

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

January 2014

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Body of Work

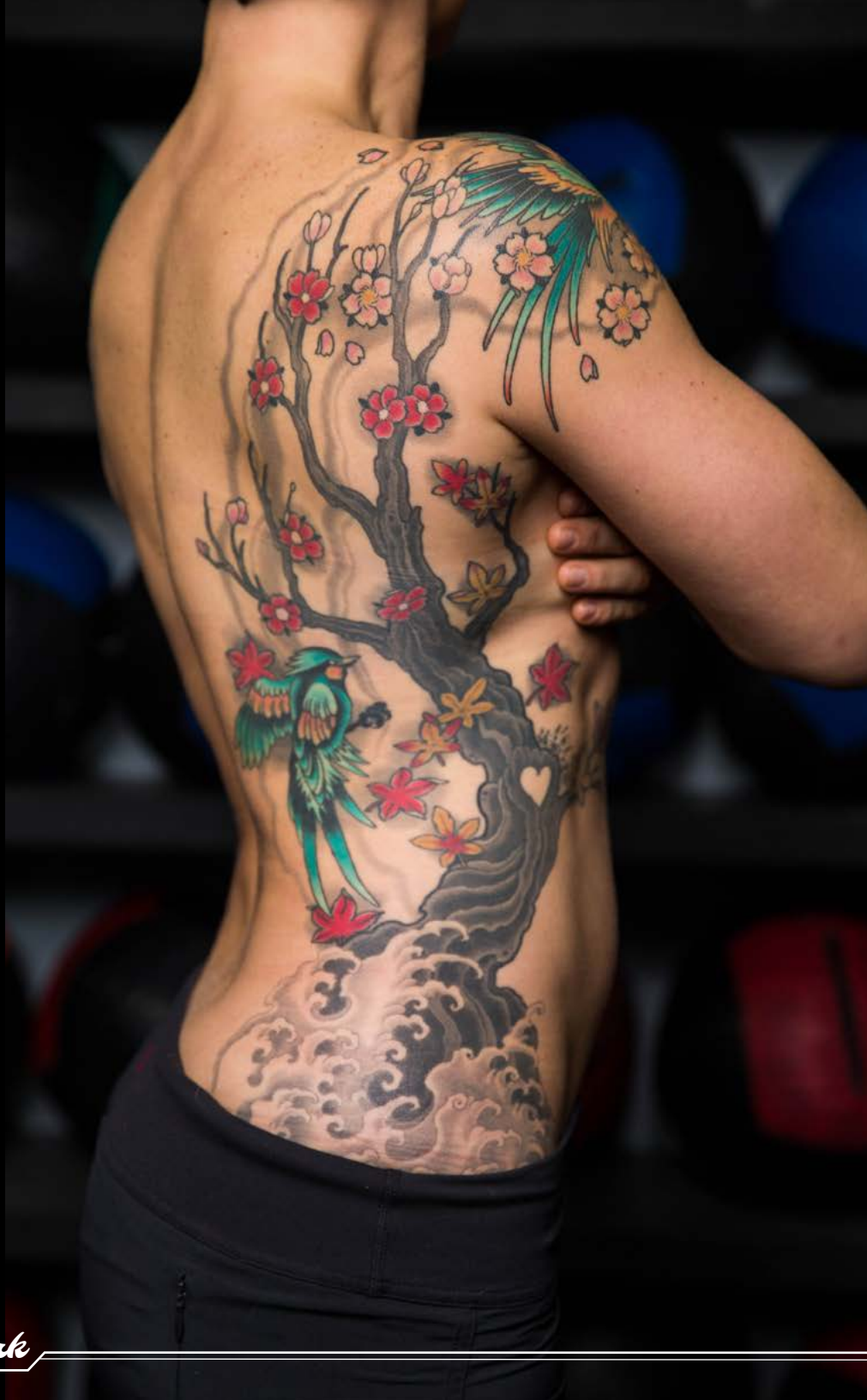


Body of Work

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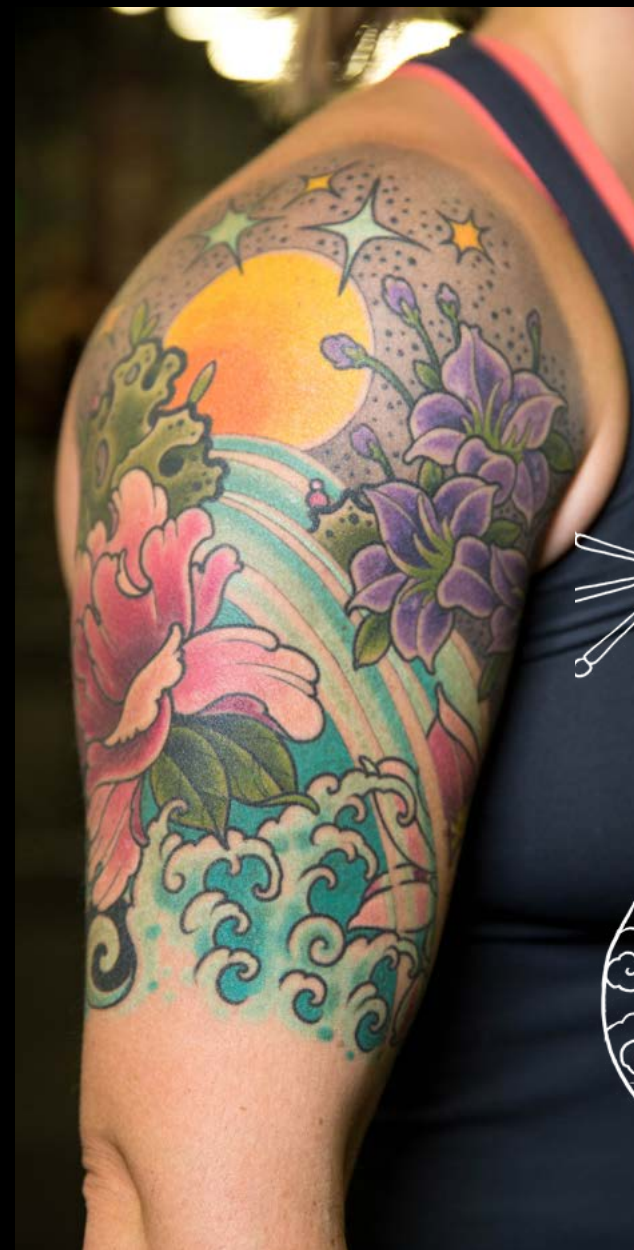
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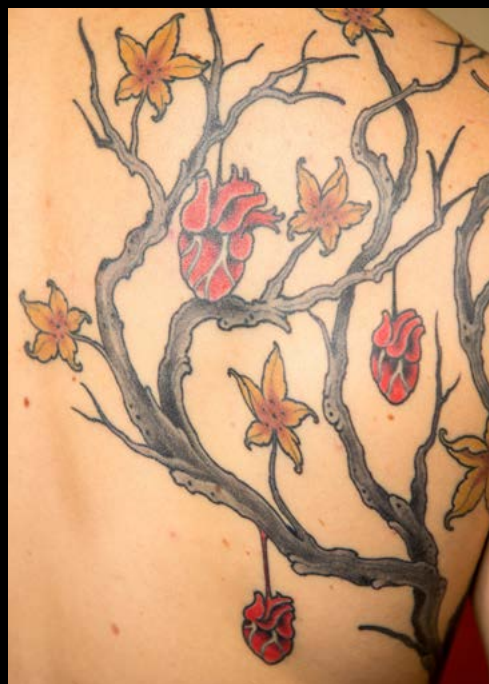


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THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Life Under the Big Top

Current and former Cirque du Soleil performers talk about what it takes to “deliver the magic” for 10 shows in five days.

By Emily Beers

January 2014



Courtesy of Cirque du Soleil

Wellington Lima bursts through one of the back doors of the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino. He has a huge smile on his face, but hidden behind his ever-present grin is concern.

“I dropped my bike on the way here. I got in a little accident,” says Lima, who drives a motorcycle to work. He brushes himself off and downplays the accident, but through his laughter you can see he’s in pain.

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He has a long night ahead of him—two two-hour shows, the second of which ends at 11:30 p.m.

It's a regular day for Lima, who works a job that has him flipping and twisting and flying through the air in front of hundreds and sometimes thousands of spectators.

Lima, 33, is a trampoline acrobat in Cirque du Soleil's *Michael Jackson One*, and he's been performing in two shows a night and 10 shows a week for 15-plus years.

Off to Join the Circus

Joining the circus wasn't Lima's childhood dream. In fact, signing a contract with Cirque happened almost accidentally.

Born and raised in Recife, Brazil—one of the biggest metropolitan areas of the country—Lima grew up in a humble home.

"My house, it was a very simple house," Lima said of the two-bedroom home he shared with his mother,

grandmother, uncle and siblings. He is the second oldest of six children, and Lima and his five brothers and sisters all have different fathers. Lima has never met his.

"My mother never told me who he was," he said with a shrug.

"I don't want to say life was difficult in Brazil, but it ... it was challenging. There were many challenges. You have to make choices," he said.

Since he was a small child, Lima has continuously chosen to follow his passions, sometimes to the point of being unruly.

"I was a bit of a wild kid. I used to skip school and go to the beach and hang out there when I was 9," he laughed.

Eventually, he found an outlet for his abundant energy through sports. As a child, Lima got involved in capoeira, a Brazilian martial art that combines self-defense with dance, acrobatics and music. The acrobatic aspect of capoeira was what really attracted Lima.



Courtesy of Mandalay Bay Hotel and Casino

A landmark on the Las Vegas Strip, the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino is home to the Cirque du Soleil show Michael Jackson One.

"My family didn't want me to do capoeira or gymnastics, and they weren't able to financially support it, but I was always going after what I believed was good, and sometimes I'd go against my family and go train," he said.

He added: "I was very lucky that I was able to follow my dreams."

So Lima kept pursuing acrobatics, and opportunities kept presenting themselves. In 1993, a friend introduced him to the trampoline. He started competing in the sport of trampoline, and in 1997 he won the national championship for his age group. Before he knew it, Lima had managed to become skilled enough to get accepted into the largest theatrical producer in the world: Cirque du Soleil.

**"I was very lucky that I was able
to follow my dreams."**

—Wellington Lima

The world-renowned Cirque du Soleil started in Baie-Saint-Paul, a small village east of Quebec City, Canada. In the early 1980s, a small theater group—essentially street performers—entertained the village by walking on stilts, juggling, dancing and playing music.

Two of the street performers, Guy Laliberte and Gilles Ste-Croix, had an idea to start touring the province and showing off their skills. Pretty soon, their performance group grew into a proper circus—what is today Cirque du Soleil.

Crowds everywhere loved Cirque, and by the 1990s and early 2000s, it had expanded from one unique show to 19 different shows in nearly 300 cities around the world. Today the company exceeds US\$810 million in revenue a year.

The World of Cirque du Soleil

In 1997, when Lima was 18, he decided to watch an audition for Cirque at the National Circus School in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Someone recognized Lima and asked him to audition.



Courtesy of Wellington Lima



Courtesy of Wellington Lima

Raised in Brazil, Wellington Lima used his acrobatic talents to create a long career in Cirque du Soleil.

"I remember that many people were so nervous for the audition, and I didn't feel any pressure," he said of being unexpectedly thrown into the mix of 120 hopeful candidates.

The audition was fairly simple. Lima had to show some basic gymnastics skills, as well as some trampoline movements. After the athletes were assessed, the field was narrowed to 20, and then to just 10. Lima was one of the 10 and was offered a spot as an acrobat in Cirque.

His family wasn't thrilled about his joining the circus, which meant Lima would have to move to the United States, and Lima admits it wasn't an easy move to make.

"It was a hard decision. And my family was never really behind it ... But I followed my intuition and trusted that this was a good decision. It was hard, you know. And I remember when Cirque du Soleil bought my (plane) ticket. It was from May until July. I thought I was only going

to be there for two months," Lima said.

Fifteen years later, he's still with the company.

Lima didn't always perform in Las Vegas. When he first moved to the United States, he was placed in Orlando, Fla., where he worked from 1998 to 2004 as a trampolinist in a Cirque show called *La Nouba*.

Still a teenager, Lima barely spoke any English.

"Well, I knew the verb 'to be' and could count to 100," he said, laughing at the memory.

Despite the challenges he faced, Lima knew he had made the right decision in joining Cirque. He immediately started earning more money than he would have earned back home in Brazil, and he saved enough to send a portion of his paycheck home to his mother every month, something he continues to do to this day.



Courtesy of Wellington Lima



Impressive athletes combine their physical abilities with pageantry to make Cirque du Soleil shows a memorable experience.

Eventually, Lima was even able to buy his mother a new home, a three-bedroom house in Brazil.

"There are four people living there now," Lima said. "My mom, my sister and her two kids."

After performing in *La Nouba*, Lima joined *Dralion*, a show that toured Europe, Asia and Australia from 2004 until 2009. In late 2009, he moved to Las Vegas, where he joined *Viva Elvis*, a show that was cancelled in 2012. Today, he performs as a trampolinist in the 63-person production of *Michael Jackson One*.

Lima feels blessed to have had the opportunity to work on four different shows. Building and choreographing a new performance is one of Lima's favorite parts of his job.

"You get to create something unique with good people and put your own vocabulary on it," said Lima, who now speaks perfect English with just a small Brazilian-Portuguese accent. He's also picked up passable Russian and Spanish.

"I work with a lot of Russians, and I felt it would be respectful to learn Russian," he said.

Lima believes part of Cirque's magic comes from its international representation. Cirque employs 5,000 people from more than 50 different countries. Over the years, the show has entertained more than 100 million spectators in more than 40 countries on every single continent except Antarctica.

"They're finding the best people, not just from the United States but from all over the world . . . People from different countries (come) together—the best that (each) country has to offer," Lima said.

He added: "Representing Brazil made me feel like I had a lot to prove."

This diversity sometimes brings unlikely nations together.

"In our show, there are Koreans, Japanese and Chinese on the same team. Nobody gets into politics. They're on the same team," Lima said.

"In the show, there's one mission: to become one. And you can really feel that."

The Life of an Acrobat

Thirty-four-year-old Tammy Stauffer met Lima when she was a gymnast performing on men's high bar in *Viva Elvis* in Las Vegas.

Stauffer followed a very different path than Lima in finding her way to Cirque. For the single mother of a 6-year-old son named Justin, joining Cirque was Stauffer's way of gaining closure on a gymnastics career that was cut short.

As a junior elite gymnast at the age of 13, Stauffer was one of the best in Canada, and although she wasn't old enough to make the Senior National Team, she was considered an Olympic hopeful even then. But injuries prevented Stauffer from qualifying for the highest level of competition. She tore her Achilles twice, but after she retired from the sport as a teenager, something kept telling her she wasn't finished with gymnastics. Something kept telling her to give Cirque du Soleil a chance. So she did.

Although she had been out of the sport for 13 years, Stauffer knew she'd be able to get much of her gymnastics skills back pretty easily. She never attended a formal audition; instead, she submitted a video of her gymnastics and was offered a position in *Viva Elvis* in Las Vegas. She didn't hesitate to sign the contract.

What Stauffer didn't know at the time was how difficult the circus lifestyle would be.



Courtesy of Tammy Stauffer

Her gymnastics career cut short by injury, Tammy Stauffer put her skills to use in Cirque du Soleil.

"I packed three suitcases—one for me and two for Justin," Stauffer said. She then hopped on a plane with her toddler and landed in a crazy city where she would live and perform for the next two years and 10 months.

Pretty soon, Stauffer was putting in an unhealthy amount of hours creating the *Viva Elvis* show with barely enough compensation to pay for her expenses.

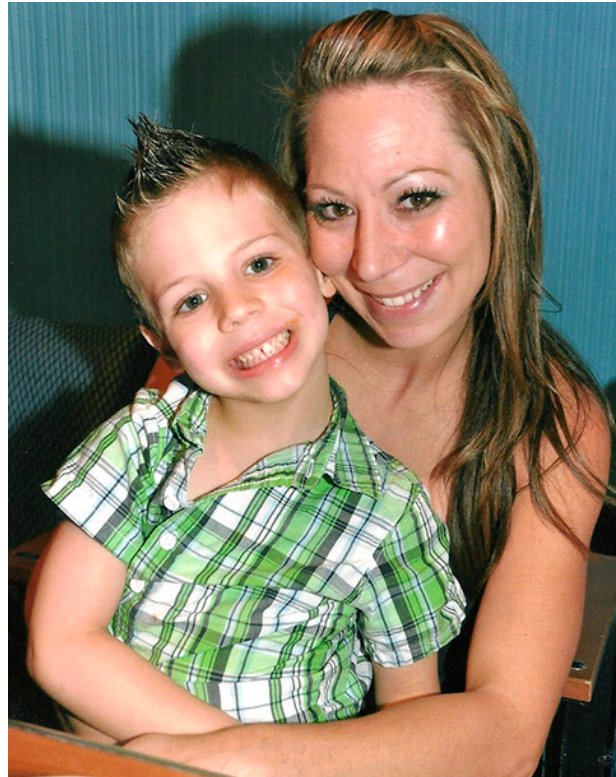
"The hours were brutal. I didn't join a show that was already running. It was a brand new show, which made it tougher," Stauffer said.

"We were working 16-hour days six days a week. And I remember thinking, 'What have I done? I don't ever get to see my son.' The money was horrible, too. Justin was at MGM daycare, and I was only making \$2,000 a month. Daycare was \$1,200 and rent was \$750, so what did that leave me with? \$50 to live off of?" she laughed at the memory.

Stauffer was 30 years old when she was performing gymnastics tricks in *Viva Elvis*, putting her body through movements she hadn't done since she was 15 years old.

During the creation phase—when the show isn't yet generating revenue from ticket sales—salaries are smaller. Once a show is up and running, performers' salaries—which are negotiated individually—improve significantly, and many earn close to six figures. Schedules become less hectic at this point, as well. When *Viva Elvis* was running, Stauffer found herself working a more reasonable five days on with two days off.

As she gained experience, Stauffer began to notice a trend. While North American athletes came and went, usually lasting one to three years before moving on to something else, international athletes were more resilient and even embraced the grueling lifestyle in Cirque du Soleil.



Courtesy of Tammy Stauffer

Stauffer ultimately left the circus to avoid having to raise her son in Sin City.

"The Belarusians, the Romanians, the Russians, Chinese and Brazilians, they wanted to stay in the United States. Many of them don't have anything to go back to. They're almost rich working in Cirque compared to what their parents make back home. And they send all their money home to their families," Stauffer said.

She noted that some international athletes, such as Lima, will craft careers of a decade or more.

One of the reasons Lima believes international acrobats tend to have longer careers is because Cirque helps them with their living and working visas. He was able to apply for U.S. citizenship because he has a "special ability," and today he is an American citizen.

North American athletes, on the other hand, have a shorter self-created shelf life, so to speak. Stauffer believes part of the reason for their shorter circus careers is because of how hard the training is on the body.

On top of rehearsals and 10 shows per week—as well as regular weekly training sessions on her apparatus—Stauffer

also made time for physiotherapy, massage, Pilates and yoga sessions. Her body felt like it was in a constant state of working overtime.

"All of the international athletes (though), they're just so willing to put up with any ache, any pain," she said.

Stauffer was 30 years old when she was performing gymnastics tricks in *Viva Elvis*, putting her body through movements she hadn't done since she was 15 years old. A 30-year-old is considered a grandmother of the sport of gymnastics; Stauffer could tell her body wasn't happy with her.

