

# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

February 2013

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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## Systolic: 140. Diastolic: 104. Impending stroke.

Russ Laraway explains why he believes CrossFit literally saved his life.

By Russ Laraway

February 2013

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Verlana Laraway

Over the holidays, I exercised very regularly, but I broke a number of my diet principles. As a result, I watched my weight, body fat and blood pressure creep up.

It occurred to me that this is my reality. My body, for whatever reason, is highly sensitive to diet and exercise. It further occurred to me that, because of this reality, CrossFit saved my life.

### The Wake-Up Call

I left the Marine Corps in the summer of 1998. I was pretty fit, and more than most people, I had a great foundation to become a fit civilian—but I blew it. I guess it's like a lot of things ...

Next thing you know, it's seven years later. Gradual decline. I didn't fully realize how steep my physical decline had been, but a doctor put it in crystal-clear perspective for me in the summer of 2005. I had acquired a pretty bad case of poison oak, and I headed to the doctor for some steroids. Per normal, they'd taken my blood pressure and other vital signs. Steroid prescribed, the doctor wanted to focus on my blood pressure.

"You know your blood pressure is very high at 140/104."

"Wow. I didn't know."

"Are you on any kind of medication for that?"

"Nah, I don't really like medication, and I'm sure I'll get it back down."

"You don't like medication?" she asked.

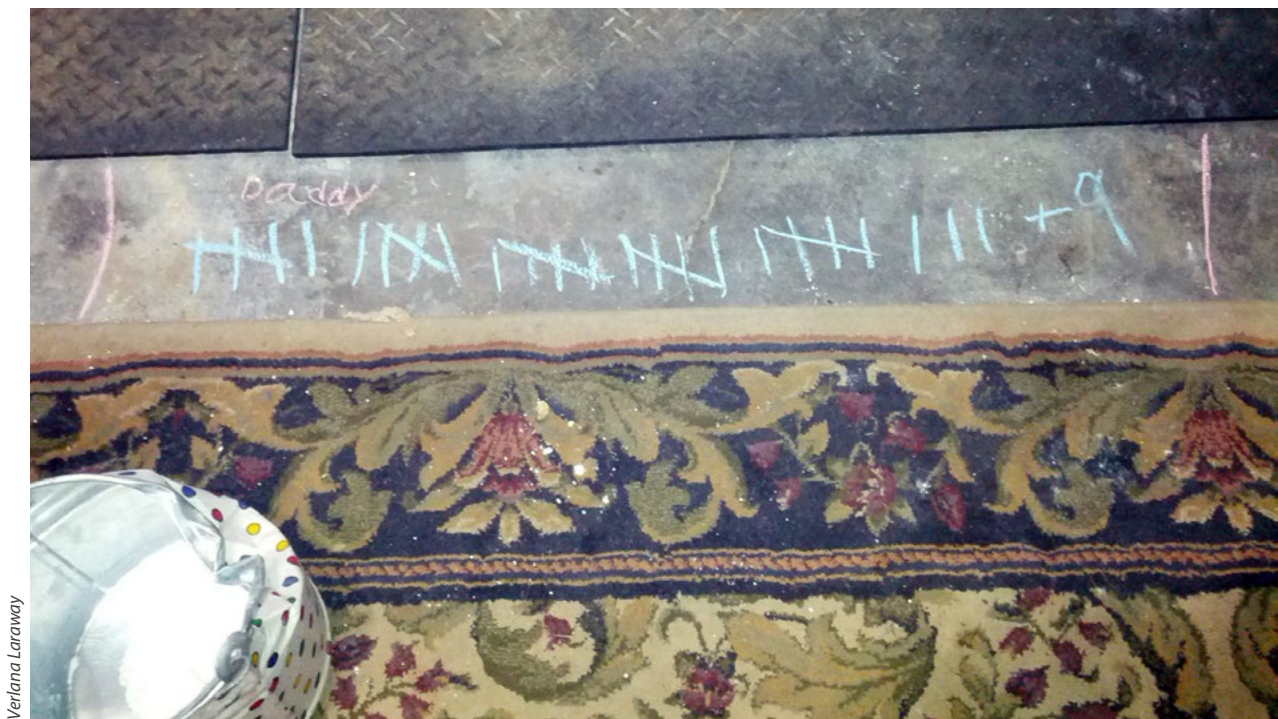
She paused and continued bluntly, "Let me put the tradeoff you are making into perspective: you have decided not to take medication, and consequently you are likely heading down a path of having a stroke before you are 40."

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**I didn't fully realize how steep my physical decline had been, but a doctor put it in crystal-clear perspective for me in the summer of 2005.**

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I moved immediately to get on medication, and things came into balance. I further realized I needed to begin exercising regularly again. I hated the gym and didn't really know where to start. I would occasionally go for a run, but there was no rhyme or reason or regularity to my fitness regimen.



Verlana Laraway

***"CrossFit code" such as this wouldn't have been seen near Russ Laraway circa 2005. Since it started appearing, he's noticed sharp improvements in his health.***





***With the risk of a stroke averted, the author decided to search out new challenges to overcome.***

In the fall of 2006, I started mountain biking. I got really into it with some buddies, and it seemed like enough. But it wasn't.

In September 2009, a close friend suggested I try P90X. All I had to do was show up and press play.

I persevered through P90X, and my appearance was significantly better, but I wasn't quite there, so I decided to start it over again: P180X, if you will.

It was fun at first, but midway through I started to get bored. Losing engagement, I started skipping workouts. I realized this was not going to be my long-term solution. It was not, in fact, the gym I hated, but the routine.

I was nervous to lose all the progress I'd made but wanted to find something sustainable and not rush into another 90-day fad. That same buddy who suggested P90X suggested CrossFit, and on Aug. 16, 2010—roughly a

month after I finished P180X—I opened CrossFit.com and saw a very accessible workout. I'll never forget it: 15 sprints (run for 20 seconds and rest for 40).

I sprinted my butt off and started the process of learning CrossFit. I scaled the crap out of everything. I used dumbbells for every weightlifting movement. I used dining-room chairs instead of plyo boxes. The door-frame pull-up bar started to destroy the molding around the door.

I soon added some modest CrossFit equipment: a 30-lb. kettlebell, a rock-hard 10-lb. medicine ball. CrossFit Brand X's website became my best friend with ready-made scaled versions of the workout of the day (WOD).

I was consistent and enjoyed it. I read [What Is Fitness?](#), and the article resonated. I'd worked for Google and am now at Twitter—two companies that strongly believe in measurement, transparency, data and rigor—and What Is Fitness? used those elements to answer the article's title question. CrossFit was specifically designed to maximize performance according to that definition of fitness, and it was humble enough to adapt and change as measurement and transparency demonstrated the efficacy of approaches through better human adaptations and results.

I quickly started to outgrow my home box. Because my wife and I were both all-in on CrossFit, and with three growing boys, we decided to go all-in on a home gym. Hampton bumper plates; 45-lb. Olympic bar; permanent metal pull-up bar; 20-, 24- and 30-inch boxes from Rogue; nice jump ropes; poods of kettlebells; big, soft, fluffy medicine balls and so on.

I was on a roll. In fact, I had convinced my doctor to cut my blood-pressure medication in half and had achieved sub 13 percent body fat. I was very steady, very disciplined—loved my CrossFit workouts. I tried to learn form from videos on YouTube and made progress, but the weights started to get to the point where I knew intuitively that if I didn't get my form squared away, I would eventually hurt myself.

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**I realized with great clarity  
that I had to break my sugar  
addiction, and I did.**

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I elected to attend a CrossFit Level 1 Seminar in Pleasanton, Calif., in the summer of 2011, while my wife was away visiting family. I learned, clearly, that I'd been doing it wrong and learned to do the big movements correctly.

The most important lecture, though, in that session was the lecture on diet. CrossFit prescribes the Zone Diet, and Seminar Staff trainer Russell Berger asked us all to go strict Zone for four weeks with no legumes, dairy or grains. I read the Zone book and realized the extent to which we'd been poisoning ourselves—and our kids in particular—with our nonchalance toward sugar.

I was disturbed by this paradox: tons of hard work and yet my body fat was still curiously high, and I was unable to fully get off the blood-pressure medication. I realized with great clarity that I had to break my sugar addiction, and I did.

I went through a couple of weeks of withdrawal. I was irritable, moody and had frequent headaches, but by the winter of 2011, I achieved 9.5 percent body fat and was finally off blood-pressure medication. I had finally achieved health.

### A New Approach to Life

It seems a drastic, dramatic and exaggerated statement to say CrossFit saved my life, but there are two reasons why it is true.

First, it is true because of how CrossFit works—not only because routine is the enemy, but also because every time you work out, you have a chance to achieve something. It's a sustainable program for me. Ellipticals and road biking and running and regular gyms are all my bane.

The second reason why I can say this, quite literally, is because of the diet insights that materialized at my Level 1. Berger is a gifted teacher, and he compelled me to act. I have no doubt my life has been extended as a result of this one session.

CrossFit has served as the foundation of a profound, though gradual, change in lifestyle and as the pathway to health.



### About the Author:

*A Philly native, Russ did his undergrad at the University of South Carolina, served as a Marine Corps company commander, ran his own business, received an MBA from the Wharton School of Business and worked at Google for seven years. He now works at Twitter, where he is @RussLaraway and leads the global SMB business. He's been an evangelical CrossFit athlete since August 2010. He lives in the San Francisco Bay area with his family of three CrossFit athletes and one gymnast.*

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## Aristotle in a Box

Dr. Jane Drexler reflects on philosophical ideas through the lens of CrossFit. It's like Philosophy 101 with CrossFit as the frame—or perhaps CrossFit 101 with philosophy as the frame.

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By Dr. Jane Drexler

February 2013

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Kim BellaVance

### CrossFit as Eudaimonia

*"Men will be good or bad builders as a result of building well or badly." —Aristotle*

Right around Day 12 of a 30-day nutrition challenge, I start to feel good.

The first week and a half feels like my body is on strike—"Where the hell is my sugar?"—and there are some mornings I have difficulty imagining ever feeling good again. But then, one day, that feeling of weary despair just sort of floats off; my eyes are bright, my legs have bounce, my mind is clear, and I feel on my way to a better self.

Day 12 is when I start to believe Aristotle again.

I start to believe again that the road to a good life—an excellent, happy life—requires difficult, uncomfortable steps for both mind and body. I start to believe again that the road is long but gets easier, that on the road we are helped along by our friendships, by courage and by self-love, each of which are, in turn, nourished as we take each step.

I start to believe again in a fundamental truth: each success gets imprinted on my character, and I become a little bit more "one-who-succeeds."

These are some of the key principles of Aristotle's ethics. His overall point is that when we "train"—physically, morally, intellectually—and, indeed, when we don't, we are molding not just our bodies or behaviors, but also our very characters, and in doing so, we are cultivating a core set of virtues that either enable or hinder our ability to flourish as human beings.

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### Aristotle asked, "What kind of person ought I be?" His was a question of character.

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I have come to see that CrossFit—all of it: its nutritional focus, mental rigor, physical pursuit, community spirit and more—manifests Aristotle's principles. CrossFit is not just a workout with a physical goal. It is also, and maybe even primarily, about cultivating a set of character traits that can enable a person to flourish in all aspects of life.

Eudaimonia means "excellence," "flourishing" and "functioning well."

