

the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

Capacity, Standards, and Sport

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The charter of CrossFit is forging elite fitness. Our prescription or methodology for achieving this elite fitness is constantly varied, if not randomized, functional movements executed at (relatively) high intensity. Following that prescription delivers improved fitness—defined as increased work capacity across broad time and modal domains. How successful we are at that is measured by the degree to which game, mission, and life are enhanced, and not necessarily by anything that happens in the gym.

Depending on your tolerance for precision, the reality of actually evaluating fitness—of measuring one's

capacity across broad time and modal domains—is challenging at best and physically impossible at worst. The unavoidable problems are that fitness levels are constantly changing and that we can't test a variety of modes and time domains simultaneously. Furthermore, the tests themselves performed over a period of time will result in adaptation that itself changes the athlete's fitness. Human performance is simply not as precisely measurable as performance in other industries (think aviation, computers, automobiles, energy, etc.).

But this is not a problem most of the time. Most folks see such dramatic and obvious improvements in their

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fitness after just a few weeks of CrossFitting that precise measurements are irrelevant. Even for experienced CrossFitters, the measurable improvements in workout performance (faster times, greater loads) are generally sufficient indicators of increased capacity. If your “Fran” time goes from 7:00 to 3:30, your average power, and thus that one measure of your fitness, has doubled (assuming you weigh the same, are the same height, and use the same loads). If it then goes to 3:25, you are fitter still. Every second off your time is a measurable and observable improvement in your fitness.

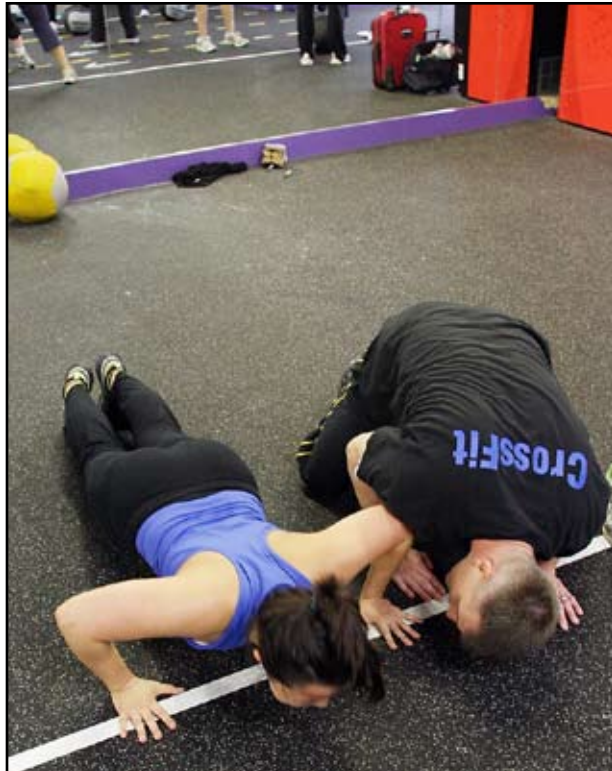
Comparison and competition

In the discussion above, the measurement of fitness (the comparison of one’s fitness levels over time, if you will) is for a single person. Do the workouts result in increased work capacity across broad time and modal domains or don’t they? Are your tasks in life easier or harder, more or less manageable?

The place where this evaluation becomes substantially more complex is when one person tries to compare their level of fitness to another. Men, women and children have always competed and sought to establish hierarchies. We want to know where we stand relative to others. This inherent desire for comparison and human achievement is both necessary and sufficient for the birth of the sport of fitness.

The sport of fitness, and all sport for that matter, is an arbitrary human creation for the sake of fun, glory, and defeat. All sports require both rules, most of which are black and white, and some form of arbitration to determine adherence to those rules. For example, in basketball, if you step a quarter-inch onto the three-point line, your basket is worth two points. Keep back that quarter-inch and it’s worth three. That quarter-inch could theoretically be the difference between winning and losing a world championship. Is this because there is some significant difference in achievement between those two measurements? No. It’s an arbitrary decision that the athletes agree upon for the sake of the sport. You have to draw the line somewhere.

To some extent, the standards for proper movement are determined by the laws of physics and the workings of human physiology. But to some extent they, like the delineations of what “counts” in sport, are arbitrary



human standards. They are arbitrary in that fitness and adaptation do not necessarily adhere to them. After all, performing a high volume of snaking push-ups, partial pull-ups, and shallow squats will result in a significant increase in work capacity across a variety of time and modal domains (especially if compared to little or no previous activity). It is simply untrue to say that imperfect or substandard movement is useless or ineffective. (Just to be clear, I am not in any way suggesting that you can *optimize* your capacity with substandard movement. In fact, the standards are often set at the point at which obvious drops in adaptation are noticed.)