And the equipment she was performing on wasn't helping her case.

"We ripped like you wouldn't believe because we were using metal high bars," Stauffer said.

Generally, female gymnasts swing on the uneven bars, which are made of wood. The metal bars they use in Cirque have less give to them, which can rip hands to shreds. Night after night, show after show, Stauffer taped up and hit the bars with raw, ripped hands.

"And the mats we landed on weren't like crash mats we used in (gymnastics). They were hard. It was like dismounting and landing on a hardwood floor And doing bars under spotlights made it tougher too They're very bright, and you can lose your timing," Stauffer said.



Courtesy of Tammy Stauffer

Stauffer (left) enjoyed her time in Cirque but knew when it was time to retire.

"There were a lot of torn shoulders. A lot of injuries," she added.

In the case of injuries, back-up performers are always ready to substitute, and often if someone sustains a prolonged injury, a new athlete will be hired as a temp artist. Luckily, Stauffer avoided any major injuries, but her circus life was relatively short, especially compared to someone like Lima.

Stauffer believes Cirque is no different than any other sport.

"Injuries happen when you're training at that level," she said. And she's quick to point out that safety is always a priority in Cirque.

Recently, Cirque has been under the microscope after 31-year-old aerialist [Sarah Guillot-Guyard plummeted to her death](#) in June 2013 during a performance in the Cirque du Soleil show *Ka* at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas.

It was later determined that Guillot-Guyard's wire rope came off its pulley and scraped against a sharp edge until it eventually broke. An investigation into the tragedy resulted in Nevada's Occupational Safety and Health Administration citing Cirque du Soleil for failing to train Guillot-Guyard properly, and for failing to protect other performers, as well. Cirque du Soleil was hit with \$25,000 in fines, and MGM Grand was fined \$7,000 for safety shortcomings. Both Cirque and MGM Grand told the Associated Press they plan to appeal the fines.

Cirque has had other injuries over the years, and a performer was hurt after falling from the Wheel of Death in an early November 2013 performance of *Zarkana*, but Stauffer recalls Cirque was persistently committed to safety.

"Harnesses were always double-checked. Triple-checked. Safety was always a huge priority, and what happened to Sarah was a freak accident," Stauffer said.

"I never felt unsafe performing," she added.

Safety concerns were certainly not why Stauffer left the company. The effects of years of training and performing told her body it was time to call it quits. Not only that, but her son was also about to start kindergarten, and the last place she wanted to raise a child was in Las Vegas. So Stauffer returned home to Canada with the memory of Cirque du Soleil—both the great times and the challenging ones—never far from her mind.

She doesn't have any regrets about her time in Cirque. She achieved her goal of getting closure to her gymnastics career, and she had a great experience in the process. But

it still amazes her how so many international athletes—people like her friend Lima—are able to continue putting their bodies and minds through the circus, night after night, weeks after week, year after year.

"I have so much respect for Wellington He's amazing," she said.

The Magic of *Michael Jackson One*

Close to 1,800 people fill the *Michael Jackson One* theater for a late Wednesday-night show.

It's the last night of performances for two days. The production rests on Thursdays and Fridays and resumes on Saturday night. The lights go down and music starts playing.

For two hours, the action doesn't stop. From impressive tumblers to high-flying trampolinists, rope climbers who effortlessly scale silk ropes, pole acrobats with impossible-to-believe strength, and a contortionist dressed as Michael Jackson, the show masterfully obscures the fact that you're watching human beings.

The talented athletes combine with the intricate costumes, colorful lights, dramatic music and beautiful choreography, and each moment is more breathtaking than the last in a show where no performance detail is forgotten.

Twenty minutes into the show, Lima makes his debut. He jumps off a platform and drops 25 feet onto a trampoline, which springs him high into the sky. His athleticism and precision save him from disaster, as he flips and twists and miraculously manages to reach into the air and grab a small bar.

He hangs from the bar with one hand for a moment or two before releasing himself, dropping back to the trampoline, landing on his back, and rebounding 25 feet in the air, carrying on with focus and grace.

Before you know it, other trampolinists join Lima mid-air, flipping and twisting, dropping and rebounding in perfect timing. The crowd oohs and ahhs with both appreciation and anxiety as one slightly mistimed jump or bounce could result in a mid-air collision.

But they don't collide. Like clockwork, the trampoline specialists continue their risky routine, doing tricks that appear miraculous to the audience.

Lima feels no anxiety. When he first started learning the Tramp Wall, it was a challenge, but he has learned to be



Courtesy of Cirque du Soleil



Courtesy of Cirque du Soleil

Michael Jackson One pays tribute to the King of Pop through music, dance and acrobatics.

Courtesy of Cirque du Soleil



In the cutthroat Las Vegas market, a show can't be good. It has to be outstanding or it's not going to last.

patient, one of the keys to his performance. That said, this show has presented Lima with new challenges, even after more than a decade in the business. In the other shows, the trampoline was 7 by 14 feet, but in *Michael Jackson One*, it's only 6 by 12 feet, meaning Lima has to be even more precise.

But after spending five months putting this performance together with the other nine members of his crew, he

has nothing but faith in the team's ability. And Lima isn't showing any ill effects from the motorcycle accident earlier in the day. If he's suffering, he hides it well. The show must go on.

An hour into the performance, the crowd grows almost immune to the complexity of the acrobatic performances. The movements look so easy, so natural, so much like flowing water it's as if nature intended bodies to move this way. Just before the audience starts taking the talent for granted, the show is over.

People file out quickly and immediately move on to their next Las Vegas adventure. Some can immediately be found with a drink in hand, others hit the casino or place a bet on the next day's baseball game, while others drop close to \$1,000 at the Gordon Ramsay-inspired steakhouse just outside the theater.

But for Lima, it's time to recover from a long week of work. After the performance, exhausted, sore athletes file out of the Mandalay Bay, many of them icing one body part or another.

**The movements look so easy,
so natural, so much like flowing
water it's as if nature intended
bodies to move this way.**

Lima takes a long, hot shower like he does after every show, and at the very end he blasts the cold water to refresh himself.

He has two days off, and then it all begins again.

Magic in Every Show

For most of the performers in *Michael Jackson One*, Wednesday is their Friday.

"On Wednesday, lots of people say, 'Yeah, it's finally Friday!' but it feels like Monday for me. You have to have the mindset like it's the start of the week every night. The energy has to be there every night," Lima said.

"Delivering the magic," as Lima calls it, is very important to him.

"You have to remember that people are all here for the first time," he said. "We try to always leave a message on their hearts."

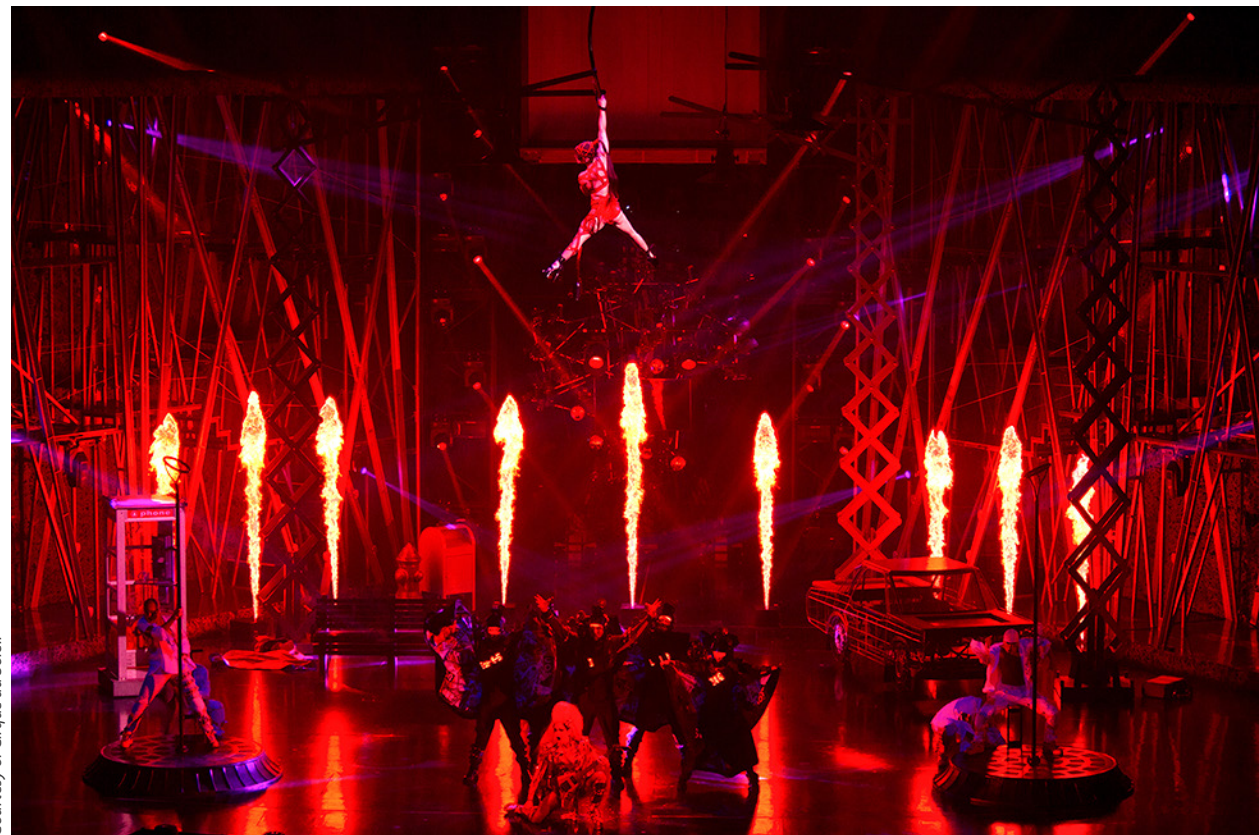
So every night, Lima finds a way to pretend like it's his first night performing, no matter how tired he is, how sore he is or how overworked his body feels.

And he will keep doing this, night after night, "as long as my body holds up," he said.

Although he does everything he can to help his performance and his recovery—from staying strong with capoeira training to taking glucosamine, doing yoga, performing proper warm-ups and cool-downs, and making regular visits to his physiotherapist—Lima admits his lifestyle is tough on his body.

"The pain is always there," he said, smiling as he speaks, as if the pain doesn't phase him. The job he has to do overrides the challenges. And most of the time, it doesn't feel like a job. And the risks? They're just a part of life, he believes.

Lima's worst injury was breaking the fibula in both legs in 2006 while warming up for a show in Malaga, Spain. The injury left him in a wheelchair for nine weeks.



Courtesy of Cirque du Soleil

For Cirque performers, this is just another day at the office.

Courtesy of Wellington Lima



Lima performs hundreds of shows a year, but the most important of all is the one that happens tonight.

"Because of my willpower to get back on the stage, and the support from the Cirque staff, I was back doing the show in five months," Lima said.

While he recognizes acrobatics carry an element of risk, he looks at it as just another part of life: "We take risks in everything we do. When we drive a car or when we eat in a restaurant—food can be poisonous."

He added: "But I like to face my fears and go after what is good ... And I've never been asked to do something that doesn't feel safe ... When I signed up, I knew what I was signing up for."

He continues to embrace the life he chose, but Lima still misses some of the simplicities of his home in Recife.

"I miss things like drinking fresh coconut juice straight from the coconut," he said. And he misses his family, who have never seen him perform in his 15 years with Cirque du Soleil. But that might change. Lima's mother is hoping to visit her son for the first time in the United States this winter.

"She doesn't really understand what I do ... She'll be surprised," Lima said. "She has no idea what to expect."

Lima is thrilled to show her what he does every day, excited to show her all he has accomplished in the last 15 years.

"Not many people perform for 15 years," he said proudly.

He added: "But the longer you stay, the harder it is to leave."



About the Author

Emily Beers is a **CrossFit Journal** staff writer and editor. She competed in the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games on CrossFit Vancouver's team, and she finished third at the Canada West Regional in 2012. In 2013, she finished second in the Open in Canada West.

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

No Time for Patty-Cake

Straight-talking CrossFit trainers reveal why they believe the tough-love approach is best when it comes to coaching. Andréa Maria Cecil reports.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

January 2014



Courtesy of Jeff Martin

It was a foggy morning in rural Mount Vernon, Wash.

At 7 a.m., Jodi Monroe was biking alongside her three kids as they pedaled the 10 miles from home to school. As they neared a curb, Monroe's bike lost its traction in the corn-silage juice, a substance commonly seen on the roads in that part of the state. She went tumbling, suffering a stress fracture, deep bruising and a pointer in her hip, as well as a concussion. Her favorite helmet was split in half.

About a month later, she returned to Mount Baker CrossFit in the nearby city of Burlington. She didn't mention her accident or her injuries and started her warm-up with wall-facing squats.

Skip Chase started barking at her.

"Go lower," the affiliate owner said.

"My hips hurt. I can't," she told him.

Chase was unmoved.

"He told me to 'get down.' He just kept saying it," Monroe recounted. "That's when I got a lump in my throat."

She stepped outside to regain her composure before the workout.

On the whiteboard, there were two choices: one involved handstand push-ups and the other was Cindy.

"I decided, 'OK, I'll do the pull-up one so I can knock that one out and get outta there,'" Monroe said. "I did not want to be there."

But two rounds into the workout, her emotions became overwhelming.

She stepped outside. This time, she didn't come back.

"It's the only CrossFit workout I never finished—even through chemo," Monroe said. "I decided at that time, 'Ya know what, I didn't need that.' So I didn't go back."

"She actually said she was going to do what she wanted to do that day. And that just doesn't happen in my gym."

—Skip Chase



Courtesy of Skip Chase

Athletes coached by Skip Chase (second from right) will tell you he has high standards and no time for excuses.

Courtesy of Skip Chase



Coaches like Chase (center) often form great relationships with athletes who appreciate their honesty.

She added: "I just got the hell out of there. I was crying. I mean, he triggered a chord."

Chase recalled things a bit differently.

"I remember Jodi coming in that day with kind of an attitude," he said. "I could tell right away when I coached her, when I corrected her, she had kind of a funny attitude. And she actually said she was going to do what she wanted to do that day. And that just doesn't happen in my gym."

A year later, Monroe got a phone call. It was Chase. He wanted to meet for coffee.

"It was basically, 'Let's get over it,'" Chase said of why he called.

So they met.

"I think one of the first things I told him was, 'Hey, don't ever talk to me like that again,'" Monroe remembered.

Chase smiled.

"We have a respect and understanding (now)," Monroe said.

She returned to Mount Baker CrossFit, where she had been training for a year before the squat incident, and today she talks about Chase as much more than a coach.

"When I think of Skip, it's kind of like a religion in a way," Monroe said. "He has impacted my family."

Her oldest daughter is a Division I rower, while a Division I football program is recruiting her son. And her younger daughter, a sophomore in college, regularly makes time for Chase's 6-a.m. class.

"Love, love Skip!!!," Monroe recently wrote in an email.

Hers might be the quintessential story of a coach dishing out honesty and hurting an athlete's pride before arriving at a place of mutual respect.

For a handful of straight-talking CrossFit coaches, the stern approach isn't about being abusive but rather making better people by getting right to the point.

No Pulling Punches

Although soft-spoken, Jeff Martin is known for being a straightforward coach at his affiliate, CrossFit Brand X in Ramona, Calif. And while he says his style has mostly yielded positive results, it hasn't always resonated with every member.

"We've had to fire a couple of clients, and it's ugly and hard. But it's for the best," he said. "And when it happens, ya know, nobody feels good about it."

One of the last members with whom CrossFit Brand X parted ended up creating a Facebook group called "I Hate Jeff Martin."

"It's terrible," Martin said. "But there's also successes."

Not mincing words has had a positive effect on the vast majority of the affiliate's membership, he continued.

"I'm pretty blunt and I'm pretty harsh, but I think it comes from a place," Martin starts, "my wife and I—we care more. I honestly believe that CrossFit makes people better. ... They end up being better at their jobs, at their relationships, at their marriages—people aren't just good inside the box but outside of the box."

He added: "I'm kind of willing to say whatever it takes to get them there."

And do whatever it takes.

Martin's even taken out his pocket knife and cut resistance bands members were using after he told them to do unassisted pull-ups.

"I try to handle it as levelheaded as possible: 'Look, this is where you're fucking up.'"

—Joe Marsh

He added that it's important for trainers and coaches to help athletes understand that they're being straightforward because they want them to improve.



Courtesy of Jeff Martin

Jeff Martin (right) believes success comes from being honest and uncompromising when it comes to standards.

And being straightforward isn't about being unkind, Martin noted.

"Honestly, I think when you give people ... very clear, concise goals, they thrive under that."

Joe Marsh echoed those sentiments.

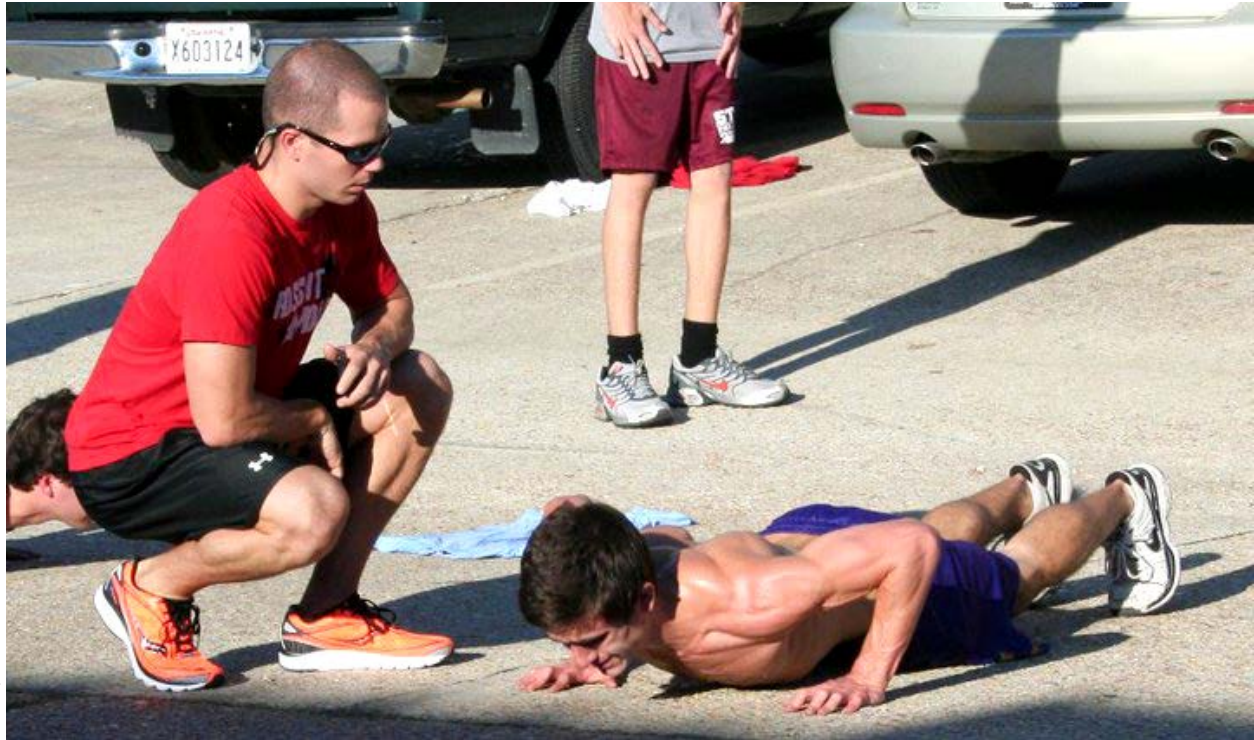
"It's never from a place of animosity," said the CrossFit Las Vegas owner. "I try to handle it as levelheaded as possible: 'Look, this is where you're fucking up. You're not getting any sleep, you keep feeding yourself garbage, you only come to the workouts that you're good at.'"