In moral philosophy, there are essentially two kinds of questions. The first is "What ought I to do?" This question occupied most philosophers' attentions through Medieval and Enlightenment philosophy. For instance, St. Augustine and Immanuel Kant focused on coming up with moral rules to follow, and they emphasized the moral duty to obey those rules. The source of the rules differed, of course—God or Universal Reason—but nevertheless, to be "good" meant to adhere to a set of moral rules.

Aristotle, on the other hand, didn't care about that question too much. He asked a different one all together: "What kind of person ought I be?"

His was a question of character. He insisted that "rules" could not be given for how one ought to be because the moral question was always about whether or not people were flourishing, and flourishing looks different—in its particulars—on different people. Thus, there can be no moral cookie cutter dictating right action.

Flourishing means the capacity of a being to be its best self, to thrive, to vibrantly inhabit the world. This definition underlies Aristotle's central concept of eudaimonia, an

ancient Greek word. What eudaimonia really means is "functioning well." Excellence means "to function well." Happiness means "to function well." And "to be good"—and that's not just descriptively good, but also morally good—means to be "functioning well."

In carpentry, it is having a good eye for proportion and hand-eye coordination. In violin playing, it means sense of timing, tone and musicality, and so forth. And we might imagine then that in CrossFit, eudaimonia is achieved by "functioning well across broad time and modal domains." Take a second to enjoy how Aristotelian the very definition of CrossFit is.

But in addition to the eudaimonia of particular social locations and activities, Aristotle was primarily interested in the eudaimonia of being human.

What did it mean to "function well" as a human being? In answering that question, Aristotle found that there were some character traits, or virtues, essential to human flourishing, such as courage, perseverance, friendship, self-love and others.



Kim BellaVance

***To hand-release or not to hand-release? That is the question.***



Jane Drexler



***It's so much more than working out. CrossFit teaches perseverance, courage, confidence and friendship.***

One can easily imagine the explanation: One cannot be one's best self, thrive and vibrantly inhabit the world if one lacks the courage to move forward, the perseverance to push through difficulties, the friends who support one's endeavors, or the self-love to find oneself worth the effort.

CrossFit cultivates all these virtues:

1. We practice perseverance whenever we reach that pinnacle moment in a workout, described by Todd Widman in one of the first *CrossFit Journal* videos I ever saw: "(You see) the face go pale from lack of oxygen and start to turn blue and purple, and you see that wild-eyed kind of look, like 'I can't do this anymore,' and yet they push through" (*Portrait of a Flowmaster: The Conclusion Part 1*, Feb. 18, 2010).
2. We practice courage every time we walk in the next day to face challenges again. As Neil Amonson put it last year in the *CrossFit Journal* feature *Muscle-Ups at 10,000 Feet*, our workouts "are scary in their own way. It's not like scared you're gonna die, but just scared that you're gonna not meet your own expectations." Aristotle holds that courage is not just a soldier's concept, and it's not just about life and death. Instead, at its heart, courage applies in any situation when you are faced with a choice or action for which you cannot see the end result. That action can be running into a burning building or onto the front lines, yes. But it can also be asking someone out on a date, deciding whether to apply for a job or go back to school, expressing your view, or taking on a CrossFit challenge. All are examples of courage.

3. We practice self-love. We get up at 4:30 a.m. to head to the gym, or we suit up after a long day of work. We honor ourselves when we take a recovery day. Every time we finish a workout, we practice self-achievement. And when we abstain from sugars and grains, we enact the view that our sense of achievement and growth is more valuable than our desire for brownies.
4. We practice friendship, belonging and community. We come from so many different social locations—soldiers, mothers, lawyers, doctors, athletes, firefighters, teachers—but we all come together a few times a week to experience the energy of community. Amonson said it well: "Maybe that's what it is about the CrossFit community that's so incredible: we all share this experience, which is emotional. It doesn't look emotional. It looks like people working out. But it's emotional. It's raw. It's intense."

Aristotle is perhaps best known for this line: "Man is by nature a social animal." We need each other to flourish, on a practical level and on a spiritual one. Aristotle described many kinds of friendship, but true friendship for him was manifested in those relationships where each person actively sought to help the other to flourish as well. This was not a "yes friend" then. It meant being willing to critique, to help one's friend see a clearer path toward his goals, to help him get back on track when drifting. True friendship for Aristotle was not always fun or easy, though, of course, it sometimes could be.

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**CrossFit has the capacity  
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Aristotle's description of friendship is reflected in many relationships I see in CrossFit—when I see friends discussing recipes or helping to correct the depth of a squat, when I see competitions (or just the daily WOD) where the fellow competitors cheer for the successes of each other.

And I see that level of friendship in the harder times, when deaths occur or when folks' lives are altered. I see it too in CrossFit's enduring commitment to the flourishing of those whose opportunities are limited. CrossFit's efforts in Africa are but one example of the way CrossFit athletes help others, and there are thousands of such examples in affiliates around the world. As we play a role in the flourishing of others, we participate in our own flourishing.

In short, CrossFit has the capacity to help us cultivate the Aristotelian character traits so crucial to our endeavors to be fully human.

### Becoming by Doing

Aristotle started from a basic premise: no one is born virtuous or viceful. No one is born good or bad. Rather, we become virtuous (or viceful) through what we do.

We have a phrase today that basically captures Aristotle's point: "Fake it till you make it."

Aristotle said it this way in his *Nicomachean Ethics*: "By being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly. ... Thus, in a word, states of character arise out of like activities."

To become a good builder, you must build. To become a good runner, you must run. To become a good violinist, you must practice the violin.

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Every time I say yes to  
a workout, I am choosing  
to re-create who I am.

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As CrossFit athletes, we are all Aristotelian on this point. To become good at the clean and jerk, we carefully practice that lift. To correct a weakness, we work that weakness. Further, we recognize the importance of starting early and thus build CrossFit Kids programming into our boxes throughout the world.

Incidentally, Aristotle would have loved CrossFit Kids. It's all about practicing in order to become: to become fit, active, disciplined, adventurous, ambitious, courageous, supportive, self-assured, etc., CrossFit Kids wholly manifest Aristotle's point: "It makes no small difference, then,

whether we form habits of one kind or another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference."

Simply put, we become what we do. If we practice virtues that enable our flourishing, we will become beings that can flourish. If we don't, then we can't.

For example, if we grow up never practicing cleaning our rooms, it would be exceptionally difficult to be tidy as an adult. Similarly, if we haven't exercised in a long time, it is exceptionally difficult to start exercising. But when we have cultivated the habit of exercising, it is often very difficult not to do it.

Another way of thinking about it—and I think this is a lovely, inspiring thought—is this: we never simply decide once and for all, "Hey, I'm gonna be a runner." Or "I'm going to be a bad-ass CrossFit athlete." Rather, becoming that person is a choice that we make over and over and over again by saying, each day, "I will run" or "I will do CrossFit," then saying it every week, every month, every year. We never finish choosing.



Courtesy of Jane Drexler

**The author (right) believes, as Aristotle did,  
that we become something by doing it.**

Jane Drexler



***Is finishing the workout with ripped hands worth ruining the next five days of CrossFit? There's a fine line between courage and poor judgment.***

To me, that's a powerful thought. Every time I say yes to a workout, I am choosing to re-create who I am. I am choosing to move myself forward toward flourishing.

And, as a bonus, I am strengthening a habit.

The good news for Aristotle is that the choice becomes easier the more you cultivate a habit. Habits are like inertia: they help keep you moving when you're already in motion, and they help keep you stagnant when you're sitting still.

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**Aristotle taught us that there are excesses and deficiencies of each of the virtues—too much or too little of a good thing can easily slip into a vice.**

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As he reflected on the importance of habit—and the internalization of the virtues (or vices) through habit-formation—Aristotle distinguished between three types of personalities. The weak-willed personality is the person who desires those behaviors or things that will hinder his or her flourishing. These people want to eat the Twinkie. And, because they lack the will to fight that desire, they eat the Twinkie.

The continent personality is the person who desires the Twinkie—desires the thing that is bad for him/her—but has the power to control that desire and does not eat the Twinkie. He or she wants the Twinkie but eats the salad.

For Aristotle, the person who has desires “rightly ordered” is the temperate person. He or she does not want the thing that will hinder flourishing. These people have cultivated their desires to be in line with their flourishing. They want the salad—and that's what they eat.

We all know people who are one of the first two types at times. We, ourselves, fit into these categories. I, personally, am often continent or weak-willed. In fact, right now, I really, really want a cookie (and a cocktail—which I would argue is not necessarily bad for one's flourishing, dammit).

But, Aristotle's point here is essential: the more we cultivate good practices through habit formation, the more we internalize the virtues informing them, the more we want to perform those virtuous actions, the easier it becomes to choose those virtuous actions, the more we cultivate the habit. And repeat.

### **The Golden Mean**

We also know we're not always completely in the sweet spot of those virtuous practices that enable our flourishing. Aristotle taught us that there are excesses and deficiencies of each of the virtues—too much or too little of a good thing can easily slip into a vice.

Consider the virtue of courage. Yes, we came back again to push ourselves and dig deep in that next WOD. That's courageous, right? But to have the character trait of courage, one must have good judgment regarding three things: one's abilities, the risk of the endeavor and the value of the goal. Bad assessment of any of these three and you become reckless or cowardly.

It's probably easy to remember those times when we've slipped into recklessness: pushing through to ripped hands on the morning WOD's 100 pull-ups for time. When I do that, I have overestimated the value of the goal that day: the 100 pull-ups become all I can myopically see, obscuring my overall goals, which I dare say include being able to hold onto anything for the next five days, including the barbell that might indeed help me continue to flourish. Of course, I am not talking here about, say, the CrossFit Games, where you might very well judge the ripped hands to be worth it, in which case you've accurately assessed the value of the goal.



We fail to reach that Golden Mean between excess and deficiency all the time. We become resentful when we performed less well than we wanted. We become jealous of others and über-critical (of range of motion, most often). We push through on injuries that we should be nursing. These are not acts of self-love: here, we practice egotism (excess of self-love) or self-loathing (deficiency of it).

### Eudaimonia as Scalability

Knowing which actions would fall under excess, deficiency or mean depends on the person, and Aristotle was adamant that courage and other virtues require good judgment. By way of analogy, he put it this way: "If 10 lb. are too much for a particular person to eat and 2 too little, it does not follow that the trainer will order 6 lb., for this also is perhaps too much for the person who is to take it, or too little—too little for Milo, too much for the beginner in athletic exercises."

This is his whole this-is-not-a-rulebook philosophy. It is a set of guidelines toward which one must apply sound reasoning and self-discipline in order to flourish.

Take, for example, the question of whether or not you should move up to the RX weight. One person might be underestimating his abilities, never believing himself capable of moving forward and thus undermining his efforts of self-love and practicing cowardliness. But another may be soundly reasoning that she is not ready to move up in weight, and doing so would be rash and ego-driven. Sometimes we allow someone else to define for us where we are at and do not trust our own judgment. Other times, we let our fear or hubris clog our ears to sound judgment from our trainers.

So, no, we're not perfect on hitting that Golden Mean every time.

And for Aristotle, there is no way around it. Simply put, we have to be wise. We have to be thoughtful and willing to make choices. We have to be able to trust ourselves and be willing to know ourselves.

None of those are easy things. But they are essential for our ability to flourish.



