

# the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

## Balancing Act

Andy Petranek



Define “running yourself into the ground.” For everyone, the answer’s a bit different, but I can say that my definition has changed significantly over the past ten years!

When I started as a trainer, I was an adventure racer with a seemingly limitless supply of energy. I could work all day, train all night, and then do it again the next day, seemingly no worse for the wear. After three or four years of this, however, my energy definitely became a limited resource. I started scheduling clients in the mornings, training myself in the afternoon, and sleeping

at night. As I got busier, this got more and more difficult and, ultimately, my desire to own and operate my own personal training business (and actually make a living) overcame my need to beat other people on race courses. This is when I started training people full time.

Great! So now I had all hours of the day to work. Exactly how did this make my life better? For the next two to three years, I worked Monday through Friday, 6:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. (or later), building my business, staying in shape, and building my knowledge base through courses at UCLA and the CHEK Institute and correspondence

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## Balancing Act (continued...)

courses or certifications through NASM, NSCA, and ACSM. In my “spare” weekend time, I helped create an adventure camp for women called “Girl Teams,” the purpose of which was to teach women the basic outdoor adventure skills of rock climbing, kayaking, mountain biking, and orienteering. Busy, busy, busy! Though my work was “fun,” it required a lot of time—and the money, even though I was charging \$85 to \$100 per hour for a client, was slim to none when averaged out over my actual work hours each day.

Up to this point in my life, I hadn’t really been working from a plan. In fact, my only “plan” was what many people would probably regard as screwy. While still in college, I developed the idea that I would “retire” after graduation to pursue my adventurous dreams: fight for my country in the Marines, travel around the world, and do many of the physical things that I wouldn’t be able to do were I to wait until age 65 to retire, such as climb mountains, kayak, run, mountain bike, adventure race, etc. Money wasn’t that important, as long as I had enough to pay my bills. It seemed backward to spend vital youthful years toiling away, only to have freedom when I might be too old to enjoy it in the same way. I always thought that the end of this early “retirement” would be around the age of 35, at which point I would actually start “working.” Well, as it happened, my adventures in life began to morph into my life’s work, and as I got older, the line between work and non-work became increasingly blurry. I never really made a decision to end my “retirement”; each step I took in that direction just felt right. In retrospect, though, the day I opened the doors at Petranek Fitness marked the end of retirement and the start of my career.

I didn’t realize it at the time, but from the start, Petranek Fitness was about community and team. Every aspect of my life up to that point had been about being with groups and working together with people. But when I opened PF, I just plopped my clients in, and that was it. It was a personal training gym, and I



was the only trainer. In fact, I made a conscious decision not to allow any of my colleagues or friends join me as trainers because it was important to me that everyone training at PF had the a similar training experience, and I didn’t know anyone at the time who could deliver the type or level of coaching that I wanted.

CrossFit changed all that. Initially, I just taught CrossFit to my clients one-on-one. This morphed into offering a few small-group classes each week, and over the course of the next two years, I added classes and reduced the

number of private sessions I did. I also took two of my best, most committed students and developed them into instructors. This was the foundation from which the operation became a real business, because even at this point, although it looked like I was running a business, I was simply the highest-paid slave. When I was there to teach a class, I made money, and the more people in the class, the more money I made. But if I left town for a week or

two, all my private training income dried up, and the sizes of the classes dropped off. Moreover, if I didn’t return, the “business” would no longer function. The

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## Balancing Act (continued...)

value of the “business” was totally dependent on me, my personality, and my ability to coach and motivate. I had no system and no plan for sustaining the business outside of myself.

In fact, by the time we were about seven months into my wife’s pregnancy in November of 2006, I was at my wits’ end—totally burned out, working my ass off day after day, making no additional money, and realizing that more students, though more money for me, meant more work and more time, when I literally had no more to give. Additionally, the future to me looked extremely bleak and relentless. How could I possibly hope to be a good father if I was tied to work from 5:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. every day of the week?

