

# the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

## Characteristics of a World-Class Trainee

Andrew Thompson

*“A trainee must learn first to be quiet, then to be alone, then to face and examine himself, then to recognize and speak truth, and finally be with others, unaffected by circumstance or surrounding, of single mind.”*

—Jason Dougherty

My experiences with athletics, academics, physical training, and military service have exposed me to many types of leaders, students, and trainees. There is a lot of discussion about what makes good leaders, teachers, and coaches, but less about the qualities required on the other side of that relationship—about what it takes to be a world-class trainee. In my exposure to training and teaching interactions across diverse fields, I have observed several consistent characteristics that distinguish world-class trainees and students from the pack. These characteristics are frequently observed in the gymnasium or on the field, but they are relevant to numerous occupational fields and general life scenarios as well. These characteristics include, but are not limited to, the following:

- **Desire.**  
World-class trainees have an insatiable desire to improve. They are self-motivated and take action in the absence of specific direction. Their burning desire enables them to bear the “full dose” of the training.
- **Willingness to listen.**  
Great trainees understand the necessity of listening. They are teachable, open, and willing to accept guidance and correction. Engaged listening

fosters effective communication between student and teacher. Intelligent discussions pertinent to the situation not only instruct the trainee but also strengthen the bonds of trust and confidence.

- **Dedication to fundamentals.**  
Exceptional trainees embrace fundamentals. They build on a solid foundation, performing common movements uncommonly well (as Coach Glassman puts it). Great trainees improve with regular, deliberate practice. Pre-workout time is maximized and used as an opportunity to sharpen basic skills.
- **Mental and physical preparedness.**  
World-class trainees are prepared at every session. They understand that early is “on time.” They are enthusiastic about the opportunity at hand, regardless of how they “feel” coming into it. They recognize rest and nutrition as important and complementary components of elite human performance.
- **Independence.**  
While a group dynamic offers encouragement and mutual accountability, there are times when a trainee must work alone. Military deployments,

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austere environments, unpredictable schedules, unreliable training partners, and road trips present training disruptions. Excuses aside, a world-class trainee will find a way to face rigorous protocols alone and unafraid. The seeds of world-class performance are often born in the silence and solitude of the morning darkness.

- **Behavior under duress.**

World-class trainees are able to deal with injury and the mental anguish of rehabilitation. They may get temporarily discouraged but are able to bounce back quickly and with even greater resolve. They understand that pain and injury are part of the contract. World-class trainees reveal their true character in times of stress and adversity. They do not quit when faced with discomfort. Great trainees perform well by themselves and in group or team settings.

### Field case study

Jason Dougherty, a former Marine and longtime friend of the CrossFit family, embodied these characteristics while deployed to Fallujah, Iraq, in 2004. The Battle for Fallujah is a storied Marine Corps battle. At the time, it was one of the world's most dangerous and unpredictable environments.

Working “graveyard” shifts, often under enemy fire, Jason maintained his training regimen by living out the world-class trainee's traits described above. He relied on these characteristics to counter the inherent stress and disruption of normalcy that combat necessarily brings. My conversations with him reveal how he sustained world-class training efforts through desire, mental toughness, behavior under duress, independence, and dedication to fundamentals. Let's pull the curtain back and listen as Jason described his experience:

*“During lulls in the action, I would step into the night to train. I performed four types of exercises: weight lifting in a makeshift tent, calisthenics, quick Tabata-style drills, and running, when practical. Incoming fire usually deterred running. If I could see where incoming rounds were hitting, I'd usually turn back. I'd wear at least a flak vest with Small Arms Protective Insert (SAPI) plates, and, during high-tempo incoming fire, I'd wear a helmet, of course.*”

*I had little control over available food, slept little (2 to 6 hours per day) or not at all, and training times were inconsistent due to the criticality of operations. The results surprised me. The heavy weights and intense effort made me stronger quickly. My strength grew faster than my technical capacity, so my strength was better than my technique.*

*The unpredictable training frequency combined with high levels of intensity allowed for adequate recovery, and my progress never leveled off. Aside from the obvious environmental factors—heat, dust, danger—the experience was memorable because it was so varied and random. I adapted rather quickly to the unpredictability. I expected it, knowing CrossFit's theory.”*

Experiences like Jason's inspire us to pursue our goals with renewed vigor. Desire, listening, fundamentals, preparedness, independence, and behavior under duress are all within our ability to control. If Jason's training could thrive in that environment, it can be done almost anywhere.

Upon returning to the United States, Jason realized that his experiences were unusual and worth sharing with others. Now he works with people in his community to create and execute personal and professional development plans. These plans have helped people better organize their life's pursuits and work toward their goals. Jason's experiences and lessons have given others inspiration to remain steadfast in times of personal crisis. As a result, Jason has enjoyed tremendous fulfillment helping and watching other people improve their lives.

Jason's personal growth has also continued. An avid reader, he better understands the practicalities of fate. Dedicated CrossFit training and a certification seminar have further strengthened his grasp of the “unknown and unknowable.” Jason's interpersonal skills (see the list above) and dedication have helped him repair a severely neglected sales territory and regain customer confidence in his work organization.

In closing, I quote Jason himself: “The most valuable part [of training in a combat environment] was the mental toughening. Physical training was the one gift I could always give myself. We fail to see how far we could actually take this thing were we to bring all of our resources to the endeavor.” Even for those of us not

## Characteristics of a World-Class Trainee (continued...)

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likely to confront challenges like Jason's, we can all adopt these characteristics in our own training efforts. And, as he has, we just might discover their applicability to other aspects of our lives along the way.

**Andrew Thompson** is a Major in the U.S. Marine Corps, a level-3 CrossFit trainer, and the founder of CrossFit Quantico.

**Jason Dougherty** now works for Stryker Medical.



⇒ Andrew Thompson and Jason Dougherty, taken at the Thanksgiving Day workout at CrossFit Santa Cruz in 2004, shortly after Jason's return from Fallujah. (Photo appeared on the CrossFit.com website, [November 30, 2004](#).)