Courtesy of Jane Drexler

### About the Author

*Jane Drexler is an associate professor of philosophy at Salt Lake Community College and holds a Level 1 CrossFit Certificate. She has published essays in several books and professional journals, primarily on political theory and ethics. At 43, her Fran time is an awesomely average 7 minutes, and her clean-and-jerk max hovers around 135 lb.*

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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## Accessing Athleticism

Trainer Anna Woods reports great success adapting the CrossFit program to clients with disabilities, whose PRs are measured not in seconds or pounds but improved daily function.

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By Anna Woods

February 2013

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Anna Woods

*Training partners Amy Klein and Debbie Hostetler.*

When I tell people I am a CrossFit trainer, the first assumption is that I work with skilled athletes. I usually respond that I work with a different kind of athlete. I train athletes with more determination, fearlessness, ability and competitiveness than most any other trainer I know.

The athletes I train have developmental disabilities—disabilities such as Down syndrome, autism and Asperger syndrome—while others are bound to a wheelchair.

What's so unique about training this population is that their fitness routine is truly a lifeline to their ability to function in life. Their days outside the gym are often filled with little variance, low intensity and varying levels of function. Conversely, CrossFit is the prescription that counteracts the routine of their day-to-day lives.

### **CrossFit: Infinitely Scalable**

One of the benefits of training my clients with the CrossFit methodology is the ability to keep workout times short. In these short and focused workouts, my clients have seen increased strength and mobility, improved cardiovascular endurance, and improved function and movement efficiency.

But the effects go beyond the 10 general physical skills. For one, CrossFit workouts help address sensory-specific stimuli many of my clients need. Some of them suffer from sensory integration dysfunction, meaning they either receive too much sensory stimuli and their brains become

overloaded, or they receive too little sensory stimuli and they crave information from the senses. In addition, some of my clients' tactile, vestibular and proprioceptive systems may be under- or over-reactive, which affects their touch, movement, balance and body awareness.

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**CrossFit provides  
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And, of course, CrossFit provides an atmosphere of competitiveness that drives my clients to get up each day and work harder, as well as a social setting that is so important to happiness.

When it comes to the universally scalable aspect of CrossFit, working with my clients is no different than working with anyone else. Workouts are easily modified for a client with no use of his or her limbs, or for an individual who does not have the ability to understand and apply the more technical movements.

That being said, programming for my clients takes creativity and is always an interesting challenge. I take my "toolbox" of equipment to the workout session with me, knowing that various factors will influence our workout for that day.

I base the prescribed workout for each session on the noise level in the room, the response to my arrival, the willingness to do the warm-up correctly, the day of the week, how close the week is to a holiday, as well as what I can sense from my client's demeanor that day.

The constantly varied aspect of the workouts is part of the therapy I use to expose clients to different stimuli and environments, which enable opportunity for exploration and movement.

I have had great success programming workouts with pushing and pulling heavy loads, wearing weighted vests, and lifting and carrying sand bags. All these exercises provide a calming sense to the body and the mind through deep pressure stimuli. On the other hand, striking a bag, ball slams and medicine-ball throws allow for the release of aggression that the individual has often kept bottled up.



Courtesy of Anna Woods

***This is CrossFit: universally scalable, constantly varied and functional.***



## Friendly Rivalries

Two of my clients—Amy Klein and Debbie Hostetler—have Down syndrome and are also workout partners. They are two of my most competitive clients. Because low muscle tone is prevalent in people with Down syndrome, we do a lot of work with both body-weight movements and strength training. We do a strength movement of various reps and weights in every session, and I prescribe a strength element in every WOD. Amy and Debbie are two of my most flexible clients as well, so issues related to hyper mobility are always a concern.

Running and step-ups probably get the biggest moans and groans when I announce the WOD to Amy and Debbie.

Not only do I train the physical aspects of CrossFit with Amy and Debbie, but I also work to incorporate mental training. Beyond mental toughness, we work on counting our own reps, reading the workouts off the log book and recalling to memory the previous workout, and they explain and show me where they were sore from the previous session, as well as how they feel about the workout after we finish.

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**Their biggest physical achievement was learning to jump from the floor to a small box, which is very hard to master for a client with a developmental delay.**

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"I like to try to beat Debbie in the workout," said Amy, who plays basketball and is a cheerleader in the Special Olympics, as well as an avid CrossFit athlete.

After lots of hard work, Amy and Debbie have both worked up to squatting and benching 65 lb. on a regular basis. They clean and press about 30 or 35 lb., and they are learning the hang clean and the split jerk. They have both progressed from wall push-ups to knee push-ups and can now do one or two full push-ups.

But their biggest physical achievement was learning to jump from the floor to a small box, which is very hard to master for a client with a developmental delay.

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**With my clients, we measure our progress through improvements in basic functions that many people take for granted.**

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With my clients, we measure our progress through improvements in basic functions that many people take for granted.

Rachel McGee, a client of Disability Supports of the Great Plains (DSGP), has lived the majority of her adult life in a wheelchair after being hit by a drunk driver in high school. She was very active before her accident, and due to the nature of her brain injury, when she looks in the mirror she still views herself as an active, healthy, ambulatory adult.

For Rachel, CrossFit helps fill the competitive void. After several months of CrossFit workouts, she can now strict press a 10 lb. dumbbell with her one functioning arm. She does one-armed pull-ups and push-ups with the use of a PVC pipe and my assistance.



***For someone like Rachel McGee, getting stronger can lead to life-changing improvements such as getting out of a wheelchair independently.***

Her favorite workouts involve wall-balls, where she punches the 6 lb. Dynamax ball I'm holding in my hand into the air over and over again. She sometimes pairs this workout with rope pulls, where a kettlebell is tied to the end of a rope that she pulls toward her with the use of her neck and arm.

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**To my clients, these accomplishments are as big a deal as an elite CrossFit athlete achieving a 300 lb. snatch.**

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But nothing makes her blood pump and jacks her heart rate like a good conditioning WOD against her workout partner, Janna Frank. Janna is another wheelchair-bound client at DSGP. Unlike Rachel, Janna has the use of both of her arms but not her legs, as she was born with cerebral palsy. With Janna, we focus on various forms of upper-body and core work using a PVC pipe.

As a substitute for pull-ups, she pulls herself forward out of her chair. She does push-ups by pushing against my body resistance. And we incorporate the arm bicycle into workouts for additional conditioning, as well as boxing for 30-second rounds. The winner is determined by who throws the most strikes during the 30-second round. Each week we determine a winner of the WOD, who gets bragging rights until our following session.



**Janna Frank's main motivation is to beat her workout partner, Rachel, in the WOD.**

Throughout workouts, Janna repeatedly reminds me how hard she is working and how out of breath she is. This is another benefit of CrossFit for a person in a wheelchair: it is the most effective tool for providing cardiovascular endurance for a person who generally does not have quick enough body movements to elicit a faster heart rate and breathing pattern.

"I feel really good about myself, and my weight is down," Janna explained. "I like to do them (the exercises) because my arm muscles are stronger. I can tell just by looking at them."

When we name the benchmark workouts after Janna and my other clients, it only helps to motivate them even more.

### **Celebrating Victory**

There's a saying that it doesn't matter what level you're at because the feeling of accomplishment is the same. This couldn't be more true than when it comes to the group of people I work with. Progress may not be highly recognized by common standards in the fitness world, but for my clients, their progress is something we celebrate.

Waking up with less pain, having the newfound ability to comb your own hair, regaining the ability to transfer yourself from the wheelchair to the bed, losing enough weight to fit into a new wheelchair or climbing an entire flight of stairs without assistance are the kinds of achievements we celebrate every day. To my clients, these accomplishments are as big a deal as an elite CrossFit athlete achieving a 300 lb. snatch.



### **About the Author**

Anna Woods took her first steps into a gym when her mom taught aerobics in the '80s and since then has always felt destined to be involved in fitness. She grew up in Hutchinson, Kan., where she played high-school and collegiate sports. She earned her bachelor of science degree in exercise science from Northwestern Oklahoma State University in 2005. After graduating, she moved to Kansas and opened her own training business in 2007: Woods Wellness. Soon, she added CrossFit to her triathlon and marathon training regimen. Today, she can't imagine life without it. She earned her CrossFit Level 1 Certificate in November 2012 and is currently a trainer at CrossFit Pathos in McPherson, Kan. She also continues to run her own personal-training business.

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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## The War Within

Veteran and affiliate owner Atom Ziniewicz struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and bipolar disorder. He ultimately lost his battle, but he fought with his CrossFit community at his back.

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By Hilary Achauer

February 2013

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Erik McKenna

On Sept. 21, 2012, 34-year-old Atom Ziniewicz faced down two Alaska State Troopers near Mile 270 of the Parks Highway in Fairbanks, Alaska. The former Green Beret, CrossFit athlete, coach and owner of CrossFit Liberation was armed with a handgun. Earlier in the day, he had shot and wounded 21-year-old Brenton Green and then disappeared. The police began a search, combing the area and establishing checkpoints along the highway.

Ziniewicz had spent the last year fighting a losing battle with bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and alcoholism. His life back home in Virginia was spiraling out of control.

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"I'm not like this," he had told his ex-wife, Carrie Satterlee, before he left.

"I can't quiet this noise in my head," he had told his good friend and fellow coach Scott Horton.

Deep down, Satterlee—who separated from Ziniewicz in February 2012—thinks he found the escape he was looking for in Alaska.

"I think he was looking for a way out," she said. "Given his background, he knew what the response (of the police) would be."

Four hours after the Green shooting, Ziniewicz appeared. He came out of the woods, about 30 yards away from the two troopers. Ziniewicz drew his gun, and the trooper fired. Ziniewicz was killed.

The voices, finally, were quiet.

### Beginnings

When Carrie Satterlee met Ziniewicz, they were both working as civilian contractors in Iraq. Ziniewicz had served in the Army from 1997 to 2004. He was a Special Forces sergeant, part of the military force often referred to as the Green Berets.

Ziniewicz began his CrossFit journey in 2004 when stationed in Okinawa, Japan.

"Fortunately for me, special-operations forces were some of the first to start implementing the CrossFit method into their fitness regime because of its high intensity and efficacy," Ziniewicz wrote on his bio for the CrossFit Liberation website.

Once he completed his military service, Ziniewicz left the Army. He wanted to be in the thick of things, in Iraq and Afghanistan, so he took a civilian job as an instructor for a protective security detail.

Satterlee met Ziniewicz in February 2004 at Camp Dublin, a training camp in Iraq. The two started out as friends, and as they worked together a romance blossomed. They started dating in August 2005.

"My first impression of Atom was that he was antisocial," Satterlee said. "He never really hung out with the rest of the camp members when we had barbecues or get-togethers. Then one day I remember him coming out for a barbecue and he seemed to be hanging around me a lot.

"I was always so amazed at how intelligent he was and that he had a very wicked sense of humor. And while he was a complete smartass, he also had this gentleness to him that was very disarming. He was very thoughtful and generous to those around him. He always seemed to be

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**"He knew how to talk to clients.  
He would say, 'Don't try—do.'"**

**—Scott Horton on Ziniewicz**

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good at whatever he applied himself to, whether it was being an outstanding marksman, writing or swimming. Even if it was something he had never tried before, he just set himself to the task and was a natural," she said.



Christopher Nolan

***Ziniewicz was an early adopter of CrossFit who set up a training space for civilian contractors and deployed service members in Afghanistan.***

While Ziniewicz and Satterlee started dating, Ziniewicz became more involved in CrossFit.