In December of that year, nearly desperate for a better plan, I met my business coach and strategist, John Burch. In a few months, we developed a strategy and plan for achieving both personal balance and business success, and by March of 2007, we had completely turned things around. Here are some of the steps we took:

1. I raised my personal training rates from \$100 to \$185 per hour. I realized that training people by the hour was keeping me from developing the business I wanted but I was willing to take someone at that rate.
2. We created membership packages and eliminated our single class drop-in rate. Membership packages immediately differentiated us from every other fitness gym/club. No longer do we have a price for a single class. If you want to train with us, you have to become a member for a period of time. Each package gives students additional access to our coaches for one-on-one coaching, phone coaching, nutrition guidance, discounts on events and seminars, and discounts on family-member memberships.
3. We converted every student who paid by the individual class, in blocks of ten, or by the month to a longer-term contract. This contract isn’t like a contract at a Globo Gym. Rather, it is an agreement between students and Petranek Fitness that solidifies their commitment to themselves to show up consistently over a specified period of time. From a business perspective, this also gave me a lump sum (when someone paid in full), or a consistent cash flow over the course of four to eighteen months. (I wrote about my contract system in greater detail in “Sign on the Dotted Line: Affiliate Membership Contracts” [*CrossFit Journal* 64, Dec 2007].)
4. We began offering an introduction session for each new student. This is a free, 60-minute, one-on-one training session (not a sales pitch) that allows each person who starts our program to begin with the same foundation. Our approach to this is to treat each person as if they have already signed up; it is simply their first training session in what we assume will be an ongoing relationship.
5. We introduced different levels of classes on the schedule: beginner, intermediate, and advanced, plus some for all levels. By doing this, we let people know that, yes, there really are differences between a beginner and an advanced student and that they should be working toward progressing. It also made it clear that there is a place in our gym for committed people of all levels.
6. We created a calendar of seminars and events over the course of the coming six months to a year. This added depth to our program and made it clear that we aren’t just a place to come for hard workouts; we are committed to our students’ growth and development in all areas related to health and fitness.
7. We established an instructor teaching schedule that is balanced, gives my trainers enough hours, and gives me more time at home with my family. Because the busy hours in this business are always 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m., it is difficult to be at home to be Dad. We structured the new schedule so that I get two mornings and two evenings off every week. On those days I don’t come in to the gym until 9:00 a.m. and can leave between 4:30 and 5:00 p.m. It’s still not perfect, but it’s radically better than it was.

There are many other small things we did that were related to these seven, and there are many more that we’ve developed and implemented since. However, these are the ones that had the biggest impact—and that kept me, personally, in the game. What we’ve built over the past year is a system—something that on the surface may look very similar to what many other affiliates do—i.e., teaching CrossFit to groups of people. But underneath, it’s something extremely different from what we were doing. It delivers results to happy and satisfied customers, and it enables me and our entire staff to be the best at what we do.

## Balancing Act (continued...)

I don't know if I've truly achieved "balance," nor do I know if I ever will. What I have learned from this experience, however, is that it's not necessarily the what, it's the how. The process makes all the difference. I've also learned, in a concrete, firsthand way, that I really can create any life for myself that I want. I'm not stuck as a wage-slave trainer working long hours, making a moderate living, and never being at home with my family. But doing this requires the courage to take bold steps forward into the unknown—to take risks, to try new things, to relinquish a modicum of control, to let go of the notion that the only way to get something done right is to do it myself, and to move forward with gusto. With a bit more time off these days, I've found that I actually do some of my best "work" when I'm doing things that don't seem remotely related to business (like playing at home with my son, sleeping, traveling, reading, or doing nothing). My team—Becca, Dawn, Cill, Stanwyck, Burch, and Jonesy (with three or four more in the works) are my most valuable asset. Developing each of them enables me and my business to reach more people and continue to deliver a quality product, and it affords me the time to be the best I can be—in all parts of my life.



Andy Petranek is the owner of [Petranek Fitness/CrossFit Los Angeles](#). He's been in the fitness business for over ten years and has been CrossFitting for almost four. He is a former United States Marine and adventure junkie, having raced at an elite level (sponsored by Red Bull) in three EcoChallenges and hundreds of shorterduration adventure races. He's a snowboarder and whitewater kayaker and loves his newest adventure—fatherhood.