Good coaches should know when to say what to whom, said Kelly Brown, of CrossFit Agogo in Montrose, Colo.

"I think that our job as trainers is not so much to make (athletes) feel good about who they are, (but it's also) to help them actually be better. And sometimes that means telling someone they should scale even though they don't want to."

It's a delicate balance, Brown said, of "giving clients what they need, which isn't always what they want."

Courtesy of Brad McKee



Listening carefully to clients during the warm-up will often reveal quite a bit about an athlete's state of mind.

"You have to pick your moments," she continued. "If that person's had a crap day, then maybe let them have their moment."

In an ideal world, all coaches would be quick with the truth, Brown said.

"I think that when people don't do that, they put their clients and themselves at risk."

Marsh went a step further, saying a trainer who doesn't speak the truth is one affiliate owners should avoid.

"If someone isn't comfortable telling their client what they need to hear ... then they're in the wrong business," he said.

While CrossFit Las Vegas coach Mike Ty isn't aware of anyone leaving the affiliate because of his truth-only cues, he said there are some members who will avoid his classes—specifically to avoid him.

"If they don't want the truth and they're happy and they're living a lie, I don't want to be a part of that. At all," he said. "The truth sucks, but it's better served straight up than with a bunch of sugar coating, especially in the gym, especially in CrossFit."



Courtesy of Brad McKee

Most people usually have a little bit more to give, and a good coach will bring out that extra effort.

“The truth sucks, but it’s better served straight up than with a bunch of sugar coating, especially in the gym, especially in CrossFit.”

—Mike Ty

But Brad McKee warned that while it’s important to be honest, it’s also important to ensure the gym remains a getaway.

“One thing I’ve experienced with clients: You have no idea what they just experienced when they came in the gym that day,” said the owner of CrossFit Hammond, about 60 miles north of New Orleans. “You have to ensure you’re not another stressor to the stresses of their life.”

The Criticism Sandwich

Although Martin advocates the so-called criticism sandwich—a criticism between two compliments—for coaching children as the co-founder of CrossFit Kids and CrossFit Inc.’s Director of Youth Programs, he says it’s best not to pull any punches with adults.

“I think being honest and straightforward is always the way to go,” he said. “It’s really better to say, ‘Stop. Look, this is just tragic and I want to help you be un-tragic.’ I think it’s always better to be straightforward like that. I have the reputation of walking up to people and saying things like that.”

For her part, Brown said she sees value in the criticism sandwich as long as it’s genuine.

“I think there’s a way to do that criticism sandwich that isn’t false. And I use that shamelessly,” she said.

Brown’s husband, John, noted that it can go both ways: a coach who ignores poor movement because he or she doesn’t want to make an athlete feel bad vs. a coach being a hard-ass for the sake of being a hard-ass.



Courtesy of John Brown

John Brown recommends trainers discover which clients need the soft approach and which will respond to blunt criticism.

"Really, really good coaches ... go out of their way to know their clients on a more profound level and get that client what they need to be successful," he said. "Some require a pat on the back. But a lot of people respond really well to, 'OK, I think we should shut it down for the day because that last rep looked like shit.'"

"It's really better to say, 'Stop. Look, this is just tragic and I want to help you be un-tragic.'"

—Jeff Martin

The criticism sandwich, John said, took him time to develop.

"I wouldn't say that I already had the criticism sandwich ready. That's something I had to work toward," he said. "Coaching is just like being an athlete—you've got weaknesses."

Ty, on the other hand, said he doesn't have time for criticism sandwiches.

"Some (of my) classes run right into each other," he explained. "In general, that strategy, in my opinion, it really kind of mutes the overall intent of that conversation. I want the athlete to realize what's going on (right away)."

He added: "As long as the conversation comes from a good place ... it's something positive."

Monroe said she can do without the criticism sandwich: "This is CrossFit. It's straightforward. No time for patty-cake."

Telling an adult what they need to hear to become better shouldn't be "a big production," Martin said.

"For crying out loud, that's what they pay us for," he continued. "When did we get so soft that telling an adult that they need to push their knees out needs to be qualified with, 'You have really cool socks on today?'"



Being honest to clients, especially when they don't want to hear it, takes courage and conviction.

"The Church of Skip"

To this day—seven years later—Monroe hasn't told Chase about her cycling injury.

"People know that Skip Chase is a rock-solid trainer. But he's tough. And he absolutely has no time for excuses. And, ya know, that's probably one reason I didn't tell him about my hip—that would be an excuse."

Chase confirmed as much.

"A lot of people respond really well to, 'OK, I think we should shut it down for the day because that last rep looked like shit.'"

—John Brown

Courtesy of John Brown



Kelly Brown will use the “criticism sandwich” but says it’s important to give clients what they need rather than what they want.

“I don’t remember an injury,” he said recently. “If she had an injury, she hadn’t told me.”

Nonetheless, their temporary parting did not feel good.

“When you lose a member, especially over something like that,” Chase said, “that wore on me every day. That bothered me every day. I finally had the courage ... to reach out and say, ‘Let’s get together and have coffee. Let’s get over this.’”

He made an effort to heal the relationship because Monroe is special.

“There are those people that you meet in your life that you determine there’s something special about them, there’s something different about them,” Chase explained. “She speaks her mind. And mentally and physically she’s like my twin sister.”

It was a trait he noticed immediately.

“Right away I could tell Jodi has a level of desire that most people don’t have. If she was a guy, she would beat Rich Froning,” he said. “I wanted her back in the gym because I wanted to coach that, I wanted to mold that. I saw in Jodi Monroe a Games athlete.”

After reconciling, Chase was there through Monroe’s breast-cancer treatment—standing beside her as she competed in last year’s CrossFit Games Open, blood streaming down her face from her nose—and Chase trained her husband and her children.

“I think he’ll just go down as one of the most passionate, thoughtful coaches in CrossFit. He’s that caliber. He really is,” she said. “He has a huge following and I think that sometimes people’s egos get in the way of allowing them to accept his training, but they know he’s good.”

As for him being a religion, Chase heartedly laughs.

“It went from a family to a community—in the church of Skip.”

These days when Monroe hears complaints like, “God, he’s tough today,” she has a simple response: “Right on.”



About the Author

Andréa Maria Cecil is a *CrossFit Journal* staff writer and editor.

Updated Jan. 9, 2014, to correct an error in a caption on Page 3.

Most reply by flexing their small biceps. One child, just to his right, is almost motionless; the tip of his straightened right index finger is aimed at his temple.

“Look where he’s pointing,” Yasin-Bradley calmly says.

“On the count of three, ‘Use my mind,’” he loudly instructs. “One, two, three.”

“Use my mind,” shouts the group of nearly 20 in unison.

MORE THAN MUSCLE-UPS

Most call 5-foot-7 Yasin-Bradley Giant. He said it’s an acronym for “growing is a noble thing.” The name was born of being “the shortest guy with something really big to say.” At 44, Giant—and the Bartendaz group he founded—is known throughout Harlem, and he and his crew are known on the Internet for the impressive gymnastics skills they display.

Three days a week, the Bartendaz are at a Harlem park, practicing what they call the seven natural movements—push-ups, pull-ups, squats, lunges, jumps, dips and planks—in an explosive style more akin to an artistic performance than a workout.

But Bartendaz is part of something bigger: It’s the fitness arm of nonprofit Giant Thinking. Its mission is youth gang prevention, according to GuideStar, an organization that collects and shares information about nonprofit organizations. Bartendaz melds fitness, martial arts, youth empowerment and elements of hip-hop culture to “push our youth and our communities to higher standards of physical, social and moral excellence,” according to the Bartendaz’s website.

They’ve created fitness and mental-empowerment programs for schools, community organizations and inmates on Rikers Island, and this summer they organized the Days of Movement. The fifth annual event included individual and team performances, and residents throughout Harlem and New York City attended.

Larry Jackson, the senior director of career services at a workforce-development agency called Strive International, called Giant “a valuable commodity” in a community heavily influenced by media images.

He’s hired Giant over the past 10 years to speak to young adults working toward earning a GED diploma through Strive International’s New York City affiliate in Harlem. Whenever Giant speaks, “a light goes off in somebody’s head,” said Jackson, a 30-year resident of the area.



TENDING BAR

About 10 years ago, a man called Giant started the Bartendaz fitness movement in the country’s black-culture capital. Today, he’s spreading his message beyond Harlem and seeking to change more than your body.

WRITTEN BY ANDRÉA MARIA CECIL | PHOTOS BY SHAUN CLEARY

Standing in a half circle, they slightly tilt their heads back to see his face.

“Where’s the strongest muscle in the body?” Hassan Yasin-Bradley asks the children, all under the age of 12.

They’re standing around him on the shiny basketball court inside Harlem’s Polo Grounds Community Center, which hosts the after-school program.

“What he adds is just another level of reassurance that you can succeed, that you can do well,” he said.

Bartendaz is a household name in the Manhattan neighborhood, Jackson said, and in the summer of 2012, Nike Inc. ads featuring Giant could be seen in parts of the New York City subway system. One pictured him atop a square stone as if he were a statue in Harlem’s Marcus Garvey Park at 124th Street and Madison Avenue. Text was printed across the top of the ad in plain, white block letters: “Ten years ago Giant created a workout in this park. Today it’s a movement followed by many. He believes you should work with what you have and that’s what he’s proven.” That was followed by the hashtag #FindGreatness.

The ad stemmed from Nike’s “find your greatness” campaign connected to the 2012 Summer Olympics, Nike spokeswoman Joy Davis-Fair said via email.

“The NYC brand team translated this campaign locally and connected with several local athletes (heroes) who exhibited this sentiment,” she wrote.

The relationship had started two years earlier, when the Oregon-based company’s New York marketing team found

out about the Bartendaz through word of mouth and came to view Giant as an “influencer,” Davis-Fair said via phone.

“Anyone who’s doing positive things through physical movement is someone we would align with,” she added.

Nike supplies T-shirts, shoes and other gear to the Bartendaz.

Besides the original group in Harlem, there are four Bartendaz affiliates, including Team Regiment Bartendaz in Canada.

To become an affiliate, you must attend a two-day workshop in Harlem or pay for a Bartendaz representative to travel to you. The workshop focuses on not only explaining the group and its movement system but also—and more importantly to the leadership—the mental aspects of Giant Thinking. New affiliates are left with a packet serving as guidance on taking physical fitness and mental-empowerment into local schools “so they can actually make money,” explained Solomon Gold, a member of the core Bartendaz team who goes by Dr. Good Body, but most often Dr. G for short.



Donald Phinazee, known as Bandana, claps his hands behind his back at the top of an explosive push-up at Colonel Charles Young Playground.

Gold has traveled to such countries as Latvia, Norway, Russia and Spain on invitations from organizations that want to learn more about Bartendaz and Giant Thinking. What started as simply one man exercising in a public park has turned into an international movement. Still, it’s not enough.

“YOU HAVE TO HAVE THE PROPER CAP—CHARACTER, ATTITUDE, PERSONALITY—AND A CERTAIN MORAL FIBER. WE CAN ALWAYS TEACH YOU THE MOVEMENTS LATER.”

—DR. G



Talía Coles—who goes by Iso, short for Isometriculos—does pull-ups with bent knees. Coles is a singer-songwriter whose music can be found on iTunes.

“We have a lot more work to do,” Giant said after a Bartendaz workout on a chilly Saturday morning in late October at Fred Samuel Playground in Harlem.

“I’m not even halfway where I need to be.”

LIFE AS A BARTENDA

To become a Bartenda, you first must enroll in Giant Thinking classes, Dr. G explained, to avoid being a “mental midget” influenced by society and media.

“We put them through, for lack of a better word, a mental ringer,” he said. “The first thing we say is, ‘You have to have the proper CAP—character, attitude, personality—and a certain moral fiber. We can always teach you the movements later. It’s not about how muscular you are or how many pull-ups you can do or your movements on the bar. It’s about how you treat people.’”

And you must memorize the mission statement.

“That’s a big one,” Dr. G noted.

Specifically, prospective members endure a probation period lasting anywhere from six weeks to three months, depending on the individual. One to two hours per week is spent hearing from Giant and Dr. G about the organization’s philosophy. The hopefuls also are taken to schools at which Bartendaz leads programs, “where they pull their pants up and take off their hat.”

“The whole key of Bartendaz is Giant Thinking,” Dr. G said, referencing the group’s logo—a male silhouette with a light bulb in his head as he bends a pull-up bar over his shoulders.

One group of hopefuls had to feed the homeless for three days in various locations throughout Harlem.

“We had nine. Three made it,” Dr. G said.

One of those is Laquana Reardon-Thornton, who goes by Earth. She is one of few Bartendaz women who can do an “incredible”—or, as the CrossFit community knows it, a strict bar muscle-up.

You can find Earth alongside Giant at the Polo Grounds Community Center, or at either the Fred Samuel or the Colonel Charles Young playgrounds in Harlem.

The Bartendaz meet three times a week to practice: Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Saturday’s 11-a.m. session is open to the public.

During a Thursday-afternoon practice in late October at Colonel Charles Young Playground, Josh Likens, called

Kentucky as an homage to his home state, got up to the dip bars and simply held himself at the top. His arms weren't quite locked out, and his feet were suspended off the black playground mats. A handful of other Bartendaz cheered him on.

"Go, go, go, go, go, go!" one person shouted.

"Don't stop! Pedal!" loudly said another as Kentucky moved his feet in circles parallel to each other.

**"IT'S NOT ABOUT
HOW MUSCULAR YOU ARE OR
HOW MANY PULL-UPS YOU CAN
DO OR YOUR MOVEMENTS ON
THE BAR. IT'S ABOUT HOW YOU
TREAT PEOPLE."**

—DR. G.

"This move is very important to me," Giant explained. "I just want you to be able to hold your body up. I teach that before the pull-up."

Then his attention moved back to Kentucky.

"Excellent hold. One more. Excellent hold. One more. Beautiful."

The team members took to the bars one at a time, and Giant directed each one with an approachable-yet-unyielding command that exuded confidence in himself and in the athlete.

Once Kentucky was off the bars, it was time for Michael Fontanez to do his thing. Cinder Block, as he is known, is more accomplished than Kentucky. He showed off incredible, spins on the pull-up bar and even a human flag.

"What the body can do—nothin' like it," Giant said excitedly.

Then it was Talia Coles, who goes by Iso—short for Isometriculos. With an underhand grip, she held her chin just above the pull-up bar with gloved hands. Then, Giant instructed her to begin methodically pedaling.

"And step. And step. And step. And step. And step. And down," he told her before the rest of the team cheered.

"I want more than one muscle constantly moving," Giant said loudly.

Coles, a singer-songwriter and fashion stylist, met Giant about 12 years ago. When she started with the Bartendaz, she couldn't do one pull-up. Now she's one of the few women on the team who can.

"It's not easy pulling up your own body weight," she said after the session. "It's harder than pulling up any weights."

DRINKS AT THE BAR

Giant was 24 when he was released from jail. Because of his good behavior, he was granted work release for the final year of his four-year sentence. Possession of a controlled substance led to his imprisonment, though he maintains his innocence and said his only crime was being with "the wrong crew."

Jail, he said, altered everything.

"It really terrified me and changed my life," Giant explained. "I'm proud to say ... that woke me up."

Behind those walls, he saw his friends and his elders.

"That was not a cool place to be," he said. "I'm so thankful (for being in jail). Who knows what would have happened to me if I didn't go to jail?"

There, he met men who posed to him philosophical questions: "Who are you?" and "Do you have freedom?"

They "put me under their wing, put a book in my hand. They said, 'Come to the library,'" he recounted. "I decided to say, 'Let me just look at the man in the mirror,' and I didn't like what I saw. My mother didn't teach me to go to jail."

When Giant got out, he had a different sense of self.

"I came out and said, 'I'm not going back.'"

That led to self-empowerment speeches in neighborhood schools, community centers, and churches in an effort to prevent children from joining gangs and to steer them clear of alcohol abuse. All along, he had been doing pull-ups, dips, lunges, squats, push-ups, planks and jumps at Harlem parks just as a way to stay in shape on a budget—like many other residents in inner New York City.

"He's been exercising or working out since he was 10, 11 years old. So by the time the people actually started to take notice, he was in his late 20s, early 30s," Dr. G said.

He later added: "The park became his sanctuary. The park became his refuge. That became his laboratory."

Giant demonstrates a bent-knee chin-up on a wheeled bar during a Bartendaz-led after-school program at the Polo Grounds Community Center in Harlem.



When the after-school program for children under 12 ends at the Polo Grounds Community Center, Giant huddles the group together. He emphasizes physical fitness as well as the power of the mind.

Over time, Giant began to add his own flair—moving right to left on the pull-up bar, pedaling his feet as if on an imaginary bicycle during dips, spinning around the bar with his hips flexors as the axis—simply to ward off the boredom of routine.

“One of the teachers in one of the schools asked him to put something together from the physical-fitness side because a lot of the children were actually cutting gym,” Dr. G said.

Giant’s initial response: “I’m not a P.E. teacher.”

Days later, he was working out in a park when a neighborhood woman walked by. The story goes that she told him, “Every time I see you on the bar, you make me dizzy. I feel drunk watching you.”

And that’s what gave Giant the inspiration for the name Bartendaz and further inspired him to develop a physical-fitness program for his neighborhood schools.



Giant uses his elbows to spin around the bar so quickly that he loses his hat at Colonel Charles Young Playground in Harlem.

“He took what he did in the park,” Dr. G explained, “and said, ‘Wow, in order to attract those people, that so-called at-risk crowd,’ he said, ‘What can I do to keep these people interested?’”

Giant gleaned from multiple sources, creating something uniquely his own in the process.

“It was urban, it was cool, it was break dancing, it was cutting edge, and he’s telling you something about using your mind. He’s not just strong intellectually but stronger than anybody else in that room,” Dr. G recounted.

The message was clear.

“Pull-ups on the right bars instead of the wrong bars,” Dr. G said. “Have these drinks from the fountain of youth as opposed to goin’ to the bar on the corner.”

He noted: “Where we live, there’s a bar on almost every corner.”

The idea is to use words the audience already knows and turn them on their heads.

**“IF YOU CAN’T DO 25 PUSH-UPS,
WHY THE FUCK YOU TRYIN’ TO
BENCH PRESS FOR?”**

—DR. G

“Makes them think, ‘Wow, Bartendaz. Wow, he’s not talking about drinks,’” Dr. G emphasized.

For Giant, word choice is paramount.

“Words make people and people make words,” he often says.

He tells children and adults alike not to focus on the “bling bling” but on the “think think.” And he’s got an acronym for just about everything—“pimp,” he says, means “poor image of a man’s personality.”

Over time, Giant and Dr. G noticed changes in students’ attitudes.

“The most at-risk started to flock to our programs,” Dr. G said. “At-risk students started to become student-body presidents, go on to college.”

But the awe-inspiring acrobatics, he said, were simply the bait on the hook.