"When I was in Iraq and Afghanistan throughout 2005 to 2010 my journey took on a life of its own. I became a CrossFit certified trainer on one of my trips home," Ziniewicz wrote.

Satterlee and Ziniewicz were married in Mexico on Oct. 3, 2009.

Meanwhile, Ziniewicz continued his work as an instructor and mentor in Afghanistan for most of 2009 and 2010, and he took it upon himself to create and run an outdoor functional fitness training gym for his colleagues and deployed service members. He helped them build a training ground complete with tires, stones, sledgehammers, pull-up stations and weights.



***Scott Horton was an early client of Ziniewicz's and lost 85 lb. while training with him.***

### Warning Signs

Ziniewicz came back to the United States in March 2010 and began working as a personal trainer at a Globo Gym in Virginia. Horton was one of his clients.

"I was 330 lb. when I met Atom," Horton said. The two shared an instant connection.

"He had a good sense of people's abilities," Horton said. "He knew how to talk to clients. He would say, 'Don't try—do.'"

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**"He didn't know he had bipolar disorder. But then he threw himself into CrossFit and got clean and sober."**

**—Carrie Satterlee**

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Through CrossFit and Ziniewicz's leadership, Horton was able to lose 85 lb. and bring his high blood pressure and cholesterol to normal levels. Horton talked about his experience with CrossFit and Ziniewicz in a video in the February 2012 *CrossFit Journal* video [My CrossFit Story: Scott Horton](#).

Kerri McKay was another of Ziniewicz's original personal-training clients.

"He made you want to be better. He brought something out that you didn't know you were capable of," McKay said.

In December 2010, Ziniewicz and Satterlee realized a long-held goal—they opened their CrossFit affiliate, CrossFit Liberation in Lorton, Va.

"The name (of the affiliate) was a collaboration between the two of us," Satterlee said. "We wanted to have a patriotic theme. The motto for the Army Special Forces is '*De Oppresso Liber*' (to free the oppressed). We thought it would be great to have our motto be 'Freeing the Fitness Oppressed,' and suddenly CrossFit Liberation came to us."

Freedom may have been on Ziniewicz's mind, because ever since he had returned from overseas he was plagued by dramatic mood swings. The stress of opening a new business exacerbated his problems.



Nicole Bedard

***When Ziniewicz's condition worsened, CrossFit Liberation coaches and members stepped up to support the affiliate owner during his struggles.***

"He had difficulty integrating back into society," Satterlee said. "He struggled with drinking, and that was masking other things."

Satterlee added: "He didn't know he had bipolar disorder. But then he threw himself into CrossFit and got clean and sober."

Ziniewicz stayed sober for a year and half, but the stress of his new business took its toll.

"The lack of sleep and the stress of the gym led to a progression of mood swings," Satterlee said. "He experienced highs, and he would throw himself into work, then he would hit a low," she said.

Then, in November 2011, Ziniewicz had a 10-day manic episode, which led to a breakdown.

"We got him into a hospital. We knew there was something else going on," Satterlee said.

They had been to other doctors but had never received a diagnosis. Finally, a doctor diagnosed Ziniewicz with bipolar disorder 1 and PTSD, which was confirmed by another doctor.

The National Institute of Mental Health defines a person with a bipolar disorder 1 as someone who exhibits "manic or mixed episodes that last at least seven days, or by manic symptoms that are so severe that the person needs immediate hospital care. Usually, the person also has depressive episodes typically lasting two weeks."

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, bipolar disorder affects approximately 5.7 million American adults, or about 2.6 percent of the U.S. population age 18 and older in a given year.

"The Department of Veterans Affairs has quietly released a new report on post-traumatic stress disorder, showing that since 9/11, nearly 30 percent of the 834,463 Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans treated at V.A. hospitals and clinics have been diagnosed with PTSD," Jamie Reno wrote in the Oct. 21, 2012, *Daily Beast* post "[Nearly 30% of Vets Treated by V.A. Have PTSD](#)."





Nicole Bedard

**Horton lifts under the eye of his coach and friend, Ziniewicz.**

He continued, "Veterans advocates say the new V.A. report is the most damning evidence yet of the profound impact multiple deployments have had on American service men and women since 9/11. Troops who've been deployed multiple times to Iraq and Afghanistan are more than three times as likely as soldiers with no previous deployments to screen positive for PTSD and major depression, according to a 2010 study published by the *American Journal for Public Health*."

Although the diagnosis was upsetting, Satterlee said she and Ziniewicz felt a sense of relief when they found out the underlying cause of his mood swings.

"He took his medication. It can sometimes take years to find the right mix, but he was excited. He told me it all made sense, and he was happy to be getting treatment," she said.

## A Losing Battle

The athletes at CrossFit Liberation had no idea about Ziniewicz's struggles.

"He was such a good coach," McKay said. "He inspired so many people. He made people feel like they could do anything," she said. "He was larger than life and could bring greatness out of anyone."

McKay admitted that Ziniewicz was so physically and mentally strong she had a hard time picturing him struggling.

A few months after his diagnosis, Ziniewicz started drinking again. Horton said he stopped taking his medication because it made him feel fuzzy.

"He didn't like the way the meds made him feel," said Horton, who in addition to being the first member of CrossFit Liberation, had also become a coach. "He told me he drank to quiet the noise."

Ziniewicz was able to keep everything together for a while, but about five months after the diagnosis he spiraled again. This time he was taking his medication, but he began to cycle through mania and depression more quickly than ever before.

"Every couple of weeks he would have a bad day," Satterlee said. "It created a lot of anguish for him. He was embarrassed," she said.

Satterlee knew it was time to let everyone know why Ziniewicz was behaving strangely.

"I brought in the coaches, told them. They told the members, who were incredibly supportive," she said.

The drinking got worse, and Ziniewicz started to miss classes.

In February 2012, Ziniewicz and Satterlee decided to separate. The illness was a strain on their marriage.

"He couldn't focus on his illness, running the gym, and the marriage," Satterlee said. "We came to an agreement. He was my best friend, but we made an agreement, and at the time he was on his meds."

Ziniewicz moved in with Horton and his partner, Mike Newsome.

"Carrie was the love of his life," Horton said. "He thought she deserved better. He saw himself as broken."



### The Worst Enemy

Horton and Newsome did their best for Ziniewicz, but he was cycling through his moods more rapidly than before. One manic spiral, combined with drinking, landed Ziniewicz in the ER. Every rehab facility in the area was full, so Horton called in a favor and got Ziniewicz a bed in the Psychiatric Institute of Washington.

"It was scary," Horton said of the institute. "I didn't want to leave him there, but Atom told me it was OK. I told him, 'Pretend this is a really bad WOD.'"

Horton said Ziniewicz looked at him with tears in his eyes and said, "Thanks, man, I need to do this. I'm OK. Don't worry about me."

"The support was horrible from the V.A.," Satterlee said. "A lot of waiting in line, and we had to submit him for evaluation. The medical system in general was absolutely frustrating. It's a matter of beds. Sometimes, all that's left is jail."

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**"There is an amazing rehab center for injured veterans, but it's nearly impossible to find something similar for mental health."**

**—Carrie Satterlee**

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She added: "When they are not stable (at home), it's infuriating. You can't call the hospital, so you just call the police. Then they would ask me if he was threatening me."

Satterlee wondered if it had to come to that. She knew he had the potential to hurt himself or others.

"Every avenue leads to nowhere," she said.

"There is an amazing rehab center for injured veterans, but it's nearly impossible to find something similar for mental health," she explained.

Satterlee said that for Ziniewicz, the psychiatric hospital was a fate worse than death.

Satterlee realized she needed to accept what was going on. She started doing research and found that there were one or two facilities in the U.S. that would fit Ziniewicz's situation, but their insurance didn't cover it, and they didn't have enough money to pay out of pocket.

Ziniewicz had spent seven years of his life in the military, from age 19 to age 26, and then six years as a civilian contractor in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Suicide is now the leading cause of death in the army," Tina Rosenberg wrote on Sept. 26, 2012, in the *New York Times* Opinionator article "[For Veterans, a Surge of New Treatments for Trauma](#)." "More soldiers die by suicide than in combat or vehicle accidents, and rates are rising: July, with 38 suicides among active duty and reserve soldiers, was the worst month since the Army began counting. General Lloyd Austin III, the army's second in command, called suicide, 'the worst enemy I have faced in my 37 years in the army.'"

Rosenberg wrote: "There are many reasons a soldier will take his own life, but one major factor is post-traumatic stress. Anyone who undergoes trauma can experience post-traumatic stress disorder—victims of rape and other crimes, family violence, a car accident. It is epidemic, however, among soldiers, especially those who see combat."

According to the American Psychological Association, bipolar disorder is a combination of biological and environmental factors. Stress and trauma increase the risk. Satterlee said Ziniewicz was involved in multiple IED incidents while overseas. In addition, Ziniewicz's best friend was shot and killed when they were both 19, right around the time Ziniewicz joined the Army.



James Cullum

***As mental illness took hold, the things Ziniewicz loved most started to slip away.***

"We tried to change up his medication, but we were lucky if we could see the psychiatrist once a month, and he would just give us a prescription," Satterlee said.

"He really gave this his all," she said, "but he ran into problems and he didn't know where to go."

Horton saw a man desperately trying to hang on to himself.

"He would leave Post-it notes around that said things like, 'You're worthy' or 'you're strong,'" he said.

Ziniewicz had a whiteboard in his room in Horton and Newsome's house. On it, Ziniewicz had written in green Sharpie, "I had to fail in order for you to succeed. Be better than me."

In August 2012, Ziniewicz hit a low point. He was cycling through mania and depression every few days. Satterlee said he was having suicidal thoughts.

"He could never understand how someone could take their own life," Satterlee said. "He was scared, because he was having these thoughts."

Ziniewicz's doctors changed the medications, kept adjusting them, trying to find the combination that would work for him.

Meanwhile, Ziniewicz continued to drink, trying to quiet the voices he told Horton kept him up at night.

"He told me that's why he slept with the TV on," Horton said, "because of the voices."

### Letting Go

The timing was particularly difficult for the CrossFit Liberation team. They were gearing up to host their second annual competition, The Cold War, in which teams and individuals from around the mid-Atlantic region compete in indoor and outdoor events in the dead of winter. The first event, held in December 2011, was put on in partnership with Operation Ward 57, benefitting wounded soldiers, a cause close to Ziniewicz's heart. It was a big success, and Ziniewicz was excited about the competition in 2012.



Courtesy of Carrie Satterlee

*Ziniewicz (second from right) with members of CrossFit Liberation.*

It wasn't enough. Instead of getting better, things just got worse.

"I'm not sure what triggered the episode," Satterlee said. "But he went into a meltdown. He tried to shut the gym down."

Satterlee and the other coaches got Ziniewicz to stop, and once he calmed down, Ziniewicz decided he needed to take a break and leave Satterlee to run the gym.

He wanted to take some time to get his head straight.

"We didn't support it," Satterlee said. "He was really embarrassed. We kept encouraging him to stay."

Horton recalls the last time he saw Ziniewicz alive.

"We stood in the driveway," Horton said. "Atom had tears in his eyes. He told me not to cry. 'This is not your fault,' he said. 'This is me. You guys did more for me than anyone.'"

Horton said Ziniewicz told him the Cold War competition was going to be epic and said Horton and Newsome were two of his best coaches.