Contesting fitness: The CrossFit Games



The sport of fitness, which will be contested next month in the [CrossFit Games](#), will necessarily require arbitrary standards and rules to be established for the sake of sport. These standards are human creations, which often get reified to the status of natural laws. The push-up must be performed with a rigid body. The pull-up isn't complete unless the chin comes over the bar. The squat requires the hips to drop below the level of the knees. And so on.

Let's go one step further. The standard for the pull-up is chin over the bar. But, pulling the sternum to the bar results in even greater capacity, particularly in terms of transference to other activities such as the muscle-up. So why not make the standard be sternum to the bar? In the handstand push-up, range of motion is limited by the ground. Why not make the standard be parallel to the HSPUs with the ear dropping below the hands or the shoulders touching the parallel bars? For every defense of a particular standard, there are legitimate arguments for a different one. There is rarely a truly unarguably "right" standard. In the end, the right standard is the one everyone agrees on, if just for the duration of the contest.

There will be a set of standards established for the Games, as for any other contested sport. Those standards will be consistent for at least the weekend, but I think it's predictable that at least some of the standards will change or evolve over time.

It is at our peril that we forget the arbitrary nature of standards. The sport of fitness is a subset of general fitness. The CrossFit benchmark workout "Fran," for example, is an obstacle or test. It is also a tool for forging elite fitness. A competent mechanic both requires and

possesses a wide variety of good tools. Yet the tool doesn't make the mechanic. It has to be used properly. We define elite fitness as great work capacity across broad time and modal domains. Yet no sport has broad time and modal domains on anything close to the scope of real life. By definition.

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For the sake of consistency, measurability, and repeatability, we can (and must) establish rules and standards for benchmark workouts and tests such as "Fran," "Diane," and "Grace," and for the Games in general. But this is simply so that the Games can be run efficiently, effectively, and fairly. "Fran" done "substandard" but with intensity will not win any competitions, but it will still improve the athlete's work capacity across broad time and modal domains. This distinction is essential.

There have been a few debates recently on CrossFit.com about movement standards in workouts, particularly "Fran." These discussions are essential for us as a community to define and establish our boundaries. In the debate on the legitimacy of Speal's 2:05 "Fran," posted on site on May 13, 2008, some folks argued that the emphasis on intensity in workouts and the measure of work capacity and power output (lots of work in a short time) means a de-emphasis on technique and "correct" movement.

But this argument completely misses the point. Proper movement technique is nothing other than the most efficient, effective, and safe means for increasing power and work capacity. If there is any merit to the argument for exacting movement standards, it comes only within the artificial realm of sport, and even there with only limited relevance except in judged performances like figure skating, diving, and gymnastics, where technique or the expression of "style" is central to judging

performances. In the real-world pursuit of maximal fitness and capacity, there is no reward for achieving some established “technique” outside its support of a measurable accomplishment of work (think shoveling snow or moving sandbags in a flood). That is, technique, or the particulars of *how* work is achieved, is relevant only in terms of mechanical efficiency, efficacy, and safety. What matters is not how the movement looks but that the work is accomplished.

It is our hope and expectation that the CrossFit Games define the sport of fitness. We will establish exact standards for each competition by which all participants and judges will be held accountable. They are essential for the Games’ success and will, by definition, be artificial and somewhat arbitrary.

But—and this is really the main point of this article—the standards established for the Games are not necessarily the standards for effective human movement or even for CrossFit in general. The standards for CrossFit are results-based rather than arbitrarily technique-based. A first responder needs capacity on the call. Whatever he does in the gym that best develops that capacity is our standard. Pull-ups to the sternum develop greater capacity than neck-craning pull-ups, but all pull-ups develop capacity. In the end, I don’t think we necessarily need to mandate who does what kind of pull-ups. Instead, I think the broader CrossFit standard is to educate and to orient the fitness world to real-world results. Each participant will have to decide the manner in which they train. Winning the Games, though, will require adherence to the Games’ standards.



Online Video

http://media.crossfit.com/cf-video/CrossFit_SpealFran205.wmv

http://media.crossfit.com/cf-video/CrossFit_SpealFran205.mov



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