“The real jewel of Bartendaz is the Giant Thinking concept,” Dr. G explained. “You have schools now that don’t have gyms with P.E. teachers. What the education system has missed is moving your body is an integral part of growing your brain.”

Giant and Dr. G call it fundamental functional movement.

“It’s at the very root of athleticism,” Dr. G said.

He added: “We’re a human-repair agency. It’s our job to try to fix people who’ve been broken.”

ONLY IN HARLEM

The Fred Samuel Playground is at 140th Street and Lennox Avenue, also known as Malcolm X Boulevard. Two blocks away—on 142nd and Lennox—is where the famed Cotton Club operated from 1923 to 1940. The whites-only establishment hosted many of the best black entertainers of the day: Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Cab Calloway, Nat King Cole, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday—the list goes on.

“No other place but Harlem could give birth to the Bartendaz,” Dr. G said while standing in the playground on a Saturday morning.

Harlem, he later added, has historically been “the epicenter” for black culture.

“And the Bartendaz speak directly to that,” Dr. G said.

With a population of nearly 350,000, according to the New York City Department of City Planning, Harlem is like many places, Dr. G said, comprising individuals and families trying to find their way in the world. He called it “a poetic village.”

Leslie Wyche, known as the Mayor of Harlem for about 35 years, referred to it as “the black capital of the world.”

“It’s the economic, cultural capital of the world. We have every kind of imaginable cultural theme in Harlem,” he said.

The 65-year-old has held positions with various New York City agencies, including the New York Housing Authority and the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development.

Adam Clayton Powell—“one of America’s greatest politicians”—was from Harlem, Wyche pointed out. Powell presided over the powerful House Education and Labor Committee in the 1960s and was key in passing legislation that made lynching a federal crime and that desegregated public schools.

“This has always been a place for fertile minds,” said Marc Cary, a jazz pianist who lives in Harlem.

The 46-year-old has played and recorded with the likes of Erykah Badu, Betty Carter, Ani DiFranco, Dizzy Gillespie, Lauryn Hill, Abbey Lincoln, Meshell Ndegeocello and Arthur Taylor. He started working out with the Bartendaz about three years ago.

“(Harlem is) a place where things have been activated and affected the world,” Cary said. “It’s no wonder they’re here.”

THE PIED PIPER

As of November, Giant and the Bartendaz were working with seven New York City public schools, including Eagle Academy for Young Men II in Brooklyn, Boys and Girls High School in Brooklyn and John Adams High School in Queens. Besides Polo Grounds Community Center, they also can be found in other community organizations like Minisink Townhouse and the Boys & Girls Club in Mount Vernon.

The structure of Bartendaz programs in those places depends on the place itself, Dr. G said.

One size fits all?

“It can’t be,” he said. “Each location is unique.”

At Polo Grounds, for example, children are “basketball crazy,” he noted. So Bartendaz created a program that included push-ups on a basketball, incorporating a familiar object with a movement that wasn’t simply about playing the game.

“They have to know that there’s more in the world than basketball,” Dr. G explained.

And in some cases, Bartendaz has gone to schools simply to talk about the “basic dialogue of respect,” he said. Physical fitness wasn’t emphasized.

In September, Bartendaz traveled on its own dime to Crawford High School and Hoover High School, both in San Diego, for an “edutainment” show introducing themselves and Giant Thinking to students and staff.



Two months later, Bartendaz was back on the West Coast to do the same thing at Washington Preparatory High School and Crenshaw High School, both in Los Angeles.

“This is all we do. This is our life,” said Dr. G, who, like Giant, is solely employed by Bartendaz.

**“IF I GOTTA TAKE OFF MY SHIRT
TO SHOW YOU HOW STRONG I
AM, THEN I MISSED THE POINT.”**

—GIANT

The goal?

“To better humanity,” he flatly stated. “We use exercise as a metaphor for life.”

Physical strength supports mental strength, Giant frequently emphasizes.

“If all you got is the bar,” he said, “you’re lost.”

To spread their message, they want to grow the number of affiliates worldwide, establish a fee system for them and grow to a point where they can hire employees. It might seem like a lofty goal. But Bartendaz believe anything is possible under the leadership of the man they call “the Barfather.”

“Giant is like the Muhammad Ali character: He’s brash, he’s bold. But in the community, he’s like the Pied Piper,” Dr. G said. “He’s done the impossible in the middle of Harlem: You got kids who want to exercise, adults who want to exercise.”

Describing himself as humble, Giant likened Bartendaz and Giant Thinking to the Black Panther Party.

“I just put more sunshine in the air,” he said.

Giant added that he has trouble articulating his feelings on what he’s created.

“I can’t explain to you what it means. The bars were empty,” he said, referring to pull-up bars in Harlem parks.

“They’re not gonna appreciate what I brought, I’m gonna say, for another 10 years,” Giant continued. “I’m just thankful that I was a product of my environment and now I have a product for my environment.”

**“I GOT LATS THAT COME OUT
LIKE COBRAS.”**

—GIANT

Today, there are a multitude of bar-workout groups, including the Barmasters, the BarStarzz and the Bar-Bar-ians. By most people’s accounts, Giant and the Bartendaz are considered to be the originators, with many copycats.

Warrington Hudlin called Giant “a medicine man walking among us.”

Hudlin produced such films as *House Party* and *Boomerang*, and he is the founding president of the Black Filmmaker Foundation. He also serves on the board of the Museum of the Moving Image.

The Tribeca-based filmmaker met Giant in 2006, when he was working on the BET television show *Iron Ring*. Giant was to be one of the trainers. The show was canceled after airing for a few months in 2008. Hudlin was instantly impressed with Giant and has since connected him to community leaders so he can further disseminate his message.

“I don’t want to overstate this, but I’ve been around a long time, and I’ve seen people who are just special, who not only have charisma but the humility to go along with that,” the 61-year-old said. “Someone told me (Giant is a) cross between Jack LaLanne and Malcolm X—and that’s how I see him, and that’s a very special person.”

As for the future of Bartendaz and Giant Thinking, the plan is to keep walking the current path and growing.

“Continue to have the opportunity to touch lives and make a difference. ‘Giant’ is a metaphor for life—you can do it without a budget. It’s as simple as exercise, as simple as a smile, as simple as words,” Giant said.

Bartendaz is also working to obtain indoor space for a gym and possibly an obstacle course. And Giant is entertaining the idea of the so-called G-Games, which Dr. G described as “almost like Disneyland” with a dodgeball area and a jump-rope area, for example, for some friendly competition among individuals and families.

“It’s a beautiful thing what he does for the community,” Clintonia Anderson said of Giant as she stood just outside the gates of the Fred Samuel Playground.

The 53-year-old Harlem native has known him for 13 years. She’s been working out with the Bartendaz since 2007. Most people call her Nettie Nanette.

“There’s brothers out here doin’ the wrong things. He pulls them in to do the right thing,” she said. “I’ve watched all of them want to be Bartendaz.”

BODY AND MIND

The children are in a large circle inside the Polo Grounds Community Center. With the exception of one girl, it’s all boys.

Giant raises his left index finger to hold it vertically on his lips.

The children quickly get silent.

“Repeat after me: physical fitness,” Giant shouts.

“Physical fitness,” the children echo.

“Self-empowerment,” he says next.

“Self-empowerment,” they say back.

“Bartendaz, one, two, three,” he shouts.

“Bartendaz, one, two, three,” they shout back.

“Mind up,” he says last.

“Mind up,” they repeat. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Torpedo School

The Pool event at the 2013 Reebok CrossFit Games revealed dramatic differences in swimming efficiency. Adam Palmer explains how you can learn to cut through the water.

By Adam Palmer

January 2014



Ruby Wolff/CrossFit Journal

The 2013 Reebok CrossFit Games introduced a swimming event held in a pool, which was unprecedented in the brief history of the Games. The event was 10 rounds of a 25-yard swim, 3 bar muscle-ups and another 25-yard swim, and the short lengths in the water revealed the less-than-ideal stroke mechanics of a number of athletes.

Some, such as former collegiate swimmer Jordan Troyan, made the short lengths look easy. The former All-American swimmer from West Chester University won the event handily. Others weren't so efficient in the water and wasted valuable time and energy getting across the pool.

1 of 10

As CrossFit Founder and CEO Greg Glassman said, “We fail at the margins of our experience.” With that in mind, here are some suggestions for improving your efficiency in the water, whether you’re a novice or more experienced swimmer.

Principles of Drag and Hydrodynamics

In freestyle swimming, athletes use force exerted on the water by their arm stroke and flutter kick to propel them forward through the water. In nearly all land-based sports, air drag is seemingly negligible, but drag in the water plays a huge factor in both speed and efficiency of movement. In fact, drag factors ultimately inhibit forward velocity far more dramatically than a general lack of propulsive force ever could. The fastest swimmers in the world use

less energy and move faster primarily because they have learned, through training and repetition, to optimally streamline their bodies and make the most effective use of their propulsive force.

In that regard, a novice swimmer is easy to spot as he tends to plow through the water with all the grace of a bull in a china shop. Meanwhile, the fastest and most efficient swimmers make it look effortless. This is primarily due to a narrow, streamlined body position, a developed “feel” for the water, and effective breathing patterns in addition to a properly timed and efficient arm stroke—all combined with a strong and steady flutter kick.

The name of the game in swimming is drag reduction.

Beyond just the basics of the freestyle stroke, the name of the game in swimming is drag reduction. In the same way that weak or inefficient arm stroke and kicking won’t produce enough power, excessive body movement of any kind will increase drag proportionately and be detrimental to forward velocity. This is a concept true of any stroke in swimming, not just freestyle. Our current knowledge of hydrodynamics and math agrees with the notion that investing in drag reduction has a much higher potential payoff than simply focusing on the production of greater propulsive force.

$$F_d = \frac{1}{2} \rho V^2 c_d A$$

This basic equation for the force of drag on an object moving in a fluid says it all. In the equation, c_d is the drag coefficient of the object (you), A is the surface area of the object (you), V is your velocity, and ρ is the mass density of the fluid (the chlorinated or brominated water in this case). As your speed in the water increases, the force of drag against you increases quadratically. The only factors you really have any control over are your surface area, your drag coefficient (to a lesser extent) and your velocity, which is affected by all the other factors.



Scott Wallace/CrossFit Journal

It’s not uncommon for swimmers to remove body hair in order to improve hydrodynamics. Lucas Parker’s signature beard would not be seen in swimming events at the Olympics.

Scott Wallace/CrossFit Journal Graphics by Adam Palmer

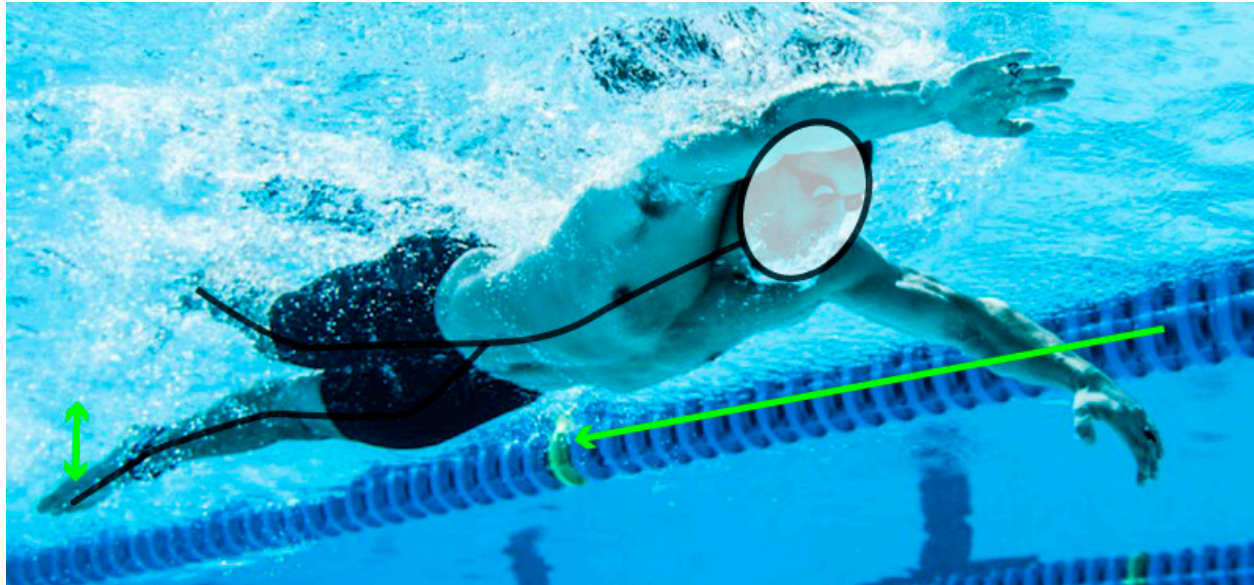


Figure 1: This photo of athlete Ben Smith shows good body and head alignment as well as a high-elbow position in the catch.

Body and Head Position

The optimal body position for freestyle swimming is with the entire body length, from head to toe, in line and horizontal (parallel to the surface of the water). The cervical spine should be in a neutral position such that the top of the head is at or just below the surface of the water throughout each stroke cycle. While active, the swimmer should rotate the body as a unit about the lateral axis, initiating with the shoulders and hips, extending the forward arm as far as possible. The toes should be pointed backward with the legs relatively relaxed but still in line with the same horizontal plane as the torso.

In the water, the dynamics of gravity and body alignment are somewhat different than on land. This is largely due to the phenomenon of buoyancy. While your center of mass, the belly button, doesn't change in the water, swimming introduces what we refer to as your "center of buoyancy": your lungs. This center of buoyancy is far enough away from your center of mass that it naturally creates a moment arm that forces your lower half (which has very little buoyancy) down into the water and your upper half toward the surface if you maintain a static amount of air in the lungs. The key to swimming with good body alignment is to concentrate on pressing your chest into the water and kicking with a light flutter kick.

This pressing of your face into the water is counterintuitive because your head, which is connected to your torso, will



Courtesy of Adam Palmer

Figure 2: Optimal lateral alignment.

Scott Wallace/CrossFit Journal Graphics by Adam Palmer

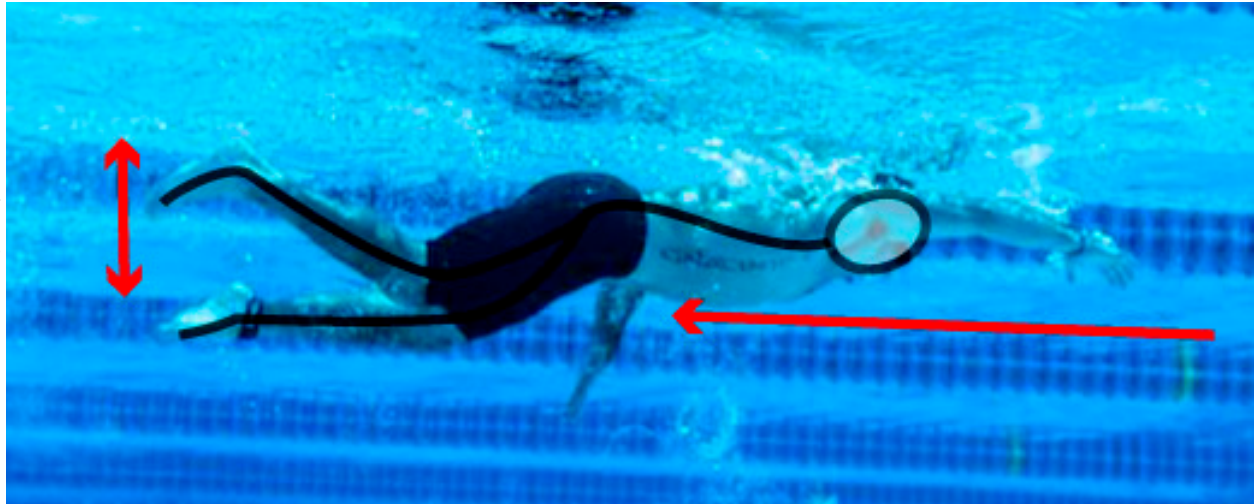


Figure 3: This photo illustrates body alignment that could be improved by relaxing the leg muscles, pointing the toes back, pressing the chest down into the water and maintaining more air in the lungs.

be forced into the water as well. The result is that learning to breathe effectively without lifting the chin out of the water now becomes very crucial to maintaining proper body alignment while swimming freestyle.

Common Faults

The most common error I've seen with new swimmers is body position. Many who lack body awareness in the pool attempt to swim with their torsos virtually upright; i.e., their legs sink, and the result is what we know as "the dog paddle." Think about the size of the forward-looking profile this creates and how much drag is introduced. This position can be caused by factors ranging from lack of body awareness or nonexistent kick to buoyancy issues caused by not having enough air in the lungs. But more often than not, the swimmer simply just doesn't know how to use his or her legs in the water.

Drills and Corrections

Many novice swimmers begin to learn the basics of proper body position in the water with their hands pronated and touching the side of the pool, with their arms, shoulders and hips fully extended and their feet pointing back toward the opposite wall. This creates a body line. In the wall drill, the coach should observe the swimmer's hips and feet to ensure the body line is in the same horizontal plane as the surface of the water. The head may be lifted, as though the swimmer is using a kickboard, or it may be neutral, with the face in the water. Instruct the swimmer to flutter kick only as much as is necessary to maintain the body line parallel to the horizontal plane. This drill may also

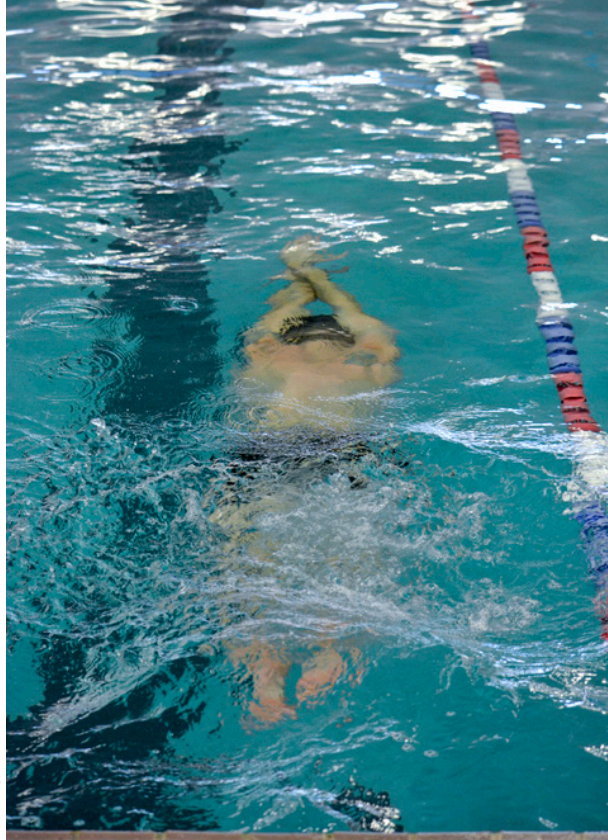
be done with the body in a supine position, which makes breathing very easy.

After conducting the wall drill, the swimmer can move away from the wall and perform essentially the same movement, this time with the arms and hands fully extended with one hand superior to the other in what is known as the streamline position. The goal here, as well, is to build familiarization with the horizontal body line. This will be more difficult because the swimmer lacks the wall as a support to stabilize the torso, but it will more realistically engage the actual muscles required for stabilization.



Courtesy of Adam Palmer

Figure 4. The wall drill with kick.



Courtesy of Adam Palmer

The streamline position.