Looking back, Horton said he thinks Ziniewicz knew he wasn't coming back. "He was telling me these things because he knew he wouldn't be there," Horton said. "Then he hugged me like he's never hugged me before. That's the last time I ever saw him."

### Final Escape

Ziniewicz went to Alaska, and once there he went off his meds immediately.

"He hit a bad depression," Satterlee said. "I talked to him three or four times. He seemed pretty depressed, but he also seemed determined."

Satterlee was hopeful when Ziniewicz called with new ideas for the Cold War competition.

Then, on Friday, Sept. 21, Satterlee got the call she was dreading. It was the police.

According to the police report, Ziniewicz, armed with a handgun, confronted 21-year-old Brenton Green and 21-year-old Kimberly Scharber. Green said Ziniewicz threatened the two of them and shot Green twice. Both Green and Scharber fled the area and reported the incident to Alaska State Troopers. Green was treated for two gunshot wounds at the hospital and then released.

Alaska State Troopers and Alaska Wildlife Troopers, including a K-9 team and members of the Special Emergency Reaction Team from Fairbanks, Healy, Cantwell and Palmer, all responded to the area and established a perimeter. At approximately noon, two members of the Special Emergency Reaction Team saw Ziniewicz appear out of the woods about 30 yards away. The officers attempted to arrest Ziniewicz. The police drew their rifles, and Ziniewicz drew his handgun.

Ziniewicz was fatally shot.

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**"Without CrossFit, we would  
have lost him a long time ago."**

**—Kerri McKay**

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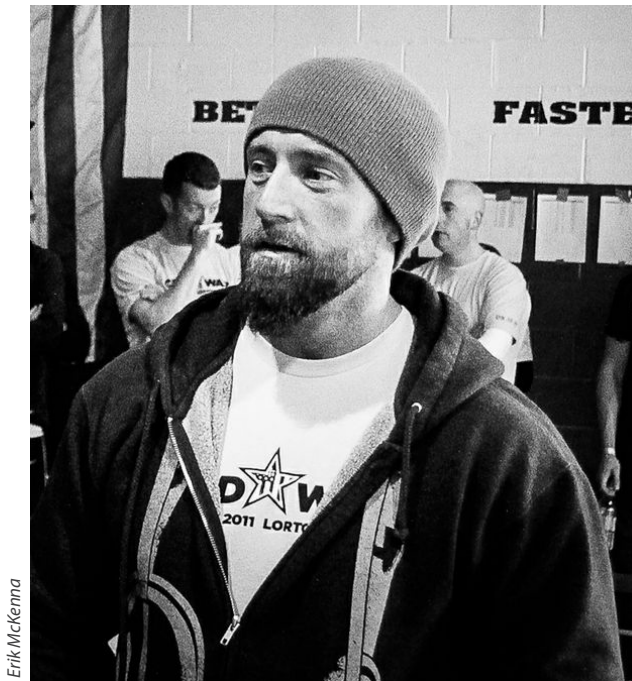
In the article "[Virginia Man Shot, Killed by Alaska State Troopers Near Healy](#)," KTVA.com, a local news station, reported that Ziniewicz stayed at Denali Dome Home Bed and Breakfast for three nights about three weeks before the shooting. Terry Miller, the owner of the bed and breakfast, described Ziniewicz as "crazy" and "lost" according to the report. Eric Helwig, a clerk at a liquor store where Ziniewicz bought \$400 of chewing tobacco and \$400 of liquor, said Ziniewicz seemed like an average, nice guy. "He seemed sane to me," Helwig said.

Satterlee traveled with Horton and Newsome to Alaska to collect Ziniewicz's remains.

"The police were sweet," she said.

Satterlee began asking questions, and from what she could tell, Green and Scharber came to Ziniewicz's cabin and were hanging out with him. It's not clear exactly what precipitated the shooting, but there was some type of altercation. Satterlee knew Ziniewicz had cash on him, and it was gone when the police arrived.

"Atom was a highly trained individual," Satterlee said. "He devoted his life to helping people. He had a kind and gentle heart, and he wouldn't hurt a fly. There is a lot that doesn't add up."



Erik McKenna

**Ziniewicz's bio remains on the CrossFit Liberation website to honor his memory and contribution to the community.**

"I think Atom was looking for a way out," Satterlee said. "Given his background, he knew what the response of the police would be. I don't blame the officer, but I still have questions."

She added: "Alaska is the last refuge of people suffering from PTSD. Episodes are popping up left and right. People are looking to get away."

CrossFit was not enough to save Ziniewicz, but Satterlee believes it kept him healthy for longer than he would have otherwise been.

"It was the one thing that brought positivity to his life," she said.

McKay agrees.

"He was fighting a constant battle," she said. "Without CrossFit, we would have lost him a long time ago. He truly loved the members (of CrossFit Liberation) and he loved CrossFit," she said.

"The members were devastated," Horton said of losing Ziniewicz. "It was so horrific and violent. It brought us closer together."

## Forging Ahead

Despite their shock and sadness, Satterlee and her team decided to go forward with the Cold War competition. They dedicated it to Ziniewicz's memory and raised money for Invisible Wound, a nonprofit organization benefitting victims of PTSD, and the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

The event was a success, with over 200 athletes from the mid-Atlantic region competing, representing over 40 affiliates across six states. The two-day event included a swim workout as well as a weighted rucksack march.

"We are all human and can't tackle all the curve-balls that life may throw at us on our own, we need to work as a team. The CFL community has literally saved my life and looked out for my well-being on more than one occasion. I can only hope that my continued work here has repayed (sic) that in some small way," Ziniewicz wrote on his [CrossFit Liberation bio](#), which has been preserved on the website in his memory.

There are thousands of men and women who, like Ziniewicz, are returning home after serving their country to find their war has just begun. Media reports such as the ones quoted above indicate the mental-health services offered by the V.A. are seriously inadequate to the current need, but moves are being made to change this. Harvard Medical School has joined the Association of American Medical Colleges, along with more than 100 medical schools, in a national initiative called [Joining Forces](#), formed under the leadership of Michelle Obama and Jill Biden. The initiative seeks to create more opportunities for military families and works to expand access to wellness programs.

Nobody knows what Ziniewicz was looking for in Alaska, or what he was thinking when he faced down the state troopers. What is clear is that despite the efforts of his friends, his family and his community, Ziniewicz did not get the help he needed, and he chose the only option he thought remained.



## About the Author

*Hilary Achauer is an award-winning freelance writer and editor specializing in health and wellness content. In addition to writing articles, online content, blogs and newsletters, Hilary is an editor and writer for the **CrossFit Journal** and contributes to the CrossFit Games site. An amateur boxer-turned-CrossFit athlete, Hilary lives in San Diego with her husband and two small children and trains at CrossFit Pacific Beach. To contact her, visit [hilaryachauer.com](http://hilaryachauer.com).*



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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## When Water Comes to You

CrossFit-funded collection systems are freeing Kenyan women from the burden of transporting water, allowing them to pursue education and take important steps toward equality. Marty Cej reports.

By Marty Cej

February 2013

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Staff/CrossFit Journal

Their ambitions are the same as those of kids everywhere, but the opportunities in the Kasemeni Division of eastern Kenya are very different.

Across this 250-square-mile region, small villages of mud-walled huts and thatched roofs cluster in shallow green valleys and atop bald red clay hills that look east to the brown haze of the port city of Mombasa and the blue water of the Indian Ocean beyond.

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Small patches of farmland are carved from the dense clay along the hillsides using a short, wide-bladed hoe called a *jembe*. The length of the handmade tool forces the workers to bend from the waist from sun-up to sundown as they swing and turn the soil. But years of experience, skill and strength allow the farmer to plant acres of corn in a day, often with a baby on her hip.

And if that baby happens to be a girl, odds are she, too, will be scratching at the earth with an Iron Age tool with a child on her own hip before she is 18. In this part of Kenya, the children are many, the schools are few, and too many ambitions, especially those of young girls, are thwarted at too young an age.

CrossFit and CrossFit affiliates have decided to take some of the burden from the backs of those who have carried it too long. Education, nutrition and clean water are this community's biggest challenges. Now, they are CrossFit's greatest responsibility.

"This is all about women," says Greg Glassman, Founder and CEO of CrossFit Inc. "Every little girl is as important as every little boy. This is CrossFit making a stand for women's rights."

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### CrossFit and CrossFit affiliates have decided to take some of the burden from the backs of those who have carried it too long.

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In this part of Kenya, girls start working at three and four years of age, when they begin babysitting younger siblings and accompanying their mothers, aunts and other female relatives back and forth to water sources where they scoop foul water into plastic buckets that weigh 55 lb. when full. The buckets are lifted smoothly from the muddy ground to the knee and then overhead, to be placed gently onto the folds of a scarf coiled into a flimsy cushion at the crown of the head. The women will square their shoulders, adjust their postures, and stride up the rocky path from the water hole with their hands at their sides as elegantly as a skater gliding across a frozen lake.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

***In Kenya, women have few options beyond farming, but CrossFit is hoping to change that.***

During the dry season, many of these women and girls must make the trip twice a day, a journey of up to four miles each way.

But in the village of Peku, a concrete cistern that will hold 35,000 liters of water has been built by CrossFit Brand X, CrossFit Kirkwood and Dallin Frampton's band, The Savage Hurricanes. Frampton is the young man who first approached Coach Glassman with the idea of getting CrossFit to make a difference in Kenya. The cistern will provide 60 schoolchildren half a liter a day for four months. The rainwater spills into the tank from the school's roof gutters, and a single crushing downpour during the season of the big rains can fill the entire cistern in an hour.

It will be the cleanest water the kids of this village have ever known, and it will free the women and girls from hours of portage and open up a lifetime of opportunity.





***With so much time spent transporting water, girls have no time to get an education. A cistern would change that.***

"We build a classroom with a roof and then a cistern that will hold 40,000 litres of rainwater, which will get most of the kids through the dry season," Glassman explains. "Build two cisterns and it's the whole village. The time women spend carrying water to and from the waterholes disappears. This is about liberating women from the portage of water. Once we get women out of the water business, we get a civilization."

To be sure, at waterholes all over the district, the same scene is played out twice a day: grandmothers, mothers, sisters and daughters collect water. It's hard work, yet the women are skilled and efficient, and these few minutes are also spent renewing the bonds of community, sharing stories and news, joys and grief. The women are bound to one another in their work, their challenges and their shared responsibilities, but for generations they have also been bound to a destiny where daughters can do nothing but follow the path of their mothers and grandmothers until they, too, are mothers and grandmothers.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) points out that gender equality is a prerequisite to economic development and prosperity, and that while gender equality is,

first and foremost, a human right, empowering women through education is a key to breaking the cycle of poverty.

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**Hardship in these small villages  
has never been an impediment  
to joy, and hard work is often the  
starting point for it.**

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"When mothers are educated and families are smaller, the likelihood that all children will go to school increases. Thus, a woman's education has intergenerational ripple effects," the UNFPA explains. "Also, families with fewer children, and children spaced further apart, can afford to invest more in each child's education. This has a special benefit for girls, whose education may have a lower priority for families than that of boys."

But hardship in these small villages has never been an impediment to joy, and hard work is often the starting point for it. With hard work, and a helping hand, new paths are being broken.

