space in a commercial gym, but our environment is similar to what we'd have if we owned our own premises. I still pinch myself.

But it is not all smooth sailing. We are still sharing a space and unfortunately we are sharing with grapplers. Don't get me wrong, I love grapplers, but sharing a space means that our surface is covered with soft wrestling mats. What is a great surface for wrestling is a crappy surface for most of CrossFit. The surface is fragile, unstable, and difficult to keep clean. Lifting on it

is hopeless and we are constantly scratching our heads trying to come up with a solution for dropping weights without having to go outside. Despite our best efforts, slowly but surely we are trashing the mats, and sooner or later, it will become an issue. We are also still limited to times that are not being used by martial arts classes. This in effect means that we cannot run any night or late afternoon classes, and this is very unlikely to change. At some point this will become a deal-breaker as the affiliate continues to grow, but that is a problem for later. Until we are ready to have our own box, we will continue to compromise where we have to. For the moment, this means it is not really feasible to run a CrossFit Kids program, as it is hard to find kids who can train at 5:00 a.m.

We are also starting to face challenges created by cross-pollination within the environment. We have martial artists and gym members wanting to do CrossFit and CrossFitters wanting to do martial arts. In many ways, this is great, but it also creates many headaches, not the least being the financial implications: how do you charge for this, given we are separate businesses?

But all in all, it has been a great relationship and an option that I would suggest that all new affiliates consider.



## Partnering with a Martial Arts Dojo (continued...)

Drawing on our experience, here is our nutshell guide to successfully operating out of a dojo:

1. Accept that it is going to take time to mold the environment. It is not feasible to walk in on day 1 and expect to move furniture. It is a new relationship and, as in any new relationship, it takes time to get to know each other and set boundaries. In the same vein, in the beginning you also need time apart, so don't go for total immersion. It is important to start out softly with a few sessions and make small incremental improvements and add sessions as you build trust.
2. Be open to compromise at a practical level but never at a philosophical level. Find ways to fit in with the existing operation as much as possible and you are more likely to gain acceptance.
3. The relationship will work only if both client bases continue to get what they need out of the environment. Look for ways that CrossFit can benefit the martial artists beyond just offering training. Share equipment, respect the space and their needs, and help out wherever you can. Be useful. We offer a value-add by opening up the facility at additional times so existing clients get greater access. We cover the gym when the owner needs to grab lunch. In general, having us around makes his life easier.
4. Be clean. Mixed martial artists hate rolling on dirty mats. After every session we routinely disinfect and mop the mats. Stand-up guys hate slipping on sweaty floors. Be considerate of the environment.
5. Be sensitive to the fact that the existing clients of the business have a trust relationship with the owner. Teaching CrossFit in their environment creates a contrast effect and a "softly, softly" approach is required to influence and correct technique to CrossFit standard without undermining existing trust relationships. A great deal of sensitivity is required when working in someone else's space. Being patient is important. I have started working with clients from the other side of the business because they like what they see with CrossFit, but I always include their existing martial arts training and coaching in the equation. Be careful not to undermine the viability of the other side of the business by inadvertently poaching clients and in turn taking revenue from the owner.

For CrossFit Brisbane the relationship continues to evolve and our affiliate continues to grow. For the moment, the arrangement is perfect. I can't say what the future will hold for us, or where we will be located even six months from now, but I can tell you that tomorrow I will walk into the dojo, say good morning to my loyal crew, and run a bundle of CrossFit sessions the way I think they should be run, and that is all that is important. If you are affiliating or thinking about it but don't have your own space, consider joining forces with a martial arts dojo (or other similar venture) and, like us, you may find yourself twelve months farther down the development path than you expected.



Matt Swift is the owner of [CrossFit Brisbane](#) in Australia. He has been CrossFitting for two and a half years and affiliated fourteen months ago. He is a keen Olympic lifter and martial artist.