The Kick

Second to drag and stroke efficiency, a strong, steady kick often separates great swimmers from decent swimmers. On the other hand, a weak or lazy kick can lead to other drag and efficiency problems.

A strong, steady kick often separates great swimmers from decent swimmers.

Imagine your legs are like two whips. Initiate each kick from the hip flexors. The legs themselves should be relatively relaxed, and the toes should point along the horizontal

plane with the rest of the body. Only a very slight flexion of the hip joint is required to generate substantial force at the feet. On each undulation of the kick, the swimmer should generate forward propulsion from a whip-like stretch-reflex action at the knees and ankles. The more powerful the hip action, the greater the propulsive force. Generally, an athlete with more flexible ankles will be able to forcibly apply greater foot surface area to the water. Put into CrossFit terms, the flutter kick (and any other swimming kicking style for that matter) is a core-to-extremity movement.

Flutter (Freestyle) Kicking Patterns

There are three common kicks used in modern freestyle swimming, and most competitive swimmers employ one of them or some variant. Use of a particular pattern almost completely depends on the event distance and how comfortable the swimmer is in executing a specific kicking pattern.

- **Two-beat kick**—In a two-beat pattern, the swimmer kicks two times per stroke cycle, or one kick for every arm stroke. In competitive swimming, it is primarily used during longer swimming events (800 m or more) in which the swimmer is more concerned with energy conservation and maintaining consistent body position throughout the swim.
- **Four-beat kick**—Intuitively, the swimmer kicks four times per stroke cycle, or two kicks for every arm stroke in a four-beat pattern. Typically, this kicking pattern is used less but may be optimal for some swimmers to employ in a freestyle distance between 400 and 800 m.
- **Six-beat kick**—The six-beat kick has evolved to become the sprinter's weapon of choice. As the name suggests, a swimmer kicks six times per stroke cycle, or three times for every arm stroke when using the six-beat kick. This kicking pattern requires good timing and coordination as well as an enormous amount of energy. In competition, it is used for the 50-, 100- and sometimes 200-m freestyle events.

Common Faults

Excessive flexing of the legs is a fault in the flutter kick, in which the knees should bend, but only as much as is absolutely required to generate a propulsive kick. A novice mistake, excessive flexing is the swimming version of a classic core-to-extremity violation in CrossFit. Flexing the legs at the knee shortens the lever action a swimmer needs to generate force at the ankles. This greatly reduces the

effectiveness of the stretch reflex that generates the ankle whip, and it results in an overall weaker kick. Excessive flexion also relies heavily on the push-pull action of the quadriceps and hamstrings (very large muscle groups) instead of using the hip flexors (relatively small muscles). Using very large muscles ineffectively is a monumental waste of energy.

Excessively wide or deep kicking can also cause problems. Imagine the body is inserted into a torpedo tube. An effective flutter kick should remain within the confines of that tube as much as possible. A flutter kick that is too wide or deep generates unnecessary drag and is not optimal for generating forward propulsion.

Kicking Drills and Corrections

The kickboard is a powerful tool for focusing and developing any kicking movements in swimming. Kickboards come in a variety of shapes and sizes that can be used for different things. Larger kickboards require less core stability and body awareness to use, which may be acceptable for focused work on the kick. On the other hand, smaller boards provide less torso support and more closely mimic the conditions and body position of actual swimming. Both can be used to improve the kick. Programming for swimming is beyond the scope of this article, but the kickboard can be employed in the same variety of distances and intervals as swimming without the board.

The Arm Stroke

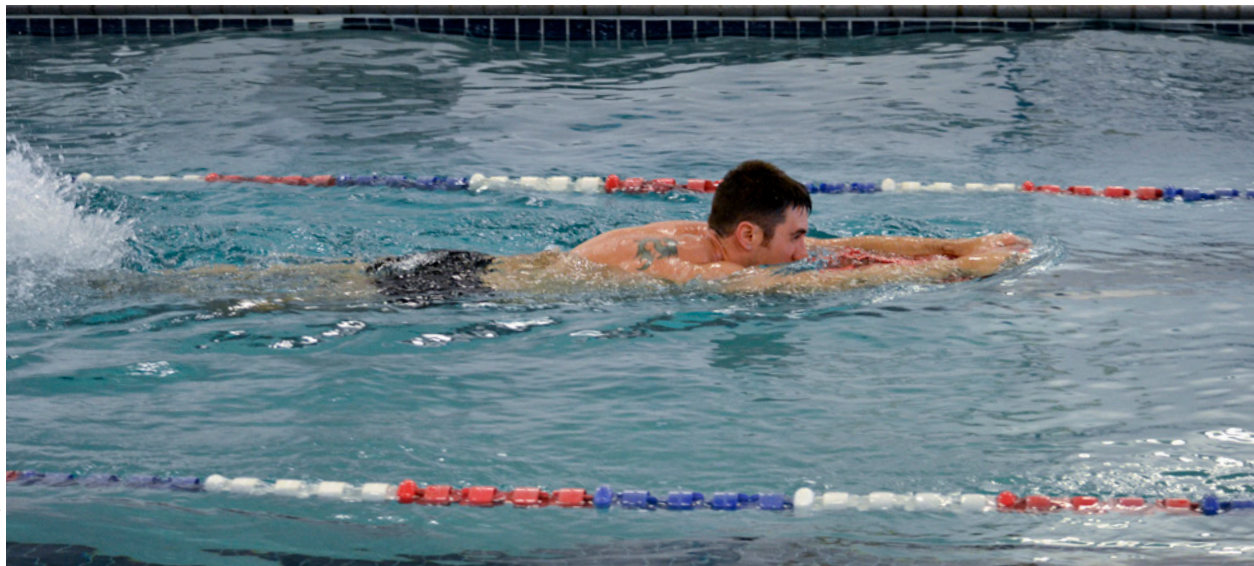
Entry, Reach and Catch

One way to think about swimming freestyle, or any stroke for that matter, is to consider the Pose Method of running. Certain positions, or poses, must be replicated exactly in order to achieve the greatest efficiency for a given stroke. What happens in between poses is merely transition from one pose to the next. The freestyle arm stroke can be thought of in this manner.

The hand should enter the water middle finger first at a slight angle toward the surface of the water, and it should be held with the fingers and thumb in line and close together. A firm wrist and firm, flat hand make for the best pulling surface. When we watch top athletes, we see daylight between their fingers. The reach and catch portion of the stroke happen next.

With the hand and arm now in the water, shrug the shoulder of the forward-reaching arm and squeeze the cheek against the shoulder. This will help reduce drag and obtain proper reach. Ensuring the proper rotation of the hips and torso will maximize stroke length. Referring to Figure 2, the pose finds the right arm fully outstretched overhead with the right hip and right side of the torso rotated toward the bottom of the pool, while the left arm is recovering along the torso. Focus on maintaining as narrow a profile as possible. Going back to drag and

Courtesy of Adam Palmer



Kicking with a board to support the upper body is a powerful tool for isolating the kick.

efficiency, the adage “be a needle, not a truck” was pounded into my head as a young swimmer.

Now comes the catch phase of the stroke, which happens 3-6 in. below the surface of the water. The wrist and arm should bend such that the swimmer mimics the motion of reaching over the top of a barrel to throw it behind him. Naturally, this will force the elbow into a high position where the potential leverage is greatest. This arm position will also allow the palm of the hand to be more or less perpendicular to the bottom of the pool.

Overdeveloped back muscles are some of the most distinguishing features of someone who is clearly a swimmer.

Overdeveloped back muscles are some of the most distinguishing features of someone who is clearly a swimmer. This adaptation is a result of continually engaging this muscle group through internal rotation of the shoulder joint in order to “scoop the barrel,” so to speak. It’s important to note that the resulting high-elbow position, from reaching over this invisible barrel, is present in any of the competitive strokes, not just freestyle. The core-to-extremity mantra ties in very nicely as well, as the power from the arm stroke originates in the core (the middle and upper back) musculature. There are two crucial aspects of the arm stroke to remember:

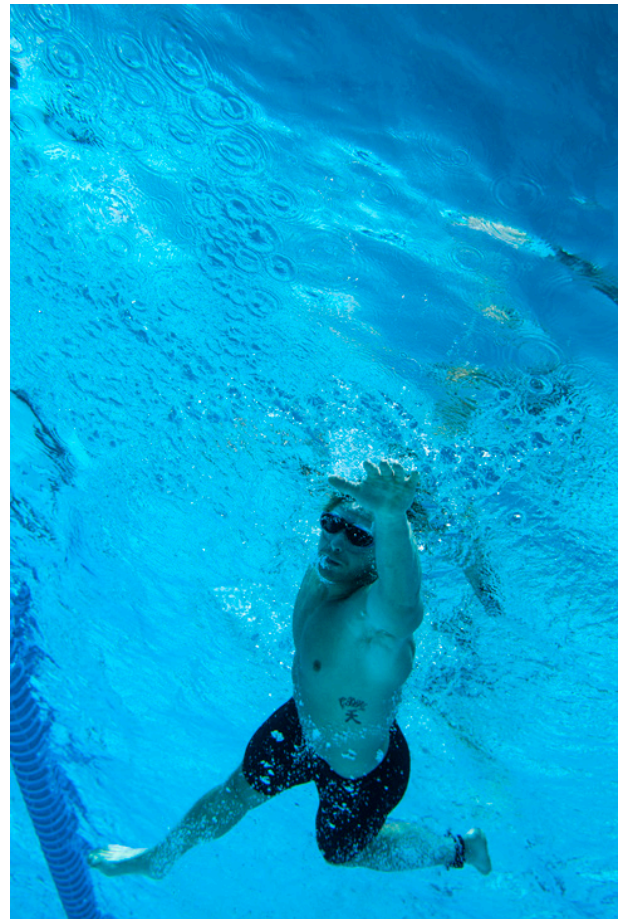
1. Maintaining consistent pressure on the water throughout the arm stroke while drawing the hand near the body’s centerline.
2. Keeping a high-elbow position where the elbow is always above the hand during the pull.

The vertical component of the freestyle arm stroke is also critical. The deepest part of the freestyle arm stroke will typically be from the catch until the hand reaches the waistline. At this point the stroking arm and hand continue to force water backward until the upper arm and

then gradually the lower arm and hand exit the water to begin the recovery phase. Again, the critical point here is the high-elbow position, which optimizes leverage on the water. A great example of high-elbow position throughout the stroke is [Chinese swimmer Sun Yang](#). His elbow stays near the surface of the water throughout almost the entirety of each pull.

Recovery

Recovery begins when the stroking arm exits the water. The goal in recovery is to transition to the next stroke cycle as efficiently or quickly as possible depending on the event. The basic premise is to relax the arms and shoulders to allow a smooth transition between strokes. This varies greatly from swimmer to swimmer.



Scott Wallace/CrossFit Journal

Imagine you are swimming in a tube. Excessively wide leg positions create drag.

Defining a proper arm-stroke recovery is a hotly debated topic in swimming. There are many different styles of arm recovery, and there are many world-class swimmers who have used unconventional freestyle stroke recovery. A great illustration of this is a comparison of Australian swimmer [Michael Klim's windmill-like 200-meter freestyle at the 1998 world championships](#) with [Michael Phelps' stroke style during the 2012 Olympics](#). Both athletes have vastly different techniques, but both are world class. The bottom line is that stroke mechanics outside the water matter significantly less than they do when the hands are below the surface.

The recovery phase of the stroke should be performed in a manner that is most comfortable for the swimmer. In addition, any recovery style that introduces additional drag can be detrimental to forward momentum.

Common Faults

Early recovery is akin to not opening the hips completely in Olympic weightlifting and will result in less than optimal power output with the arm stroke. This fault most commonly happens during sprint events in which swimmers often focus on increasing their arm-stroke turnover rate to increase speed in lieu of having complete strokes. In this case, the arm will exit the water with excessive bend at the elbow around the waistline. The drill to correct this is very simple and is known as the "finger-flick drill." The swimmer focuses specifically on making sure that his middle fingers fling water behind him as he swims freestyle.

Swimming flat is another issue. The swimmer will have a very difficult time recovering the arm stroke while the torso is completely parallel along the axial plane with the surface of the water. This error can be common in young or new swimmers and is the result of a lack of body roll. Due to this error, the swimmer will not establish optimal stroke length and will probably introduce additional drag from an inefficient recovery. To correct the problem, encourage the athlete to rotate the hips and torso with every stroke while maintaining the head position. Swimming on one side or the other for several strokes and then rotating every two or three stroke cycles can also help alleviate the problem. Emphasis on arm reach and shoulder shrug with the extended arm can be helpful as well.

Arm-Stroke Drills and Corrections

Sculling can be used to develop the catch for any of the competitive strokes. It is notably helpful in developing the

out-sweep and in-sweep of the breaststroke. This can be done in two positions: the first is with the swimmer face down in the water with arms outstretched to the front at the surface of the water. The swimmer's head can be tilted up out of the water provided he is strong enough to do this. Essentially, the scull is very similar to the movement used to wade in water. The hands should move back and forth simultaneously in 8-to-12-in. sweeps below the surface of the water, rotating toward the direction they are traveling. This drill also reinforces hand position and tilt (approximately 45-60 degrees from horizontal) as a less-than-optimal position will be both inefficient and lack power. The kick during this drill should be minimal if present at all—just enough to maintain buoyancy. Distances used for this drill are normally limited to 25-50 meters.

Another way to do this drill is to have the swimmer on his back with the feet facing either forward or backward. With the feet forward, this is a very challenging drill but will be very effective at developing the catch.

The zipper drill can be used to improve or fix swimmers with poor arm recovery leading to stroke inefficiencies and drag. As the body rolls with each stroke, draw the thumb along the side of the body prior to placing the hand in the water for each successive stroke. The motion helps emphasize a high-elbow position during recovery and also helps guide the recovering arm in a straight line along



Courtesy of Adam Palmer

In the zipper drill, the thumb is drawn all the way up to the armpit before resuming normal stroke recovery. This emphasizes shoulder roll and may be helpful for athletes who seem to flail the arms inefficiently outside the water.

the body (vs. an arguably more inefficient stroke in which the arms recover wide of the body's centerline).

If a swimmer has less-than-optimal stroke length—i.e., does not reach full extension on each stroke—a catch-up stroke can be applied in order to correct the fault. In this drill, swimmers will start with one arm outstretched and will not begin the pull with the extended arm until both hands meet in front of the body at the surface of the water. Emphasis is on hand entry with the middle finger entering the water first. Care should be taken such that the swimmer focuses on not slapping the water with every stroke.

Swimming on one side or the other can help a swimmer who struggles with body-roll mechanics or if there is a need to improve overall stroke length. To perform side-swimming, have the swimmer extend one arm and focus on keeping that arm out in front as though it had just entered the water. The forward shoulder should be shrugged. The swimmer should then only stroke with the other arm, staying on the side at an angle to the horizontal plane of the water. An option to work on the mechanics of the roll itself is to have the swimmer switch sides every three or four strokes.

Timing the Stroke, Kick and Breathing

One of the most difficult aspects of swimming any stroke is synchronizing all the moving parts. Elite swimmers dedicate years to perfecting timing and developing their feel for the water. In general, this feel is gained by spending time working on specific technique drills and breathing patterns. Some things will come intuitively, while others will require coach intervention and correction. Practice—along with the drills highlighted above—can be used to correct some timing problems. The side-swimming and catch-up-stroke drills are particularly helpful.

Breathing patterns in swimming are not unique to this sport alone, and breathing patterns in general are often overlooked as a way to improve flow and efficiency for every modality in CrossFit. With swimming, breathing gains much more attention simply because your face is in the water. Aside from the obvious need for oxygen, there can also be some gamesmanship in selecting breathing patterns, with race distance the prime concern.

It is a common practice to work specifically on breathing patterns in a workout and then employ one a swimmer is



Courtesy of Adam Palmer

The mouth only needs to clear the surface of the water slightly to facilitate effective breathing technique.



Opposite of the position seen here, the athlete's right hip should dip toward the bottom of the pool when the right arm is extended overhead. Doing so will maximize stroke length.

comfortable with in a race. For a singular 50-m freestyle event, a sprint, athletes often opt to go with one of three breathing patterns: no-breath, one breath, or two breaths. For all other distances, including those of 50s on repeat intervals, one of three breathing patterns is common: every stroke cycle, every three strokes, or every other stroke cycle.

Breaths should happen on the side of the recovering arm as it exits the water. When breathing, the head only needs to be rotated slightly, and only a portion of the mouth

must be out of the water in order to facilitate a breath of air. While the head is submerged, the athlete should slowly blow bubbles out of his nose and/or mouth to reduce buildup of carbon dioxide.

Drill for Skill and Speed

Swimming, as with every other aspect of fitness, requires time and dedication to perfect technique. As we saw at the CrossFit Games in 2013, many athletes would benefit from some basic training to improve speed and efficiency in the water. It is my hope that this article will introduce coaches and athletes to swimming fundamentals, and I also hope to share CrossFit with the competitive-swimming community, and vice versa.



One of the most difficult aspects of swimming any stroke is synchronizing all the moving parts.

About the Author

Adam Palmer is an active-duty Air Force officer, CrossFit Level 1 certificate holder and coach at Praetorian CrossFit in Kathleen, Ga. Prior to discovering CrossFit in 2008, he competed at the NCAA Division 1 level and was a United States Swimming club athlete for more than 16 years.

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Teach a Kid to Teach Deadlifts

Nick Loera wanted to bring CrossFit to fellow students at Summit Tahoma. Through the help of the NorCal CrossFit community, he'll be teaching his peers to squat in February.

By Laura Bruner

January 2014



Bill Chiochi

Nick Loera (left) trains in the NorCal CrossFit Teens Program led by Samantha Aochi (right), and he wanted to share CrossFit with his schoolmates.

Summit Charter High Schools are based on a philosophy that students should drive their own learning, and 16-year-old Nick Loera took that to heart.

While Summit has a strong approach to developing learning and critical thinking in the classroom, the students lack any form of physical education.

1 of 6

After experiencing for himself the physical and mental benefits of CrossFit, Loera built up the courage to approach his school administration at Summit Tahoma in San Jose, Calif., to make a change.

"CrossFit has changed my life in so many ways," he said. "I think better, have more confidence and know what it means to be healthy. So many of the kids at my school don't have that."

**"CrossFit has changed my life
in so many ways."**

—Nick Loera

Loera spent countless hours developing detailed proposals to convince the administration to approve an after-school CrossFit program. He won his battle, but the financial burden of providing equipment and coaches required some help from the CrossFit community.

Books and Burpees

In 2000, a group of parents from Silicon Valley asked, "What happened to the American public high school, and what can we do to fix it?"

The answer to this question came in the form of a series of Bay Area Summit Public High Schools, developed by parents, with an innovative approach to education that has already positively affected kids all over Silicon Valley. The schools encourage students to take ownership of their education, and the teachers encourage critical thinking and deeper learning through experience to support every student's individual needs. The administration describes this as "high-impact teaching."



CrossFit affiliates have a long tradition of supporting worthy causes, and NorCal CrossFit jumped at the chance to raise money to purchase gear for Loera's new program.



Brad Haines

If you're going to work out anyway, you might as well work out to support a great cause.

The emphasis has always been on academics during the school day, and while this has paid off with college acceptance rates of 96 percent, physical education has gotten lost. Summit is a public school but is funded in the same way as a charter institution.

"All funding and energy goes into academics, but all students are expected to log at least 100 hours of outside physical fitness on their own," said Rolando Loera, Nick's father and a board member at Summit.