Before CrossFit arrived, the students near the village of Dzendereni sat on the dirt floor of a mud-walled classroom, using their thighs as desks and hoping the rains held off until class was over. But change, like the weather, can come fast in this part of Africa. It was 10 months from the first conversation between Frampton and Glassman to children settling down in a new schoolroom in new desks with CrossFit logos on them. Enrollment has climbed and test scores have soared as brick walls, practical desks and new blackboards keep kids focused and motivated.

"The parents just wanted their children to remain home because of the uncondusive (sic) environment for learning," says Seif Mwachanyika, the new Dzendereni school's principal. "Before the coming of CrossFit, the enrollment was standing at 114. The enrollment is now standing at 395."

And the girls are thriving, which is a good thing not just for the small villages that dot this eastern coast province but also the entire country.

According to the Organization for Economic Coordination and Development (OECD), gender inequality is a both a major cause and effect of hunger and poverty in developing nations. The OECD estimates that 60 percent of chronically hungry people are women and girls, and countries with the highest levels of hunger also have high levels of gender inequality. But women and girls are also the linchpin in any program to overcome hunger, malnutrition and poverty.

The most disheartening fact is that while women and girls form the backbone of smallhold farms and are the main food producers in most developing nations, they traditionally have less access than men to opportunities, resources, local services and social protection. Fewer girls go to school and fewer girls stay.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

*In Africa, education can literally add years to a person's life expectancy and open a host of new avenues of opportunity.*





***Given food, water and education, these children will have a chance to break tradition by avoiding the fields and creating new lives for themselves.***

In the area around Dzendereni, the top students five years ago used to be all male. Now those places are more regularly occupied by women, and in one school, you would have to head to 11th place to find the first male scholar. The result is a new form of equality that's never been seen in the region.

Land is still divided and passed on to male heirs. A husband's occupation might be farm laborer, small shopkeeper or perhaps even migrant worker. Women are the main caregivers and laborers and, as mothers, responsible for the reproduction of labor. But things change when a young girl goes away to school and returns as an educated woman.

"Education changes life for everyone in the community," says Mishi Matano, the head teacher at a school in Majengo that was built by CrossFit Norcal. "They take it home to their villages."

Not only is Matano a teacher, but she is also the owner of a tree farm and a turkey farm and the mother of several children.

But if education is the foundation for a better future, then water, nutrition and sanitary living conditions are the mortar and bricks. CrossFit contributions have stretched miles to the west end of this district to halt a sanitary disaster in the village of Bofu, where shoddy construction led to the collapse of a latrine that serves 700 children. A new latrine with brick walls, a solid roof and plenty of privacy has already been built. And this, too, will have a long-term impact on the lives of women and girls.

"Investments in clean water, sanitation, time-saving technologies and skills training can improve sustainable resource management, food security, nutrition and health," the UNFPA explains. "It can also reduce the time spent on collecting water and firewood, releasing girls and women for educational and other productive activities."

### Hope for Kenya

A baby was born in the clinic in Myenzi in early November, but the mother wasn't from there. She walked six miles to give birth, and 12 hours later she walked six miles back. Luvuno Rama, who is 22 years old, never went to school but is determined that her new son, Hamisi, will.

And because a few friends at CrossFit Marina have decided to bond over some barbells and a barbecue, they will, in turn, be bound to a multitude of children breaking a new trail to university by first stepping through the doors of a school the fundraising efforts helped build.

One of those children will be Luvuno's son Hamisi. And by the time he's old enough to start school, he had better be ready to work, because two of the other babies born in Myenzi that night were girls.

*For more information about Hope for Kenya and the fundraising workout on Feb. 16, 2013, visit [Kenya.CrossFit.com](http://Kenya.CrossFit.com).*



### About the Author

Marty Cej is a contributing editor to the **CrossFit Journal** and the managing editor of Business News Network (BNN) in Toronto, Canada.

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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## Less Training, More Living

The members of CrossFit Alaska use CrossFit to get into shape for the physical demands of daily life in the North. One member used it to save his life—twice.

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By Hilary Achauer

February 2013

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Courtesy of Jim Mitchell

*Seaworthy vessel? Blair Parker, Jim Mitchell, Chuck Akin (l-r) and the makeshift raft they paddled into the Bering Sea.*

Alaska's wilderness is breathtaking and majestic, but everyday life requires a high level of fitness. The rugged environment is unforgiving, and little mistakes and small errors in judgment can have disastrous consequences in the North. When everything goes to hell, strength, endurance and grit can literally mean the difference between life and death.

Cheryl Boatman Photography



That's where CrossFit comes in.

In Alaska, functional fitness means being strong enough to rescue stuck ATVs, shovel snow, chop wood and survive an avalanche. Residents hunt game, catch salmon and forage for wild berries. Many Alaskans have physically taxing jobs, and common hobbies including backcountry skiing, mountain climbing and mountain biking. Strength, balance, flexibility and endurance are not skills developed in the gym only to be used in the gym.

"When it comes to training, we train in here to get better out there," said Tony Reishus, owner of CrossFit Alaska.

### The Hunt

"I ate three different game animals one day," Reishus said. The meat wasn't purchased in a store; this was meat hunted, killed and butchered by friends of his.

"People don't realize there's a lot of work involved in hunting," Reishus said. That's especially true in the vast and forbidding wilderness of Alaska, where the hunt usually starts with a long hike over rough terrain.

"Moose hunting is really popular in Alaska," Reishus said. Once the hunter kills the moose, the work has only just begun.

"The animals can weigh up to 1,200 lb.," Reishus explained. "The only way to get it back to car is to butcher the animal on the spot with your strength and then pack the meat in 100-pack portions and carry it through woods and swamp."

CrossFit helps hunters in Alaska get in shape more efficiently, so they can spend more time enjoying the outdoors and less time training. Many of the members of CrossFit Alaska spend the winter backcountry skiing. This involves hiking for three or more hours up a mountain, all for one 20-minute run.

Another favorite wintertime activity is snow-machining (known as "snowmobiling" in the Lower 48). Reishus didn't think it seemed difficult ... until he tried it.

"It takes so much strength to run that thing, especially in deep powder," Reishus said. "I took one out in 10 feet of powder, and you gotta steer the machine with your body weight, then when it gets stuck you have to deadlift and sumo deadlift high pull this awkward machine out of the deep snow."

Cheryl Boatman Photography



***Getting up and over an obstacle using just your arms can come in handy in the wilderness of Alaska.***



In the summer, it's hiking and backpacking.

"People have told me that instead of three hours of hiking many times per week to get in shape, they can do 30 minutes or an hour of CrossFit and get the same results. They can hike less, do a bit of CrossFit, and be good to go," Reishus said.

Being fit enough for leisure activities is one thing, but that fitness can be essential in emergency situations, which are all too common when you live in a very harsh climate.

### Lost at Sea

Sixty-year-old Alaskan Jim Mitchell, a member of CrossFit Alaska, started CrossFit in 2008 to help his skiing, but the tough-as-nails owner of a land-surveying company says his improved endurance, strength and confidence ended up saving his life—twice.

Mitchell's work often takes him to remote locations in Alaska. In June 2009, he and his crew of three were on a contract for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). They were surveying some of the islands that make up the Aleutian Chain, mostly uninhabited, remote volcanic islands in the Bering Sea and the Pacific Ocean.

Mitchell and his group were finishing up their work on the island when they got a call on their radio from Rod Whitehead and Bill Osterback. Mitchell had hired Whitehead and his 50-foot fishing boat to transport the four-person surveying crew from island to island. Whitehead and Osterback were headed out in their 15-foot skiff to pick up the surveyors and take them back to the fishing boat when the skiff's engine failed.

The men in the skiff were stranded in 40-knot winds and 20-foot waves, which meant Mitchell and his crew had no way of getting off the island.

"They were going to try to beach (the boat), but there were 10-to-15-foot rollers breaking," Mitchell said. "They would have been pulverized."

Mitchell and his crew weren't sure what to do. They knew they could last for a while on the island—they had water and a fire. The guys on the skiff were much more vulnerable. They could only keep rowing for so long and were vulnerable to hypothermia. Someone needed to get to the fishing boat and call for help.



Courtesy of Jim Mitchell

***Mitchell at work in the Alaska Range, eight months after the avalanche. His right leg is straight because of the large knee brace under his wool pants.***





Cheryl Boatman Photography

***Surviving a tough workout builds mental toughness and tenacity, all of which are important in emergency situations.***

Using materials they found on the island, Mitchell's group made a raft out of boards placed on buoys, held together with fishing net.

"It was 9 p.m., and we knew they weren't going to survive another 24 hours," Mitchell explained. It was Alaska in the summertime, so "it doesn't get dark," Mitchell said.

The four men got in the raft and started paddling, not sure if the raft would hold together. To their surprise, they made it through the breakers. This was their one shot to get to the fishing boat and call for help, so they kept paddling.

It was slow going, but Mitchell said his year of CrossFit helped him through the ordeal.

"I had the confidence that I was going to make it," Mitchell said.

At 10:30 p.m., after an hour and a half of paddling, Mitchell and his group made it to the boat. They called the Coast Guard immediately, and the rescuers finally found Whitehead and Osterback in the morning after they had drifted 75 miles west.

The *Anchorage Daily News* reported that Whitehead credited Mitchell and his crew for saving their lives.

"They're tough guys," Whitehead said in the article, "and the only reason the Coast Guard came is because (the BLM crew) built that raft."

### **Surviving an Avalanche**

Mitchell kept doing CrossFit and two years later found himself in another dire situation.

"I was backcountry skiing with some friends," Mitchell said. "They were all 30 years younger than me. We kicked off an avalanche and tumbled quite a ways down. Everybody came out fairly well except for me," he said.

Again, he credits CrossFit with saving his life.

"The only reason I'm talking to you today is because I'm strong. I had five broken ribs, a broken leg and a collapsed lung."

Mitchell and his group were rescued by the Alaska Air National Guard. When Mitchell was in the hospital being treated for his injuries, the doctor asked him if he wanted any pain medication. "It doesn't hurt me worse than any workout," he said.

As a result of his strength at the time of the accident, Mitchell was able to avoid surgery, and he used CrossFit as his physical therapy. A year later, he was back to normal. Before the accident, Mitchell's deadlift PR was 315 lb. He recently knocked out two reps at 320 lb.

"CrossFit provides me with the fitness I need so I can do what I want to do with my job and my recreation," Mitchell said. As he enters his 60s, Mitchell said the mental toughness he gains from CrossFit is just as important as the physical strength.

"I learned it's gonna hurt, it's not gonna be pleasant, but it's not gonna kill you," he said.

Cheryl Boatman Photography



*CrossFit Alaska hopes to send a team to the North West Regional competition in 2013.*

### Coming out of Hibernation

As the CrossFit Games Open nears, Reishus said the athletes at CrossFit Alaska are spending more time in the gym in hopes of sending a team to the North West Regional.

"It might turn out to be a *Bad News Bears* story," he said. "We're a small gym from nowhere, Alaska, but who knows? The hardest part is getting skinny enough for the Open with the darkness and cold winters. March seems to come before we can shed the hibernation pounds, but after placing 31st and 34th the previous years, we've got some special motivation."

And if the gym doesn't qualify, its members can rest assured that they'll be more than prepared to kill a moose or survive a natural disaster.





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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## Feet First

Bill Starr explains why the feet are the key to almost any lift.

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By Bill Starr

February 2013

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All images: Staff/CrossFit Journal

Oddly enough, few strength athletes think about their feet when performing an exercise—but they should.

