

the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

Certifiable Knowledge

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Have you ever watched an infomercial or a shop-at-home network exercise equipment segment? If you have you will know that the formula is a slick spokesperson or salesperson, an exercise expert with lots of letters after their name, and an attractive and fit-looking model to demonstrate the equipment and make the pitch: "This equipment is so easy to use and so effective that you will be looking like Buffy and Biff here in just a couple of weeks." Who are we to argue? There is an "expert" right there on the screen telling us that in just a few minutes a day we can look like the model effortlessly using the ab-loper or whatever the gimmick of the minute is.

Have you ever looked at who developed the guidelines for exercise used by the clinical communities? You really should read these guidelines. Most are somewhat useful sets of information about working with diseased and unfit individuals. When you do read them, look at the laundry list of exercise "experts" that produced them. Lots of M.D.s and Ph.D.s are listed as authors. Most of them

have additional sets of letters listed after their academic credentials. But how do we know that any of these experts really know anything about training anyone? Medical schools are being pretty progressive if they include a single lecture on exercise in their curriculum. Exercise-science-type Ph.D. programs are generally clinically biased and thus the curricula tend to offer little real-world application for any other than diseased or unfit populations.

In the scenarios I describe, the letters after the experts' names are intended to signify to the public that the individual is educated and certified (or in some cases licensed) to practice their particular specialty. There is an implication of knowledge about exercise. All too often, those letters are accepted to mean that the individual is an expert. But certification and expertise don't necessarily go together, and the former in no way guarantees the latter.

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What certification is

Certifications are intended to provide a means by which anyone in the general public can determine who is and who is not a competent professional. This simply means that a certifying body has produced a set of defined and consistent criteria (hopefully based on experience, observation, and science) that an individual must meet to be “certified” by them. The credential thus represents the certifying body’s acknowledgement that the individual has met the minimum standards for professional practice. There are no grades, honors, or expert levels of certification; you simply pass or fail the minimum standards. So mastery or expertise cannot be implied from the alphabet of certifications. But if certifications don’t indicate relative quality or expertise, what good are they?

The value of certifications as a means of signifying basic competence to practice in a field has nice public-relations value. But PR only goes so far. It is up to you—through your practice, not your credentials—to actually demonstrate your expertise to clients and the public through astute application of your knowledge and experience. Demonstration of expertise keeps clients coming back for more and starts the snowball of word-of-mouth advertising. Failure to display your mastery at training people leads to client turnover and leaves you relying on the appeal of your certifications to reload your client list. Relying on certifications for attracting clients is the sign of a weak practice.

Which certifications matter

Since there are literally hundreds of certifying organizations out there, how do you know which one to pursue? Should you pursue multiple certifications? These are perplexing questions.

I used to think that there were only two sets of exercise certifications worth anything, those from the American College of Sports Medicine and those from the National Strength and Conditioning Association. These are the two largest professional exercise organizations around, they are non-profit, and their members were the ones who established the written standards of practice that the majority of universities teach in their courses. In my opinion, everything else was a fly-by-night, for-profit scam, intended to fleece unsuspecting novice trainers of cash in return for a worthless piece of paper.

As I became more deeply involved in educating and training exercise professionals for real-world practice, I realized that a significant portion of the standards-of-practice documents from the big two (ACSM and NSCA) did not actually contribute to helping new trainers make ordinary people more fit and certainly could not make athletes better performers. So I began to search for a means to fill in that transitional gap between knowledge and practice.

Eventually I started to recommend USA Weightlifting’s Club Coach course and USA Track and Field’s Level-I course for students who wanted meaningful and practical certifications. These are entry-level sport educational experiences that provide a certification after course completion and an examination. So for my students in a general exercise practice, I recommended that they obtain an ACSM certification, then supplement it with a USAW certification or a USATF certification, or both. This covered their clinical, unfit, aerobic, and anaerobic bases at least marginally, albeit through a very complicated, time-consuming, and expensive process.

Ultimately, even with this assemblage of certifications, I was not satisfied that my students were getting their money’s worth or the knowledge they needed to become good practitioners. Three different organizations with three different missions, three different standards-of-practice documents, and three different educational structures left many informational holes and presented much contradictory information. I was disappointed and professionally frustrated that there was not a certification or a set of certifications that could truly represent an individual’s competency as a professional exercise trainer across the broad spectrum of needed knowledge and skills.

Filling the void

And this is where CrossFit enters the mix. In CrossFit and Greg Glassman I found a sympathetic ear for my frustration with the academic preparation and certification of trainers. It is no secret that many exercise practitioners are dissatisfied with the entire subject of certifications (because of irrelevant certifications, pay-for-paper certifications, required and expensive but practically useless continuing education requirements, etc.), some to the point where they actively choose not to get or remain certified and simply let their reputations and abilities speak for themselves. CrossFit, however, took

a different approach to the education and certification problem and decided to teach people, *really* teach people, how to help other people get fit. This meant developing an information delivery process and a certification structure for the CrossFit method.

The content of CrossFit trainer certifications comes from a thinking, pragmatic mindset. This is a very important distinguishing characteristic of the CrossFit certification process. It means that if the science doesn't exist surrounding a practical observation, logic is used to try to explain it. If a scientific observation is not practical or supported by clinical evidence, it is discarded. It means that, unlike with many other certifications, no credence is given to convention unless it can be supported by fact or sound theory.

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That is why folks are beating a path to the CrossFit certification door. They are hungry for meaningful, factual, and practical education and certification for fitness professionals. Aspiring fitness professionals want to be able to think and apply what they learn effectively. They want to have relevant and marketable skills. They want to be part of a program that is, as Coach Glassman always says, “empirically driven, clinically tested, and community developed.” They want to be well prepared for practice and they want to be confident that their actions as trainers are effective and derive from a standards-of-practice doctrine that is robust and can withstand real-world tests and peer and legal scrutiny.

As a certifying organization for exercise professionals, CrossFit is young, but it is rapidly evolving to meet the needs of the progressive trainer and coach. Other organizations may still enjoy wider recognition currently, but the educational and practical experience gained from earning a CrossFit certification poises its system to become an industry standard.

CrossFit certifications are a cohesive and systematic means of passing on knowledge, experience, and learned skills. They are not a means to acquire letters to put behind your name, and they, like any other certifying pieces of paper, can never indicate expertise. That only comes with patient practice of the skills you learn, not only from your attendance at certifications, but also from reading professional journals and other relevant materials, interactions with other trainers, experience with clients, and simply using your brain to make people fit. If you know CrossFit, you know how.



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