While members of the administration understand the importance of fitness and activity, there is no physical education because time and funds are limited.

After Nick received approval for a CrossFit program, he got creative in finding a way to fund it. As a member of the NorCal CrossFit Teens Program, led by coach Samantha Aochi, Loera came to NorCal with an idea and faith that his community could make his dream a reality. NorCal CrossFit is a group of affiliates in Northern California, with one box located in San Jose. The NorCal community has



Brad Haines

Jason Khalipa (left) and Jonji Barber of NorCal CrossFit were inspired to help Loera because they've seen what fitness can do for children.

come together for many causes in the past, including the Hope for Kenya project in which the affiliate raised enough money to build two schools in Kenya. A fundraising initiative to support one of their own really engaged affiliate members.

NorCal coach Jonji Barber, who led the efforts for the fundraising event, was inspired by Loera's work and the initiative of the students at Summit.

"When Nick came to us in hopes of fundraising to start a CrossFit at his school, I knew we had found the perfect cause for our community to get behind," Barber said. "From NorCal's perspective, it made sense to try to foster fitness in our community, and what better way to achieve this than an on-campus gym at a local high school?"

And the cause hit home for Barber on a personal level.

"I felt connected to the cause because I was first introduced to CrossFit in the classes (former CrossFit Inc. media director) Tony Budding taught at my high school back in

2004," he said. "The lessons we learned in his classes—elegance, virtuosity, the pursuit of excellence—became the guiding principles of my life and have served me in every facet since."

Aochi said the project has been good for the community.

"How can we expect to send these kids into the world and adulthood without any preparation on how to take care of themselves? If there's a want, there needs to be a how," Aochi said. "If these kids want to be stronger and healthier and participate in CrossFit, I feel it's our duty as a community to figure out how we can do that."

Coming Together

On Jan. 4, NorCal CrossFit rang in the New Year with a competition in which the focus was less about the athletes and all about the kids. There were twice as many scaled teams as teams moving the prescribed loads, showing the all-inclusive nature of the event. In fact, almost a third of the competitors had never competed before.



Ali Samieivafa

The power of athletics was on full display at the NorCal CrossFit fundraiser, which included many first-time competitors.



Ali Samiei/vafa

Children who learn to love fitness early in life will be unlikely to park in front of the TV for hours on end while eating poorly as adults.

Teams competed in at least three workouts, with the top teams doing one more. Each athlete had a fundraising target of US\$50 or more, and everyone hit that goal by raising funds through friends and family or contributing themselves. A raffle brought in additional funds, for a total of \$6,500. The money will be spent on equipment for the Summit Tahoma program.

"When I heard these kids didn't have any sort of physical education or recreational sports, I thought, 'That's crazy!'" competitor Danny Nguyen said. "Sports played a huge role in my life and helped keep me out of trouble. There is so much to learn socially by participating in organized games, and what better organized game than CrossFit?"

Jason Khalipa, six-time CrossFit Games athlete and owner of NorCal CrossFit, is fully behind the cause.

"I can't imagine a school without any physical activities," Khalipa said. "Video games and TV are taking place of the soccer field and gym. If we can help children get up and move more, our goal has been accomplished."

"If we can help children get up and move more, our goal has been accomplished."

—Jason Khalipa

With funds for equipment in place, Summit Tahoma will have a fully functioning CrossFit after-school program by the end of February.

"NorCal won't be paying for coaches for the school because we want it to be self-sustaining," Khalipa said.

The plan, instead, is to help Loera attend a CrossFit Level 1 Seminar so he can coach—a plan very much in line with Summit's commitment to empowering students to take charge of their education. NorCal CrossFit plans to donate



Bill Chiochi

More and more schools are learning what CrossFit affiliates already know: programs for kids have incredible benefits on both bodies and minds.



Bill Chiochi

a spot for him at the next seminar it hosts. Under the supervision of faculty members Zachary Drew and Eileen Kim, Loera will take the role of CrossFit coach as he shares his knowledge with his schoolmates.

"He has put in the work and shown his passion for CrossFit. He will do a great job," Khalipa said.

No one is more excited than Loera.

"I am extremely excited to take the L1 so I can become a coach. I know I have what it takes to be an instructor for my peers," he said.



About the Author

Laura Bruner works for CrossFit Inc. to bring CrossFit and education together through her interaction with schools, teachers, administrators and affiliates. She also is a trainer on CrossFit's Level 1 Seminar Staff and a coach at NorCal CrossFit in San Jose, Calif. Email Laura@CrossFit.com with questions or thoughts about CrossFit and education.

WHERE *Everybody* KNOWS YOUR NAME

AFTER HOME AND WORK, THERE ARE “THIRD PLACES.” ELEANOR BROWN EXAMINES WHY WE LOST THEM AND HOW CROSSFIT AFFILIATES ARE BRINGING THEM BACK.

BY ELEANOR BROWN

MELISSA CHERNAIK SPENT 17 YEARS working as a political consultant in Portland, Ore. She was driven and focused on her career, and her work was a large part of her identity.

“A big chunk of my friends were all in that same field,” she says. When she met new people, there would always be “that first screen: Which are you (politically), right or left?”

Passionate and committed as she was, Chernaik found that her work focused her on the big picture.

“I was so involved on the macro level for so long, thinking about the community as a political body—Congress, the legislature, the city council.”

But when Chernaik joined CrossFit PE in Portland, she found a different kind of connection—to new people, to her local community, and, most meaningfully, to herself.

Chernaik had found her third place.

RAY OLDENBURG AND THE THIRD PLACE

For hundreds of years, places like bookstores, cafés, barber-shops and pubs served as informal public gathering spaces. Without requirements for membership or formal organization, people gathered together for companionship, to talk about their concerns and ideas, and to feel like they belonged.

Urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg calls these spontaneous communities “third places” and has made his name arguing for their importance in our lives.

His landmark book *The Great Good Place* argues that everyone has two main spaces in life: home (our “first place”) and work (our “second place”). But we are at our best, as people and as communities, Oldenburg says, when we have an additional place we can call our own—that third place.

At home or work, attendance is required and roles and responsibilities are rigid. But in a third place, people expand their identities beyond those expectations and associate with their neighbors in a different way. This informal connection creates residents who care about and engage with their community and each other, and who spend time together casually for the pure pleasure of it.

People who have third places are invested in the quality of life in their neighborhoods and the amenities they offer. They have an opportunity to bypass mass media, and they can react and discuss their opinions. They have a place to vent their frustrations and celebrate their joys.

Being a part of a third place, Oldenburg says, “enhances the sense of being alive.”



J.C. Hutchins

THE DEATH OF THE THIRD PLACE

Sadly, third places are disappearing, as are the benefits that go with them. For many, life has turned into a two-place existence.

“So many of us go through our days feeling stressed, tired, busy and just move from work to home,” says Laurie Fish, one of Chernaik’s coaches and one of the principals at CrossFit PE.

Oldenburg argues that the effects of such a constrained life are drastic.

Interacting exclusively with people of similar backgrounds and interests limits learning opportunities and exposure to a diversity of thoughts and ideas. Without third places, shared experience is limited. Neighbors become strangers, and people feel disengaged from their communities and unaware of how to influence the way those communities are run. The elderly and youth are sequestered, and their perspectives neglected.

Social media is sometimes touted as a new kind of third place but does not serve the same function. Online interactions connect people globally as never before but break the involvement with the ultra-local: streets, neighborhoods, towns and cities.

And the connections made via social media do not expose us to the same sort of diversity as third places. Online communities are self-selecting, allowing us to limit our involvement to subjects that already interest us or people with whom we feel comfortable.

Conflict on the Internet is rarely enriching; debate in the comments section of blogs and articles is vitriolic and often violent. It’s more common to watch an online discussion descend into insults and ridiculousness than it is for a participant to gain a genuinely new perspective on an issue.

Again and again, we turn away from opportunities to connect with each other, often in the name of efficiency. We choose ATMs over bank tellers. We choose drive-thrus and eating in our cars over restaurants. We choose online

“WE AIMED,” OLDENBURG SAYS, “FOR COMFORT AND WELL-STOCKED HOMES AND FREEDOM FROM UNCOMFORTABLE INTERACTION AND THE OBLIGATIONS OF CITIZENSHIP. WE SUCCEEDED.”

donations over volunteering. We choose the self-checkout over the grocery-store cashier. We choose elaborate home theaters over movie theaters. We choose e-books over libraries. We choose a game of Candy Crush over chatting with other people waiting in line.

Urban geography has supported this increasing isolation. Suburban sprawl has left residents living in communities that demand a car, and time in public spaces is limited to anonymous strip malls, where transactions are kept brief and the only identity is as consumer.

Small, independent businesses that attract and encourage a vibrant, casual, third-place-friendly community have

been replaced by homogenous chains. In our search for a comfortably predictable experience, we have sacrificed local character: a suburb of Wichita, Kan., can look curiously like a suburb of Vancouver, B.C.

And while they have literally changed the landscape, those nationally and internationally owned businesses have little commitment to the health and well-being of the community, funneling away profits, tax dollars, jobs and a place's unique identity.

“We aimed,” Oldenburg says, “for comfort and well-stocked homes and freedom from uncomfortable interaction and the obligations of citizenship. We succeeded.”



At CrossFit boxes, people from all walks of life interact before, during and after a workout, creating a third place where external status is irrelevant.

J.C. Hutchins

CROSSFIT BOXES AS THIRD PLACES

Following the cultural move toward isolation and anonymity, the fitness industry has built gyms where people work out in parallel, sealed off from each other by headphones and personal television screens.

But CrossFit affiliates are different. Applying Oldenburg's criteria for third places to boxes (such as a welcoming atmosphere, a diverse membership and a low-key physical space) yields a shockingly apt fit—as though affiliates were designed as gathering spaces first and gyms second.

CrossFit is not just a novel workout; its boxes offer a new community space, an alternative to the village tavern or the general store, with the power to reconnect us to our communities and to each other.

In a CrossFit box, neither status nor external responsibilities matter. Senator and janitor are equal, and even internal CrossFit achievements—by elite competitor or recent on-ramp graduate—do not affect members' enjoyment. That leveling quality brings athletes into contact with people they would not encounter in a home-work-home existence.

To Chernaik, leaving her political identity behind has been a positive side effect.

“Meeting people who are teachers and artists, folks who I never would have come across in my life otherwise, reminded me that your whole world doesn't have to be one thing,” she says.

Unlike work or home, attendance at a third place is not required at any specific time. Athletes, however, often develop a routine, and the connections they make at their box encourage attendance.

“It's not unusual to miss a day and get two or three text messages asking why you didn't show up to class,” says Anna Lee, who trains at CrossFit 5th Ave. in New York City.

While the explicit intent of going to the gym is the workout, conversation is one of its greatest joys, from the pre-WOD trash talk to the mid-WOD encouragement and the post-WOD chatter. This light and positive mood characteristic of third places is evident in the banter between athletes and in interactions between members and coaches.

“That's what happens when you bring a group of friends together; you can spend hours talking about practically anything,” says Ryan Flores of CrossFit PE. “I've heard people getting advice (on topics) from parenting to cooking to kipping pull-ups ... nothing ceases to amaze me.”

Ultimately, a third place offers a feeling of belonging. Athletes develop a sense of ownership—it is not “the box” but “my box.” Their attendance roots them and reminds them of their identity outside their responsibilities at work and at home.

It isn't just the workout that offers a feeling of what Oldenburg describes as being “regenerated or restored”—it's the place itself and the people in it.

“Community is the base of everything,” says Mike Poppa, head trainer of RFS CrossFit/Real Fitness Sarasota. “Yeah, the workouts are crazy and we push ourselves mentally and physically, but being able to step into a place where everyone has the same common goals and is here to help each other—that's the most important.”

CHARACTERISTICS OF A

Third Place

THIRD PLACES:

- » Are “neutral ground” for the attendees, where everyone feels equally welcome.
- » Act as a “leveler”: external status does not matter.
- » Have “conversation (as) the main activity.” Though third places are designed with a specific purpose (coffee shop, hair salon), conversation makes the experience special.
- » Are “accessible and accommodating,” with a convenient location and flexible opening hours so people can attend when they are free from other responsibilities.
- » Are frequented by “regulars,” who set a positive tone and keep the community lively.
- » Have a “low profile”: a physical space that is welcoming, not formal or intimidating.
- » Offer a “playful mood” with lighthearted interactions.
- » Become “a home away from home” for the attendees.

Source: *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg (Da Capo Press, 1999)

BEYOND THE BOX

What happens inside the box cannot be contained.

In *The Great Good Place*, Oldenburg argues that third places have created genuine cultural change: as an example, he cites the American tavern and the French café as centers of the activities that produced both countries' revolutions.

And while members of CrossFit affiliates may not be gathering to overthrow an incompetent monarchy, as athletes become part of the life of their third place, the way they deal with their community changes, in both formal and informal ways.

AS SMALL, INDEPENDENT BUSINESSES, CROSSFIT AFFILIATES ARE GENUINELY CONNECTED TO AND DEPENDENT ON THE LOCAL COMMUNITY.

CrossFit boxes, like any other local business, are dependent on the community's health. Their income is derived from local citizens, they pay salaries and wages to local workers, and their taxes benefit local government. They become part of what makes the community special—a great independent bookstore, an excellent family-owned restaurant, an active and lively CrossFit affiliate.

Because affiliates are independently owned and operated and have very minimal obligations to CrossFit HQ, they can develop programs that benefit and appeal to their particular community—programs for high-risk youth or SAT-prep programs, faith-based programming and yoga classes, self-defense seminars and women-only workouts, nutrition challenges, and book clubs. Instead of striving to offer an anonymous and infinitely replicable experience, a box becomes a unique member of its neighborhood.

As small, independent businesses, CrossFit affiliates are genuinely connected to and dependent on the local community. They often seek out opportunities for outreach and charity work, defining themselves as members of the community, not just businesses.

"It is great to have our tight little community, but we feel it is important to reach out to others in the area," Fish says of CrossFit PE's fundraising activities.

Lee agrees: "Our box organizes a ton of events in the community: fundraiser workouts, family days, meet-ups with other boxes in the NYC CrossFit community."

The more members of boxes engage in face-to-face interactions locally, the more they change the way they see the impact of their actions. The emotional impact of a charitable contribution is exponentially increased when there is a local, personal connection.

In Sarasota, Poppa struck up a conversation with a man on the beach who turned out to be the father of Brian Bill, a fallen Navy SEAL (the CrossFit Hero WOD Brian is named for him). RFS CrossFit's Memorial Day WOD this year was a fundraiser to benefit Little Warriors, a non-profit created to honor Bill's memory.

"To be able to hand the check directly to his father was amazing," Poppa says.

THE PERSONAL BENEFITS OF A THIRD PLACE

Sometimes the greatest impact of a third place can be personal. The comfort of membership in a community eases the fear of stepping into a wider world, of re-engaging in what has become the discomfort of public space.

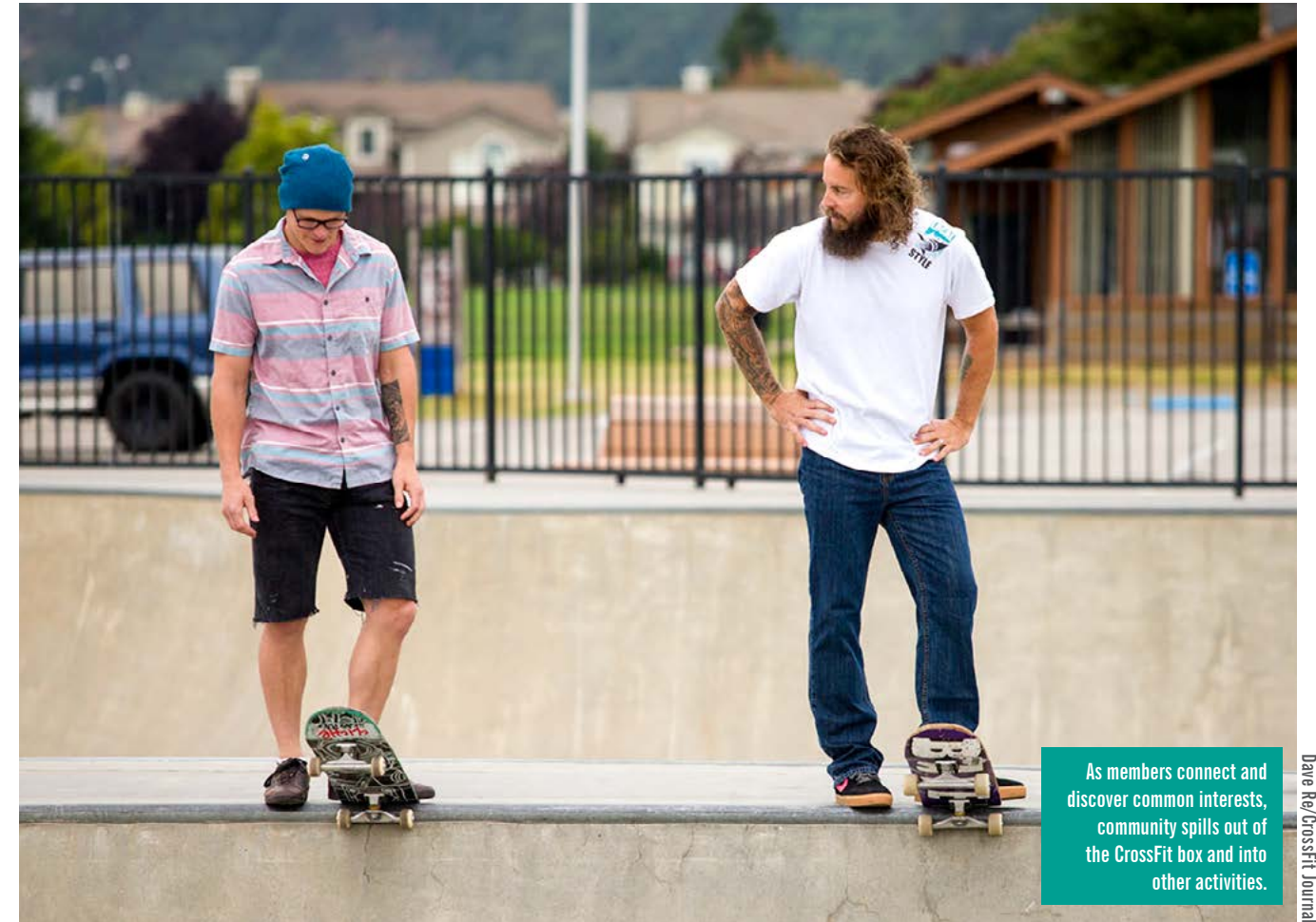
When Flores first moved to Portland, he found joining a box eased the transition.

"Having this core group of friends has given me the opportunity and confidence to go out and experience the Portland community to the fullest," he says.

And the friendships forged during workouts do not end when the clock stops. Chernaik's social life is now full of events with people from her affiliate.

"I've gone to people's houses for burgers. We have a member who does pole dancing, and she's having a recital, so a bunch of us are going to that. We had a women's weekend, where a dozen of us went up to Hood River and hiked and made food and drank an undisclosed amount of wine. We got to know each other on a deeper level and had fun," she says.

CrossFit PE's Fish and Flores both mentioned the Happy Hour WODs the box hosts once a month on Fridays, where



Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

they "do a fun team WOD, encouraging members to bring friends and family to join in and (hosting) a barbecue afterwards. We always have a great turnout. People end up staying for hours, just hanging out," Fish explains.