Seldom do people even think about their feet unless something goes wrong with them. Stub a toe badly and you will suddenly understand how important that part of your foot is for locomotion and any other athletic movement.

The feet play a critical role in nearly every movement in the weight room. In a nutshell, every lift starts with the feet. On the more complicated lifts, such as cleans, snatches and jerks, the feet play an ever-greater role.

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### Building a Foundation

Whenever I tell some athlete that he is not using his feet correctly during the execution of one particular exercise, he usually gives me a blank look. It hasn't really occurred to him that his feet are major players for the exercise he has been doing: the bench press. Teaching someone the necessity of having his feet in the proper starting position and moving them fast and precisely on the dynamic lifts is rather easy because it's quite obvious, but getting an athlete to incorporate his feet into a less dynamic exercise is a lot more difficult.

"What in the world do my feet have to do with handling a heavy weight in the bench press?" I'm often asked.

My answer: "A great deal."

Of course, if the weights being used are moderate to light, the feet don't matter as much, but when you start approaching those tough sets, you have to bring your feet into the mix or you're going to fail. I've watched countless athletes simply lie down and let their feet more or less dangle off the bench or place them carelessly on the floor. Because the bench press is an upper-body exercise, all their focus is on their arms and chest, and sometimes the

back, although few bring that part of their body into the exercise either. All they're thinking about is involving their arms and chests.

Then when the bar hits the sticking point, they often go into gyrations: squirming around and twisting with their feet flopping like fish out of water. It seldom works. In fact, it only makes matters worse. What the better benchers have learned through experience is the feet play a very critical role in moving heavy weights.

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**The very first thing the  
advanced benchers would  
always do is plant their feet  
firmly on the floor.**

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*When performing the bench press, foot position is far more important than most lifters realize.*



I was an active participant in the sport of powerlifting when it first became a part of the AAU. In the '60s, I used meets as training sessions to help me get stronger in the Olympic lifts. In the process I got to see some of the very best perform at the nationals and world championships. I saw Jim Williams come within a hair of pressing 700 at the nationals in York in '69. No suit and no drugs. The best I ever watched was Doug Young at the worlds in Birmingham, England, when I accompanied John Phillip there to coach.

The very first thing the advanced benchers would always do is plant their feet firmly on the floor. Then they would lie back on the bench and grind down into it. They were trying to become part of the bench. The combination of planting their feet and locking their backs into the bench provided a super-solid foundation, and in every exercise, the stronger the base, the easier it is to perform that movement more correctly and with heavier poundages. Now, when the bar hits the sticking point, the lifter can draw power from his super-solid base and bring it up into his chest and arms and move the bar steadily upward.



***Locking your feet in position during a dip will prevent you from swaying all over the place as you perform the reps.***

However. If his feet are not locked tightly to the floor and he is merely lying on the bench rather than being a part of it, or worse yet, if he allows his feet to move around, the odds of him making that attempt are slim to none. The reason why so many beginners make this mistake is because no one has bothered to tell them of the importance of the feet. It's really easy to fix the problem. Just start with thinking about your feet and the rest falls into place nicely.

This concept works the same for inclining. In fact, it's much easier to teach an athlete how to plant his feet and become one with the bench in the incline because he's more upright. Most inclines allow the lifter to plant his feet while he's almost in a standing position. This allows him to really push them down into the floor. While gripping the floor with his feet, it's not the least bit difficult to squeeze down into the bench to create a firm foundation from which to do the inclines. It's also essential that this rigid posture be held throughout the exercise. Should you relax after the first few reps, it will work against you just when you need that stable base to help you finish that final tough rep. When the bar sticks during an incline, you can actually change the angle of your pressing by scrunching back and down into the bench even more. This is often enough to help you complete that lift.

Of all the pressing movements, establishing a strong base is really the most necessary in the overhead press because there isn't any equipment to assist in supporting you. The overhead press is slowly but surely making a comeback in strength training, and I am very happy about it. The press was a vital part of my training program from the beginning, and once I got into Olympic lifting, overhead pressing often took up a fourth of my workouts.

The military, or overhead, press was considered a lift of strength. It was the gauge to judge not only overhead power but also body strength in general. Currently, this is not the case, but it's changing. Although having a firm base is not nearly as essential when light weights are used, it is still beneficial when someone is doing really high reps. That solid base can make the difference between doing 50 and 65 reps. They all add up.

When pressing a heavy weight, relatively speaking, a rock-solid foundation is most necessary. This is because your feet, ankles and lower legs in particular provide balance while the bar is in motion. Should that base get shaky, it will have an adverse affect on the lift. Lifters who merely stand on the floor or on a platform and try and press a demanding weight are not going to do nearly as well as those who lock onto the floor with their feet.

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**When pressing a heavy weight, relatively speaking, a rock-solid foundation is most necessary.**

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At York, the lifters would actually attempt to grip the floor with their toes. We compared this process to a giant bird gripping a tree limb with his talons. It worked, and once we had that strong base with our feet, it was rather easy to then tighten our legs, hips, glutes, back, shoulders and arms just prior to starting the pressing movement. A firm foundation not only allows the lifter to move a stalled bar through the sticking point but it also lets him keep a more precise line as the bar travels upward. That base assists him in maintaining balance from start to finish because pressing a max single or double requires a high degree of balance, as everyone discovers once he starts going after bigger and bigger numbers in the press.

It wouldn't seem as if the feet had any part in dipping, but they do. Locking your feet in a set position and keeping them there throughout the movement is most important once the poundages get heavy. If your feet, and therefore your legs, start swinging during the execution of the exercise, you will have to stop, or should you continue, you will eventually fatigue your shoulders and elbows.

### Clawing Into the Floor

In the squat, few beginners bother to set up with their feet gripping the floor as I mentioned for the overhead press. They take the bar out of the rack, step back and with a relaxed body lower into the bottom position. Everything is loose, so when they get to some demanding weights,



***In the squat, it's critical to tighten all muscles, and that process starts with the feet.***

they either collapse like rag dolls or vainly attempt to tighten their legs, hips, back and shoulders while the bar is in motion. It's no surprise when the weights win this battle.

The squat starts when the lifter takes the bar off the rack. Even then, every body part should be taut, and each should stay that way as he positions his feet and gets set for his initial rep. When the weights are at max level, care must be taken to stay extra tight as he moves back to a position where he will not hit the rack when he's squatting. Should he relax any muscle group, he will quickly discover that it's much harder to tighten it up again with all the weight bearing down on his back, hips and legs.

When he's where he wants to be, he needs to take a moment to make absolutely certain that his entire body is extremely tight, from his toes to his traps. Now he's ready to squat. Because he's solid as a rock, he can guide the bar through the exact range of motion he desires. And if he starts the movement with an ultra-tight body, he will be able to drive out of the hole much stronger and be able to finish the lift smoothly.





***A good set-up in the deadlift will produce PRs. Sloppy foot placement will result in misses when the weights get taxing.***

It all starts with the feet. One, they must be positioned perfectly; not too close or too wide apart, with the toes pointed outward slightly. Two, they must be trying to grip the floor. When that occurs, the rest follows naturally. However, keep in mind that it's almost impossible to tighten the various parts of the body if your feet are passive. With a loose body, the bar will waver on the way down and up. With an extremely tight body, it will stay in the correct groove from start to finish.

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**It's almost impossible to tighten the various parts of the body if your feet are passive.**

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In the front squat, starting with a very solid base is even more important than it is for the back squat. This is because the line of descent and recovery is even more precise than it is for the back squat. In the back squat, when the hips come up too fast, the lifter, if he is strong enough, can pull it back into the proper line and save the lift. But if the bar runs forward at all in the front squat, it will be lost. There is no way to save it regardless of how strong the athlete might be. I'm talking max attempts here, not lighter warm-ups.

Foot placement is also more exact in the front squat because if the feet are not spaced exactly right, the lifter will not have sufficient thrust coming out of the bottom to drive the weight through the sticking point. Because much less weight is used in the front squat than in the back version, you don't have to get tight until you have set your feet where you want them. But be sure you do that before starting the downward motion.

Lunges are another useful and popular hip and leg exercise, and they involve the feet to an even higher degree. Feet move during a lunge, which means you must pay close attention. Yet you must still be extremely tight throughout the movement. Should anything relax, you will lose your balance and have to stop or sometimes even dump the bar. When you squat, your toes should be turned out a bit, but this is not the case for the lunge. In that lift, your feet need to be pointed straight ahead. When you step forward, that lead foot should slam in the floor and be placed straight ahead of where it started. The slamming of the lead foot will help you tighten everything as you hit the deep split position, and this is critical to maintaining balance. If the lead foot is planted in a lackadaisical manner, the lifter will stagger and have great difficulty in keeping his balance, making it tougher to recover and save that lift.

But when that front foot is jammed forcefully into the floor in the right position, everything else falls right in place. All the working muscles and attachments are taut and where they should be, making it easy to move the bar through the desired range of motion.

The same idea holds true for an overhead squat. Make sure your feet are where they need to be in terms of positioning, and make sure they are gripping the floor before you lower yourself to the deep bottom position. It only takes a brief moment to do this, and it will make a huge difference in the outcome of that set.

### Solid Set-Up, Fast Feet

All pulling movements—from the relatively static deadlifts, bent-over rows and almost straight-legged deadlifts to the more dynamic lifts—require that the athlete pay close attention to his feet. I've seen many powerlifters merely walk up to the bar, reach down and grip the bar, then pull with their bodies so loose that their heels or toes move on the platform. Once the bar is in motion, they vainly attempt to contract their muscles, but it seldom works, particularly when a great deal of weight is on the bar. From that slack starting position, there is no possible way for them to tighten the many muscle groups that are involved in that lift to move the bar through the middle and top ranges.

In addition, whenever an athlete attempts to deadlift a max number when he hasn't bothered to get his body rigidly tight, the bar will invariably run forward because his hips rise up way too fast. With warm-up weights, this form fault can be corrected. With a PR on the bar, that fault will result in failure.



***For lifts in which the feet must move, precise foot placement is even more critical.***



I tell my athletes to get in the starting position with the feet at shoulder width, or more narrow than this for the deadlift, with the bar tucked in tight against the shins and the frontal deltoids slightly out in front of the bar. Now, rather than thinking of pulling the bar upward, try pushing your feet down through the floor while at the same time tightening every muscle in your body. The act of attempting to push your feet downward will enable you to make the rest of your body more solid. When this is done, the bar will come off the floor in the perfect line, which, in turn, allows the athlete to complete the lift flawlessly.

Wide stance or sumo deadlifts are excellent not only for building a strong back but also for working the adductors as well. In order for the sumos to be useful, the feet must be placed exactly right. They have to be pointed straight ahead. When they're turned inward or outward, it changes the effectiveness of the exercise. During the movement, all the weight must be pressed to the outsides of the feet. It's

very different from doing a conventional deadlift, where the weight starts out at the front of the foot and is transferred to the back as the bar is pulled higher. This same idea applies to wide-stance squats.

The power snatch, power clean, full snatch and full clean begin and end with the feet. The start is critical; if the start is weak, the middle and finish will be adversely affected. Use the same technique I mentioned for the deadlift: push your feet down into the floor and guide the bar upward in a tight line. Because snatching requires a longer pull than cleaning, the start on that lift has to really be neat and tight. Those who begin a snatch with their feet relaxed are not going to be able to extend as high on their toes, which means they will not be able to make the transfer from trying to jump up with the weight to instantaneously pulling themselves down to the floor while keeping the weight locked out overhead in the proper position.