When one of RFS CrossFit/Real Fitness Sarasota's coaches left, Poppa says nearly 50 members showed up for a celebration.

"There's a huge line waiting to get into this place, and here comes this mass of sharp-looking CrossFitters, one after another. It all starts in the gym, but they become friends, and that's what friends do—they want to spend time together," Poppa recalls.

And for Chernaik, finding her third place has been part of bigger changes in her life.

"I've lived in my house for eight years and have just recently become close friends with my neighbor—we've waved to each other for ever and ever, and one day I just approached

her and started talking to her and struck up a friendship.

"Being a part of this great box has opened me to developing relationships and friendships in new ways. It's put me more in touch with the micro: interpersonal interaction and the value that has." ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eleanor Brown is the *New York Times* and international bestselling author of the novel *The Weird Sisters*. She has been doing CrossFit for two years and trains at CrossFit Modig in Highlands Ranch, Colo.

Joe Hanson NYC

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Minarets and Muscle-Ups

At Cairo's lone CrossFit affiliate, athletes sweat out the stress of living through the Egyptian Revolution.

By Bryan Anderson

January 2014



All: Bryan Anderson

Adham Salloum, 26, is standing in the middle of a large glass and steel cube inside a health club on the edge of Cairo, Egypt. He grabs a pair of gymnastics rings hanging from the ceiling by black straps and heaves himself up. He pauses for a moment on top of the rings with arms extended, then lowers himself back to the floor.

A dozen of his comrades are standing around him. They clap and they shout, urging him on: "Yalla, Adham!" ("Yalla" means "come on" in Arabic.)

He pulls on the rings and hoists himself up 13 more times. By the 14th rep, the veins in his neck are bulging. His every muscle is taut. He stares ahead.

"One more!" his comrades shout, pumping their fists in the air.

He lifts himself up again, then lowers himself down, collapsing on the floor, arms and legs spread-eagled. Another round of applause erupts.

The other athletes pull him to his feet, and minutes later he's resting on the grass outside, grinning. He's wearing a "muscle up" T-shirt, a headband, and electric blue and red calf-length socks.

"If that didn't happen," Salloum says of his collapse, "I'd know I was doing something wrong."

This is CrossFit in Cairo, where over three years of political turmoil and security chaos, a small group of athletes have forged a family-like bond based on their shared passion

for "going hard" in their training. Through daily protests, street violence and a military curfew, the athletes have committed intensely to CrossFit.

"It's almost like a civil war," says Ramy Saleh, a tennis coach who brought CrossFit to Egypt in 2011. "People are looking for an outlet from what's going on around them."

Fitness and the Revolution

After three decades of authoritarian rule, in January 2011 Egyptians launched an 18-day uprising that ended the dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak. The revolution ejected Mubarak and his party from power but failed to reform the underlying structures of the authoritarian state, in particular the police and the military.

However, the uprising did produce the first free elections in decades, resulting in the election of President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2012. Over a year in power, Morsi advanced the Brotherhood's narrow agenda and failed to reform the authoritarian state. Corruption,



Egypt has been far from stable since the 18-day uprising in January 2011, and protests and demonstrations are not uncommon.

economic woes and police abuses continued, alienating much of the public. In July 2013, after Egyptians again launched massive protests against Morsi, the military stepped in to remove him. In the months that followed, a new military-backed government launched a violent crackdown on the Brotherhood that left more than 1,000 people dead.

I visited Cairo's only CrossFit box on a relatively quiet Friday in November. The nighttime curfew imposed by the military after a summer of violence had just been lifted a day earlier. The tension of the last three months was beginning to ease, but isolated protests against the military-led government were still roiling parts of the city.

I hailed a taxi from the city center and was soon zooming along the edge of the desert, passing a military tank parked on the massive Ring Road that circles Cairo and its 20 million inhabitants.

The CrossFit Stars facility is a sleek glass box tucked inside a serene, palm-dotted sports complex in a community called

Swan Lake, on the eastern end of Cairo. When I arrived, a dozen or so athletes, men and women, were chatting and stretching before starting their workout. Turnout was low. Even when the political situation was calm, lingering jitters sometimes kept people at home.

"Even if you don't have something going on in the streets, you have people worried that if they go out, something will happen," said Salloum. "If you're not committed 100 percent, you actually lose (motivation)."

**Even when the political
situation was calm, lingering
jitters sometimes kept people
at home.**



The chaotic political situation outside the doors of the box makes CrossFit Stars a haven for those who need to work off the stress of living in uncertain times.



In December 2013, students clashed with police at a Cairo university, and several bombings rattled the city.

Saleh, the godfather of Egyptian CrossFit, was born in Egypt in 1981. He began playing tennis at a young age and joined Egypt's national tennis team at the age of 12. As a teenager, he ranked in the top 70 youth players in the world. He continued playing while attending high school in New Braunfels, Texas, and at The American University in Cairo while completing his MBA in Egypt and at the Maastricht School of Management in the Netherlands.

After four years working corporate jobs, he realized his true passion was in sports and fitness, and he quit to start a tennis academy. He first heard about CrossFit while attending a high-intensity fitness workshop in Britain. He researched more about the program and decided to fly to Los Angeles, Calif., where he completed the Level 1 Certificate Course. In January 2011, he began running CrossFit sessions with a small group of people in an empty soccer field on the outskirts of Cairo, and he affiliated in March 2011.

Coincidentally, this core CrossFit group was born the same month as the popular uprising that forced Mubarak from

power. It was a chaotic time but also a moment of great optimism. For Saleh and other entrepreneurs, it was a moment of opportunity.

"With the chaos, it's a little counterintuitive—a lot of businesses did go down at that time, but in health and fitness the trend is quite the opposite," he said in a phone interview.

Saleh's first recruit was friend and fellow tennis player Karim Maamoun, now 34, who became instantly hooked on CrossFit.

"I know how important fitness is for me as a tennis player. I was doing some things similar to (CrossFit) but not as intense," he said. "I just loved the intensity of it, the new techniques. It's the challenge of it. It's not boring like going and working out in a gym."

Despite the disruptions in daily life that have gone along with the last three years of political unrest, Saleh found that the chaos actually made CrossFit's intense workouts even more appealing.

"Having that outlet, having that community, having like-minded people," he said, "it definitely helps get away from everything that's going on around you."

Building and Maintaining Momentum

At first, CrossFit Stars grew slowly. After six months, there were only 50 participants, and they were still working out on the soccer pitch. A growth spurt occurred in early 2012 when the company started holding bootcamps in other parts of Cairo, including the Gezira Club, in the heart of the city, and the suburban neighborhood of Heliopolis. In February 2013, the affiliate moved into its current glass home, and the core CrossFit group at the Swan Lake compound became a sort of family.

"In the middle of all the chaos, you have something you're in control of, because nothing else was under control. I think it came (at) the right time for everyone involved," said Karim's wife, Ariana, also a CrossFit coach. "We don't get into politics here. We just work out."

Ariana had been working as a project manager in a construction company, but after her husband became obsessed with CrossFit, she also got pulled into the CrossFit orbit and became a coach.

"You start it, you realize, 'What have I been doing until now? That's not really fitness! You see results. You push yourself to a limit you never did before,'" she said. "I really felt if we spread this around, if I have the time to invest, we can change people's lives."

Everyone who joined the CrossFit group early on remembers the experience as one of transformation. The participants began to realize that working out could be not just a hobby or a means to losing weight but also a pathway to making positive changes in their lives as a whole. People came to realize that their bodies were capable of more than they ever thought.

"It's a renewal of your ambition. It's about being competitive. It's about your self-esteem," said Mostafa Wafik, who at 19 is the youngest member of the box.



Salloum, a former swimmer and rugby player, has found a new outlet for his competitive spirit.



Despite protests and violence, the CrossFit community in Cairo has grown steadily and now includes around 400 people.



Members of CrossFit Stars realize they can't put their lives on hold, so they make the decision to train amid the chaos, using burpees and box jumps as a break from reality.

But growing the community was not always easy. Bodybuilding, gymnastics, gym culture and team sports have a long history in Egypt. In the 1920s, physical fitness became important among young, upper-class Egyptian men attempting to project an image of strength and independence at a time when the country was still under British rule. But despite this history, CrossFit is something new.

"We're actually still in this phase of explaining what CrossFit is," Salloum said. "You find that people know nothing, and they ask what fitness is, so you have to go back and explain what fitness is."

Salloum played rugby and has been swimming competitively since childhood, and he now works at HSBC Bank in addition to coaching. He initially started CrossFit in 2012 in hopes of achieving his ideal body shape but now approaches it as a competitive sport.

"I see it as a strategic game," he said. "Part of CrossFit is actually knowing your body very well so you can assign tasks to it that you can handle and then still do something after."



Undaunted by evening curfews and frequent unrest.

But in spite of the barriers, the Cairo CrossFit community has grown steadily, spreading through word of mouth and traditional advertising. Today, some 400 people participate in CrossFit Stars training. A few Egyptian CrossFit athletes traveled to Europe and the U.S. to earn Level 1 Certificates, and Saleh has plans to take CrossFit to Alexandria, Egypt's second city, located on the Mediterranean coast.

There also is one other CrossFit affiliate in Egypt, CrossFit Engine 38 in Sheik Zayed, Giza, on the far Western edge of Cairo. While there are affiliates in Israel, Morocco is the only other country in Northern or Central Africa with a CrossFit affiliate.

Over the years, political turmoil has been a repeated challenge. In July 2013, the military coup against Morsi set off weeks of political violence. In August, the new military-led government crushed huge protest camps of Morsi's supporters, leaving more than a thousand people

dead over several days of fighting. The government also imposed a strict curfew starting at 7 every evening.

"We've had really difficult times during the curfew times and ... having a window of only one hour or two hours a day when you can call on people to come and train," Saleh said.

Even with the government intensifying its security clampdown, there is little hope of unrest subsiding anytime soon. In late December, a string of bombings took place at security installations, including a suicide bombing that killed 15 in the city of Mansoura, north of Cairo. At the Islamic Al-Azhar University, student protesters repeatedly clashed with police, leading to the burning of an administration building, exchanges of rocks and tear gas, arrests, and the deaths of four demonstrators.

But still, the hardcore of CrossFit in Cairo came to work out.

"The good part was people actually came," Saleh said. "They come. They worked out. They go hard, break some sweat, laugh it off and head back to reality."



About the Author

Bryan Anderson is a freelance writer covering the Middle East.

**In spite of the barriers,
the Cairo CrossFit community
has grown steadily.**

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Staying Ahead of the CrossFit Curve

CrossFit competition is evolving and growing fiercer every year. Emily Beers talks to Brian Bucholtz and Kara Webb about how the CrossFit Competitor's Course helped them finish 12th at the CrossFit Games.

By Emily Beers

January 2014



Michael Brian/CrossFit Journal

In 1972, my father, John Beers, qualified to compete in the high jump at the Munich Olympic Games. At the age of 19, he placed sixth at his first Olympics.

When you ask him about his Olympic experience, his careful training plan or his meticulous preparation, he will casually say: "Well, I got the junior Canadian record once at a local competition, and then I thought, 'Hey, maybe I'll be a high jumper.'"

1 of 8

Courtesy of Brian Bucholtz



Kara Webb (left) and her coach, Brian Bucholtz.

He was simply born to jump. Combine this with the fact that the high jump was quickly evolving in the early 1970s, and it was a bit of a perfect storm.

High jump's rapid evolution began after Dick Fosbury revolutionized the sport in the 1960s, becoming the first man to jump backward over the bar, a method that soon became known as "the Fosbury flop." Fosbury won gold at the 1968 Olympics, and pretty soon old jumping techniques such as the straddle and Western roll were abandoned for Fosbury's new technique.

Fosbury changed the sport forever, and when my father was competing in the early 1970s, it was as if high jump was going through a rebirth. Coaches and athletes alike were still fine-tuning the small details of the flop, meaning the door was wide open for huge improvements in the sport. My father jumped on the opportunity, so to speak.

When the Fosbury flop was introduced, the decade that followed saw five new records, beginning with Dwight Stones' jump of 7 feet 6 and a half inches (2.30 m) in 1973. He was the first jumper to set the record with the new technique. The current mark of 8 feet and a half inch (2.45 m) was set in 1993 by Javier Sotomayor of Cuba, who also used the flop.



Courtesy of John Beers

John Beers employing the Fosbury flop.

To a certain degree, the Fosbury flop is to high jump what CrossFit is to fitness. The concept of fitness has been around forever, but it was poorly defined or not defined at all, and many pursued it by similarly unfocused methods. But Greg Glassman's definition provided a way to measure fitness, and CrossFit provided the program to systematically improve it. And as in high jump in the '70s, the door is currently wide open for athletes to emerge and make their mark on the world CrossFit stage as they find new ways to do more work faster. It's an exciting time for fitness, a time of change and rapid evolution.

Greg Glassman's definition provided a way to measure fitness, and CrossFit provided the program to systematically improve it.

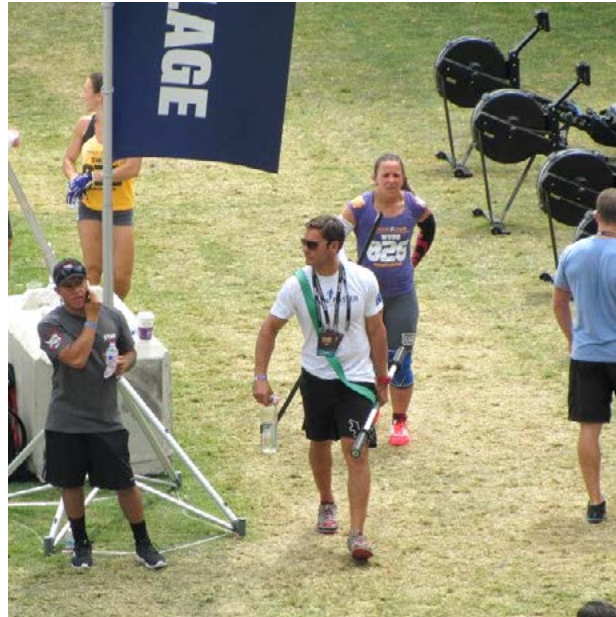
Evidence of this quick growth is in the numbers.

In 2009, the best snatch at the Games was 240 lb. by Jeff Leonard and 145 lb. by Tamara Holmes. All competitors had 10 minutes to max out. In the 2012 Regionals, 19 males and 18 females beat those numbers in a ladder format in which athletes had 50 seconds to complete 20 double-unders and perform one increasingly heavier snatch.

Dan Bailey's 1:35 judged Diane from 2012 would have been laughed off the CrossFit Message Board as impossible had it been posted there a few years earlier.

In 2013, a total of 138,610 athletes from 118 countries signed up for the CrossFit Games Open, more than twice as many as the previous year. In Event 13.3, a repeat of 12.4 from 2012, about 80 percent of participants who did the workout in both years found they were fitter in 2013.

Just as athletes and coaches pushed the numbers up in the high jump in the '70s, CrossFit athletes are pushing the limits of performance. But what makes our situation different than the 1970s is that our knowledge of functional fitness and training, nutrition, injury prevention and rehabilitation, and sports psychology is far greater than it was 40 years ago.



Courtesy of Brian Bucholtz

Bucholtz attended the first CrossFit Competitor's Course in the hopes of improving Webb's placement at the 2013 Games.

All this means that if you're a competitive athlete, you'd do well to keep up with the latest trends, techniques and training information. In 2013, only 0.07 percent of the athletes who registered for the Open qualified as individuals for the CrossFit Games. And the competition is only getting fiercer as fitness levels improve.

Bringing experts together to teach athletes and coaches how to train for competition is what the CrossFit Competitor's Course is all about. It's taught by Level 1 Seminar Staff members Chris Spealler, Matt Chan and Eric O'Connor, who have more than a dozen CrossFit Games appearances among them.

The course is for athletes and coaches who want to learn more about creating a well-structured training program, training weaknesses, peaking at the right time, moving efficiently, analyzing workouts, and optimizing recovery and nutrition.

Australian Kara Webb is one of these athletes. Webb (then Kara Gordon) competed in the Games in 2012, and she finished 19th. In 2013, her coach, Brian Bucholtz, flew from Australia to San Diego, Calif., to partake in the first CrossFit Competitor's Course.

Webb was already a Games athlete, but Bucholtz wanted to up his game and believed the course would help her get back to the main event in 2013.

The Webb-Bucholtz Evolution

The Webb-Bucholtz relationship began before either knew what CrossFit was. A former member of the Australian military, Bucholtz became a personal trainer after he left the service. Webb was one of his clients.

When a friend told him about CrossFit, Bucholtz signed up for a Level 1 Seminar in 2009. His first CrossFit workout was Fran. That weekend, a light bulb went on.

"A lot of previously unanswered questions in training made sense with the CrossFit methodology," said Bucholtz.

The next day, he signed up at a local box to learn more, and he immediately started experimenting with CrossFit methods and Webb, who took great interest in CrossFit. Eventually, he opened his own affiliate—CrossFit Roar—in 2011.

At that point Webb was competing in CrossFit competitions. She placed 19th at the Australia Regional that year, and the following year she made huge gains and won the Australia Regional, qualifying for her first CrossFit Games.

Bucholtz's commitment to Webb was total.

"I don't think I could ever coach another individual female competitor while I'm devoted to Kara. I put so much of my heart and soul into it that I wouldn't be able to provide that to one of her competitors," Bucholtz said.

Bucholtz's devotion to Webb led to a decision to up his game as a coach. And after "stumbling across a YouTube video" about the CrossFit Competitor's Course, Bucholtz was sure he had found an answer.

"I knew it was a must-do course," he said.

So in September 2012, he flew 14 hours to Los Angeles and then drove another two and a half hours to San Diego to learn from Chan, Spealler and O'Connor.

Learning From the Experts

A year later, Bucholtz looks back at the Competitor's Course fondly.

Two of the main things he took away from it were how to structure a program for a Games athlete throughout an entire year of planning and how to program for weaknesses.



Agust Sigurjónsson/CrossFit Journal

After a great year of training and competition, Webb returned to the CrossFit Games and improved on her 2012 placing.



While Eric O'Connor (right) focuses on basic press mechanics at the Level 1 Seminar, he addresses advanced techniques such as increasing cycle times for overhead movements at the CrossFit Competitor's Course.

In CrossFit, the skill requirements are vast and sometimes seem endless, with competitions demanding competency in everything from Olympic weightlifting to running to gymnastics. It's tough to know how to develop an athlete's new skills while maintaining or continuing to improve his or her strengths. Where does a coach spend valuable training time?

To answer the question, the CrossFit Competitor's Course introduced a tool called the Spider Web to help with programming for weaknesses. The Spider Web is a visual tool that identifies eight areas:

1. Metabolic conditioning (in its various modalities)
2. Flexibility and mobility
3. Stamina (and what causes stamina to break down—lungs or muscle fatigue?)
4. Olympic weightlifting
5. Cardiorespiratory endurance
6. High-skill gymnastics

7. High-volume gymnastics

8. Strength

An athlete then ranks himself or herself on a scale of 1 to 10 in each category. This allows the athlete and coach to see where the athlete's holes are. The same is also done for specific workouts such as Fran, Filthy Fifty or Nate.

Once the rankings are complete, the athlete and coach are left with a solid framework they can use to develop a specific training plan, one that focuses on areas, workouts and skills where the athlete is weakest.

Bucholtz explained how the tool helped him: "Using the Spider Web allows you to identify and link together a common theme where the athlete might need more focus—not just in one singular movement but in a movement pattern; for example, someone who is very strong in the heavy lifts but deficient in Olympic lifting," said Bucholtz, who went home and immediately used the Spider Web to set Webb's 2013 training plan.

Webb said Bucholtz didn't waste any time implementing what he learned in the United States.

"We sat down as soon as he got back from the course, as we always do, and just had a big chat about it all. I am always 100 percent invested, and I trust Brian so much that I love to hear his feedback," Webb said.

One of the major areas where Bucholtz's newly acquired knowledge helped Webb was the mental game.

"We spoke a great deal about how your words and actions before the workout really set the tone for it. We focused on no negative talk at all," she said.

She added: "I will honestly try anything to make me a better person and athlete, and so I was fully on board and really have applied it to my training."

**Two of the main things
Bucholtz took away were
how to structure a program
for a Games athlete
throughout an entire year
and how to program for
weaknesses.**

On Bucholtz's end, he noticed right away that Webb's training improved.

"Kara was able to work on her weaknesses without losing her capacity on her strengths," Bucholtz said.

Webb's results speak for themselves. Her 2013 Regional win and 12th-place finish at the Games were significant improvements over 2012. This fall, she earned a spot on the prestigious Team World at the CrossFit Invitational that was held in Germany at the end of October. She was a key part of Team World's 24-19 victory over the American team.

Webb credits much of her improvement from 2012 to 2013 to improved confidence.

Smaller Course Details

Another area the Competitor's Course covers is nutrition.

Webb happens to be studying nutrition in university, so she has a good grasp of what she needs to put in her body,

as well as when and how much she should be eating and drinking.

But where the course offered Bucholtz the most nutrition information was in the area of game-day diet. For the most part, Bucholtz lets Webb take care of her own nutrition, but he steps in when he needs to, especially on competition days.

"My job is just to make sure she actually implements it correctly on the day if she gets caught up competing," he said.

The same is true of recovery, another area of focus at the CrossFit Competitor's Course.

"Being able to manage her rest and recovery in the later stage of the year is extremely important into how she performs during the Games season," Bucholtz said.

"Knowing exactly how far you can push an athlete to maximize their training throughout the year, without tipping them over the edge, can be tricky but is vital for longevity in the sport," he added.



Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

Matt Chan (right) has competed in six consecutive editions of the CrossFit Games, giving him a wealth of experience to share with coaches and athletes.

Despite his high praise for the course, one thing a course cannot teach is individual work ethic and dedication. Bucholtz knows he is blessed to have found an athlete who possesses the kind of drive necessary to reach the elite level.

**“Knowing exactly how far
you can push an athlete ... can
be tricky but is vital for
longevity in the sport.”**

—Brian Bucholtz

“Kara is one of the hardest working and most dedicated athletes I have ever seen. Each year, she maximizes the use of her training time, and her competition results reflect that,” he said.

Course Evolution and Future

The purpose of the CrossFit Competitor’s Course is simple: to get athletes who wish to compete in CrossFit to reach their full potential, either by working with the athletes themselves or by working with their coaches. The competition goals can be as basic as doing better in a workout at an affiliate on a Tuesday night or as lofty as trying to bump Rich Froning and Sam Briggs off the top of the podium at the CrossFit Games.

O’Connor, one of the course’s instructors, explained: “The results that we hope for are that coaches can implement what we cover in their box to help others reach their goals, whether it be to help someone to just do their best in the



Nicole Bedard/CrossFit Journal

Webb moved up seven spots on the CrossFit Games leaderboard from 2012 to 2013. She hopes to continue that trend in 2014.

Open, to help someone qualify for Regionals or to help someone place at the Games.”

The CrossFit Competitor’s Course continues to evolve today, said O’Connor.

“We have added a lecture on analyzing recovery markers to stay away from overtraining or overreaching,” said O’Connor. He also said the course now features an expanded lecture on mindset and goal setting.

The course offers information to help athletes find coaches, as well as ways affiliate owners and coaches can implement competition-focused programming at their boxes.

O’Connor said he believes athletes often fall short in preparing for competition day, and athletes looking to get to the next level would do well to take notes during the section on day-of-event activities and how they can affect success.

“Knowing exactly when, what, how much to eat, when to start warming up, what to do for recovery ... , this can be huge and is often neglected,” O’Connor said.

O’Connor is happy with where the course is at, but they’re always considering possible options to take it to the next level. One idea is perhaps adding training camps for athletes in conjunction with the course.

Building Toward the 2014 Season

Bucholtz is so confident in Webb’s training program and development that much is staying the same this season.

“The same structure will be in place (this year), with the theme of building capacity throughout all movements whilst attacking weaknesses,” Bucholtz said.

He continued: “The game plan itself won’t change. We know everything about her capacity, and what she can and can’t do. After another year of training, her capacity will, of course, build, but the game-day strategies will remain the same.”

In practice, Webb’s weekly training schedule covers six days per week, and she’ll train for 60 to 90 minutes each day (including warm-up, mobility, workout and cool-down).

For Webb, Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays are considered “working days,” while Thursdays include light activity, as well as recovery sessions. Those sessions might include some gymnastics work, a long recovery run or an Airdyne workout. Fridays and Saturdays are heavier training days, and Sundays are rest days.

Bucholtz knows many Games athletes train more hours than Webb, but he believes that sometimes less can be more.

“In total, Kara trains no more than eight hours per week. I believe this is a big factor as to why she is able to bring so much intensity and dedication to her training,” he said.

Webb’s focus for the 2014 season is on making sure “there are no wasted opportunities.”

“I need to make sure that every part of my day is good for me—good food; good sleep; treatments on my body such as chiropractic, massage, dry needling; ... and making sure I can honestly tell myself that I did everything possible in that training session to get the most out of it,” she said.

Bucholtz added: “Our preparation for the 2013 season, in my opinion, couldn’t have gone any better, and with Kara’s work ethic and mentality, she will have a great result in 2014, as well.”



About the Author

*Emily Beers is a **CrossFit Journal** staff writer and editor. She competed in the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games on CrossFit Vancouver’s team, and she finished third at the Canada West Regional in 2012. In 2013, she finished second in the Open in Canada West.*

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Blind Spots

Bodybuilder Coco Kissack shares her story of a dark descent into the world of steroids and side effects.

By Maureen O'Hagan

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Ali: Courtesy of Coco Kissack

At first, her vision started to go.

There was blurriness and vertigo. And everywhere she looked, there was a floating spot.

She was putting on weight. Watery, puffy weight. She was just plain uncomfortable in her clothes, and she sweated right through them. That was new. Even when her coach had her eating something like 5,000 calories a day on a strict bodybuilding regimen, she hadn't gained like this before.

Meanwhile, she was losing her voice.

"I convinced myself it was the air conditioning," she recalled.

She felt angry. Aggressive. Completely lacking in patience.

One by one, Coco Kissack brushed each of these problems aside.

The vision? It must be her mascara, she thought. Or her contact-lens solution. Or maybe she needed a new prescription.

Her short fuse? Purely situational—a temporary problem caused by life's upheavals. She had just moved from Winnipeg to Toronto, Canada, leaving old friends behind. She had left a longtime job as a Winnipeg bus driver and was dealing with the emotional aftermath of a breakup. And in the midst of all this, her daughter, pregnant at age 19, was moving back in with her. Who wouldn't be stressed out?

Kissack simply didn't believe the drugs were causing her problems.

Kissack bought new mascara, new contact-lens solution, new eye cream. Her symptoms continued. She got a new prescription. Nothing changed. Finally, a doctor told her she had central serous retinopathy, a disease that is associated with steroid abuse. He looked at her bodybuilder's physique. Was she using?

Nah!

The truth is, she was. But Kissack simply didn't believe the drugs were causing her problems.

"I went to the source of all knowledge on everything: the Internet!" she would later recall. "I could find absolutely no

proof that steroids were affecting my vision. As a matter of fact, all the Internet experts (guys on bodybuilding sites) were pretty adamant that steroids couldn't possibly be the cause."

And so it was that Kissack began a journey that would change her life. Today, more than two years after getting off the drugs, she's on a crusade.

Steroid Culture

This isn't a story about how steroids mess you up—though Kissack now acknowledges that steroids did, indeed, mess her up. Royally. It's also not about casting judgment on the strange world of bodybuilding, though Kissack's life is wrapped up in that world, even today.

It's a story about blind spots. In trying to be tough, trying to excel, trying to become a top-level competitor, Kissack was blinded to something that, in hindsight, seems so obvious: don't put weird stuff in your body.

A lot of us wouldn't consider ingesting or injecting strange chemicals, yet the use of anabolic steroids is reportedly growing, and not just among competitive athletes. The drugs have become part of military culture, according to news reports. You can find threads running through law-enforcement circles. And how do you think some bikini models get their poppin' abs?

What percentage of models? No idea. How many cops? There's no way to know. But look around and you'll find plenty of anecdotes. In Arlington, Texas, last year, the [bust of a steroid ring](#) revealed police officers among the customers. Same thing in Louisiana. And in [New Jersey in 2010](#), a newspaper investigation found nearly 250 officers and firefighters from dozens of agencies obtained anabolic steroids and other hormones through a single doctor—many using their department health insurance. The DEA has a pamphlet titled [Steroid Abuse by Law Enforcement Personnel](#). Purveyors of these drugs have even placed ads in law-enforcement magazines.

As for the military, there are some estimates. In a 2008 Defense Department survey, for example, 2.5 percent of Army personnel admitted illegally using steroids. That's not a huge percentage, but does it capture all users? Unlikely. At Joint Base Lewis-McChord, in Washington state, some soldiers told investigators that steroid use was rampant. Several estimated that half of one battalion had tried these drugs. It was so common, they said, that it was done openly, according to a story in [The Seattle Times](#).

"No one really hid this," Seth Manzel, an Army veteran who served from 2004 to 2005 in Mosul, Iraq, was quoted as saying. "I walked into a squad leader's room one time, and he was with another soldier who had his pants down around his ankle. He had a needle and was injecting that soldier."

Given the demands of the job—regularly carting around loads that can top 90 lb., for instance—it's not all that surprising.

"If a captain sees his soldiers getting stronger at a quicker rate, that's not necessarily a bad thing," Manzel told the *Times*.

Cops, too, look for ways to maximize their physical edge on bad guys. But steroid use isn't all about performance. For some, it's purely cosmetic.

Indeed, the leaned-out, pumped-up look that anabolic steroids deliver is decidedly in at the moment, a part of the pop-cultural zeitgeist. One need look no further than Snooki of *Jersey Shore*: "My ideal man would be Italian, dark, muscles, juice head, guido." Ditto for her housemate Jwoww. "Tall, completely jacked, steroids, like, multiple growth hormones. That's, like, the type that I'm attracted to."

And, of course, steroids have long been a big part of the bodybuilding world.

The Slippery Slope

Kissack's Internet pals didn't think the drugs were doing any harm. Members of the medical establishment think otherwise. Steroid abuse has been linked with kidney and liver damage; it can raise blood pressure and increase the risk of heart problems; it can give men breasts and shrink their testicles. Need we say more? OK, one more thing: anabolic steroids are listed as "probably carcinogenic" by a major cancer research group.

Kissack entered this world through the back door. A former cardio junkie, she had gotten into weightlifting when she was trying to improve her running times. She found she liked pumping iron a lot better than pounding pavement and began training in "physique sports."

In her first competition, as a novice in Canada, she placed second. Afterward, people told her she could have won if she had just a little bit more muscle. That's when a coach gave her a "magic envelope" filled with pills that promised to help her burn fat and build muscle.



Kissack had some success competing clean, but once she saw results with steroids she never looked back.

"My delts popped like crazy!" she recalled. "It worked great."

Kissack said she didn't know what, exactly, she was taking—a statement that may strain credulity. In any case, she said she was furious when she learned it was methyl-1-testosterone (MIT). She had been telling people she was "natural"—that is, competing clean.

"I felt like a liar," she recalled. At that point, she figured because she was already doing drugs, she might as well do more.

"It's not a clear thought process," she now concedes.

Over two years, working with different coaches, she tried Anavar (oxandrolone or oxandrin) and Nolvadex (tamoxifen); she added human growth hormone (HGH); she used testosterone and Deca-Durabolin (nandrolone).

Pills led to needles. Dosages increased.

"I was so caught up in wanting to be the best, wanting to be a pro, I wanted to do everything I could to get as big as I could. I was almost hungry for it, anxious to try it."

It's easy to judge Kissack. This was female bodybuilding, for God's sakes, not the Olympics. Millions of dollars were not at stake. So why even go there?

Part of it was just who she was.

"I think bodybuilding is an extreme sport, and I think that a lot of the personality types that are attracted to it are a little bit extreme," she explained.

And Kissack was in the middle of a culture that (not unlike CrossFit) dismisses some of the medical establishment's conclusions. Bodybuilders simply think they know better.



Along with the PRs came more unwelcome changes: acne, hair growing out of her moles and terrible insomnia.

The anti-steroid information is just media hype, they say. If you're smart, and take the right dose, in the right combinations, at the right times, the drugs won't hurt you.

People who are into "gear," as the drugs are sometimes called, are really into gear. They spend endless hours online looking for the latest info, the best dosages, the proper cycling. They chat incessantly online, where you can easily find how-to guides on juicing for beginners. YouTube will teach you how to inject.

There are many ways to gain muscle naturally through hard training and proper nutrition. Most of them are a long-term investment. Anabolics are another thing entirely, providing results that are clear and immediate.

"They work," Kissack said of the drugs. "That's why people do them."

Kissack was hitting one PR after another. But it wasn't just her body that was changing. The drugs can quickly affect your thinking, too.

"I think bodybuilding is an extreme sport, and I think that a lot of the personality types that are attracted to it are a little bit extreme."

—Coco Kissack

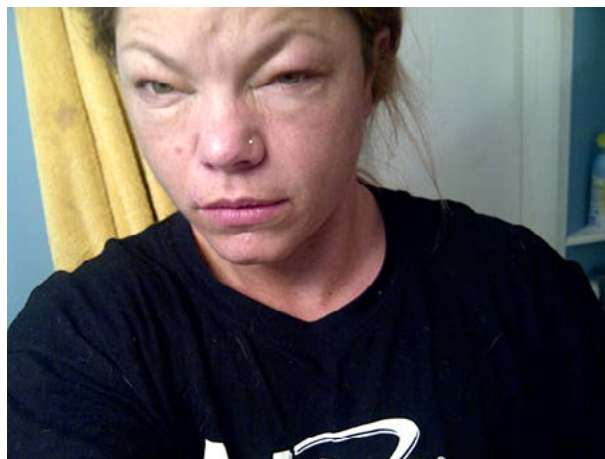
"It's probably four or five days before you get that invincible feeling," she said. "You have all of this stuff going through you that makes you feel more: more powerful, more strong, more determined, more ambitious.

"Without (the drugs)," she added, "you're just less."

The Needle and the Damage Done

Kissack was getting stronger, no question. But at the same time, her body was beginning to fail.

Her hair was falling out in chunks. Her vision was deteriorating. A specialist found cysts on her eyes and diagnosed



Almost blind, unable to walk up stairs without gasping for air, face swollen beyond recognition—and still Kissack kept using.

her with central serous retinopathy. It usually goes away in about six weeks, he said. But Kissack's vision just kept getting worse. As a city bus driver, this was serious. Eventually, her eyesight got so bad she had to give up her commercial driver's license.

Could it be the steroids? Nah.

She was unable to sleep.

"The insomnia was crazy," she would later write on an anti-steroid website. "I was taking sleeping pills, and pain killers at night ... then Clenbuterol and caffeine all day ... when I did sleep, however fleeting, I had to prop myself up on pillows, when I lay down flat, my lungs would fill up and (I'd) start choking. I started getting nosebleeds at about this time, and coughing blood ... and bleeding from my rectum."

On the site, she lists PRs including a 205-lb. bench press and a 720-lb. leg press, as well as conditions including a torn biceps tendon, sciatica and joint pain.

She consulted her "friends" in bodybuilding chat rooms about some of these symptoms. They told her not to worry. Just "stick to the plan."

By the time Coco's daughter, Kitzi, moved in, Coco had changed so much Kitzi didn't even recognize her. Her jawline was more square, more masculine. She had hair growing out of moles. Her back was covered in acne. Kitzi was tasked with the grim duty of regularly popping her mom's zits.

"The whole thing made me so sick," Kitzi recalled.

One day, the two of them decided to go swimming. Coco was a mess. She had trouble catching her breath and was nearly blind.

"She was feeling along the walls of the pool, all big and jacked in this little bikini," Kitzi recalled. She was disgusted.

One day, in the middle of a squat, a cyst burst in her eye. She ignored the blood.

Coco's moles began exploding. She could barely make it up the stairs, she was so breathless. One day, in the middle of a squat, a cyst burst in her eye. She ignored the blood. All she felt was anger that she had dropped the weight.

Coco now sees she was an addict.

"When a meth user starts losing her teeth, does she suddenly stop?" she asked. "It's the same sort of an idea. You get so wrapped up in it, that's all you know. The idea of losing control and strength in the gym when I had lost so much in everything else in my life, it was unimaginable."

She did as instructed and upped her dosages.

End of the Line

In October 2011, Coco and her daughter were building an IKEA bookcase together. She asked Kitzi to get inside the bookcase to hold it up so she could screw the parts together. Kitzi refused, afraid it was going to fall on her. The two began arguing.

Coco's temper flared, and she shoved her pregnant daughter. Kitzi fell, belly first, onto a helmet on the ground.

"That was pretty much the final thing," Kitzi recalled.

She gave her mom an ultimatum: stop using steroids or she'd never see her grandbaby.

Coco was stunned.

"It was almost like for a moment of clarity it hit me," she recalled.

She decided to quit. But how? She was addicted, physically and emotionally. She searched the Internet and could find no solid guidance. She called Alcoholics Anonymous, and they said they couldn't help her. She tried Narcotics Anonymous, and they said the same. She saw a doctor who had no experience dealing with a woman on steroids.

She quit cold turkey.

"The depression that hit me was extreme," Coco recalled.

She was nauseated, and angry. She had tremors and nosebleeds and light sensitivity. She wanted to jump off a bridge. She spent three days that October in a closet, shaking, with her dog sitting beside her. In November, she remained mired in depression and confusion. But eventually, her head began to clear. By February, her vision had improved. By March, she started to feel "normal" again.

Eventually, she started seeing the drugs in a completely different way. When people are competing in bodybuilding, she realized, "they look great on stage. But you see them a few weeks later and they put on 25 or 30 lb. They say it's post-competition depression. But it's also the drugs, and they don't want to admit it."

In the two years since that confrontation with Kitzi, Coco has become an anti-steroid crusader and freely tells her story in the hopes that others don't go down the same path. She's featured prominently on a website dedicated to a teenager, [Taylor E. Hooton](#), who committed suicide after using anabolic steroids.

Her health, she said, has returned. She ran 5 km without any problem. Her eyesight isn't as good as it was, but she can see. She's not as big as she was when she was using anabolics, and her bench press isn't as good. But "my love for the world is back again," she said.

She's still competing in bodybuilding—clean, she says. In July 2013, she entered the Canadian Nationals, placing sixth in the middleweight division.

That, she said, "was huge."



About the Author

Maureen O'Hagan is a Seattle-based journalist who is the recipient of numerous national writing and reporting awards. Skeptical by nature, she tried CrossFit for a newspaper story in 2009. Now she's hooked.