***After the second pull ends in the snatch or clean, the feet must be moved with great speed to the receiving position to create a foundation for the weight.***

There's a good reason why the snatch and clean are called "quick lifts," and the quickness is entirely dependent on foot speed. Most lifters learn early on that they can move under the bar faster when they extend high on their toes than they can from a flat-footed base. I've observed coaches teaching their athletes to jump their feet to the side when power cleaning because they want them to learn to move their feet very fast at the conclusion of the pull. But what often happens is the lifters move their feet far too soon, before they're high on their toes, and when they do that, they cut the pull just a bit—yet that little bit of extra height can spell the difference between success and failure.

The split-style snatch requires even more attention to foot placement and speed because the feet have to move a much greater distance than in the squat style. In addition, they must hit the platform at exactly the same time, and their placement has to be absolutely exact when the weights get heavy.



***Bill Starr recommends athletes finish the pull high on the toes before moving under the bar with maximum speed and aggression.***

When skilled athletes like Norb Schemansky, Louis Riecke, and Stan Stanczyk performed the split snatch, they moved faster than any athlete in any sport. This isn't just my opinion. At the 1948 Olympics in London, scientists tested all the athletes to find out who had the fastest foot movement. This included sprinters coming off the blocks, shot putters going across the ring, discus and javelin and hammer throwers, swimmers, gymnasts, wrestlers, boxers, and weightlifters. Stan Stanczyk snatched 286 as a 181-pounder using the split style and was declared the fastest. At the '52 Olympiad in Helsinki, he won the title again and was given the nickname "Flash" Stanczyk. If you really want to increase your foot speed, you might want to give split snatching a try.

Fast feet are also critical in the jerk. I know that jerks can be done without moving the feet, but the majority of competitors prefer the split style. The biggest mistake I see lifters make on the jerk is they do not take time to make certain their feet are set properly before they jerk. They recover from the clean with their feet rather wide apart, then they move them in and prepare for the jerk. The feet should be on a line with the toes pointed straight ahead. But more often than not, one foot is behind the other and the toes are turned outward or inward. When the feet are not in the perfect starting position, the thrust of the bar upward will not be nearly as powerful, and when the feet move into the split they will not hit the platform right.

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**When the feet are set perfectly,  
the athlete can give the bar  
a terrific jolt, climb high on  
his toes, then explode.**

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In contrast, when the feet are set perfectly, the athlete can give the bar a terrific jolt, climb high on his toes, then explode into a split with both feet hitting exactly where they should hit the platform.





**Try looking at lifts from the bottom up. Fix the feet and then see what you can load on the bar.**

After cleaning a weight and making sure your feet are right where they should be, take a moment to grip the platform with your feet and tighten your entire body. A successful jerk depends on strength and foot speed. However, there isn't a lifter—regardless of how strong he might be—who is going to jerk a maximum poundage without fast feet, and he is not going to make a jerk from a loose foundation. Some young athletes who are blessed with natural quickness can get away with form mistakes in the beginning, but eventually those faults will catch up with them, so it's a good idea to aim for perfection from the start.

### Focus on the Feet

It's rather obvious that the feet play a very important role in those dynamic exercises, but what about those that are done statically, such as assistance work in the form of curls, triceps pushdowns, lat pulls, rows with dumbbells, and other movements? While the feet are not nearly as vital in these exercises, let me state that any movement will be more productive if done with a solid foundation, and in nearly every case, this starts with the feet. I even tighten my feet and ankles when I'm doing sit-ups or leg raises.

A perfect example is the good morning. There's nothing the least bit dynamic about this exercise, which needs to be done deliberately and very much under control. But the exercise will go much more smoothly, and more weight can be used, if the lifter thinks about squeezing the floor with his toes as he is doing the reps. This helps tighten his legs, hips, back and shoulder girdle as he bends forward and recovers. When everything is rock solid, form is no problem. Conversely, if the feet are just placed on the floor and the body is loose, each rep is torture.

Experienced runners know that running starts in the hands. Those who understand strength training know that weightlifting starts in the feet. Before you do any exercise, take a moment and bring your feet into the mix. That simple step will pay huge dividends.



Jody Foster

### About the Author

*Bill Starr coached at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, the 1970 Olympic Weightlifting World Championship in Columbus, Ohio, and the 1975 World Powerlifting Championships in Birmingham, England. He was selected as head coach of the 1969 team that competed in the Tournament of Americas in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, where the United States won the team title, making him the first active lifter to be head coach of an international Olympic weightlifting team. Starr is the author of the books **The Strongest Shall Survive: Strength Training for Football** and **Defying Gravity**, which can be found at [The Aasgaard Company Bookstore](http://TheAasgaardCompanyBookstore.com).*



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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## On Elegance

Pat Sherwood addresses the concept of clever simplicity in fitness and in life.

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By Pat Sherwood

February 2013

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Staff/CrossFit Journal

CrossFit places great importance on the concept of elegance.

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In my pre-CrossFit life, I only associated the word elegant with “fancy.” I was half right. Fancy is shorthand for the first two definitions:

1. Tasteful in dress, style or design.
2. Dignified and graceful in appearance, behavior, etc.

Yet there’s another definition with which I was unfamiliar:

3. Cleverly simple; ingenious. As in an elegant solution to a problem.

I’m now in love with the third definition.

### **Fitness Is ...**

Coach Greg Glassman is a math guy, and, as it turns out, math guys like elegance. Two mathematicians can solve the same problem, but the one to arrive at the shortest—and thereby most elegant—solution will be celebrated. Think of Einstein’s equation:  $E = mc^2$ . With just five symbols, Einstein summarized an entire scientific paradigm shift.

Once you’re aware of the third definition of elegance, you’ll see it over and over again in CrossFit.

Let’s start with Coach’s equation for fitness:

Perform constantly varied functional movements at high intensity.

How incredible is that equation?

In just a few words, Coach described what no one ever had: how to get people fit. It’s beautifully concise while still accurate, and it makes it clear that there are just three knobs to crank when trying to attain elite fitness: variation, movement and intensity. It doesn’t get any simpler than that, and yet the few words belie the importance of the information. No one had ever thought of this before and then managed to summarize it so succinctly.

Coach’s definition of fitness is similarly elegant:

Fitness is work capacity across broad time and modal domains.

Anyone who has researched CrossFit’s definition of fitness, listened to Coach on videos, or attended a Level 1 Certificate Course knows the depth of this seemingly simple definition is profound, revolutionary and unparalleled in the entire history of the fitness industry.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

*Just because it’s simple does not mean it’s easy.*



Staff/CrossFit Journal



Staff/CrossFit Journal

*There's magic in the movements—and elegance.*

For the first time, fitness has been defined in a way that is quantifiable. Subjective definitions filled with loose terminology like “feeling good” or “the act of being fit” have been replaced with the objective measurements of force, distance and time. With tools as simple as a scale, a tape measure and a stopwatch, one can assess performance with great precision. Conducting such measurements over broad time and modal domains yields the first scientific assessment of fitness.

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**Eat meats and vegetables, nuts  
and seeds, some fruit, little  
starch, and no added sugar.**

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What about nutrition? Bypassing all complexity, the truth is that eating well, for both athletic performance and longevity, is shockingly simple:

Eat meats and vegetables, nuts and seeds, some fruit, little starch, and no sugar. Keep intake to levels that will support exercise but not body fat.

Countless books are written on the subject every year, each containing hundreds of pages of information, recommendations and guidance that may or may not be effective. CrossFit's prescription contains everything we have found necessary to include in two beautiful sentences.

### **Magic in the Movements**

Elegance is perhaps best on display in CrossFit's workouts, which tend toward couplets and triplets and precise prescriptions designed to maximize intensity. Let's take a look at the workout of the day, or more simply, the WOD. Here's a classic:

Diane

21-15-9 reps of:

225-lb. deadlifts

Handstand push-ups



The 21-15-9 rep scheme shows up in many classic CrossFit workouts. It has a certain beauty and functionality. If you can charge through 21 reps when fresh, then you just might be able to get through 15 on the second round, and 9 in the final round. The rep scheme allows athletes to maintain their intensity even as they fatigue.

Of course, if you're not Froning, Spealler or Thorisdottir, you may have to break up the reps into sets. Luckily, 21 can become 7-7-7 or 10-6-5. The 15 is ready for dissection into 8-7, 6-5-4, 5-5-5, or 3-3-3-3-3. The round of 9 can be 5-4 or 3-3-3.

Would you get fit if Diane were programmed as below?

19-5-17-3-1 reps of:

225-lb. deadlifts

Handstand push-ups

The workouts are the same in terms of total number of reps, movements and loading, and the second workout contains the same amount of work as the classic prescription.

So what's the problem?

The second workout looks like someone threw up on the page. It's not beautiful and it doesn't flow. There's nothing cleverly simple about it.

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**Elegance is what happens when  
the clutter is removed and the  
essential ideas remain.**

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It's often been said that the magic is in the movements, and let's continue to look at Diane. There are only two movements: the deadlift and the handstand push-up. Combined correctly, they can wreck a man or woman.

The deadlift is a weightlifting pull from the ground. While it's a whole-body movement, the major emphasis is on the midline and posterior chain. The handstand push-up places its demands largely on the upper-body musculature of the shoulders and arms, with the midline again playing a stabilization role.

Even an element of inversion is thrown into the mix, requiring a degree of gymnastics capacity as well as flexibility, coordination, accuracy, agility and balance. Had a shoulder press been chosen instead of the handstand push-up, Diane would still be a great workout, but it would be distinctly different. Even though both are pressing movements involving similar musculature, the gymnastics element is a far superior choice in this specific instance.

The deadlift is relatively simple, but it's balanced by the complexity of the handstand push-up. While the former movement often favors a larger person and the latter a smaller one, their pairing requires competence in both areas and removes any advantages acquired by great skill in only one movement or the other.



*"Elegance is perhaps best on display in CrossFit's workouts, which tend toward couplets and triplets and precise prescriptions designed to maximize intensity." —Pat Sherwood*



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***Elegance is key to the pursuit of virtuosity.***

The removal of specialization and the demand for broad competence are key for general physical preparedness and creating a balanced athlete, and many of CrossFit's most famous workouts—the Girls—contain an obvious grace and refinement in design. Couplets and triplets, they appear simple and even easy, but a first attempt will assure the athlete understands the prescriptions are precisely elegant.

### Crucible

Elegance, by definition, is cleverly simple. It's often the obvious answer everyone missed or the clever nuance that makes all the difference. Elegance is what happens when the clutter is removed and the essential ideas remain, and it is part and parcel of virtuosity. It is performing the common uncommonly well, and it is the mark of genius.

Next time you need to solve a problem, explain a concept, define a term or program a workout, don't seek an unnecessarily complicated solution when an elegant one would suffice. Pursue elegance in everything.

Blaise Pascal, another mathematician, once wrote a long, drawn-out letter to a friend, then apologized in the postscript that he didn't have time to write a short one.

Brevity takes time.

So does elegance.



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### About the Author

*Pat Sherwood is a CrossFit Media Project Manager as well as a flowmaster. He's done just under 200 seminars all around the globe for CrossFit HQ and competed in the 2009 CrossFit Games. He hates HSPU and loves ice cream.*