

ALL ACCESS PART 2: ROLL ON

ATHLETES IN WHEELCHAIRS ARE EXPERTS AT ADAPTING. NOW THEY'RE JOINING CROSSFIT AFFILIATES IN GROWING NUMBERS.

WRITTEN BY CHRIS COOPER | PHOTOS BY JENNIFER NICHOL

Chris Stoutenberg was weeks away from playing in his first season of football at the University of Guelph in Canada. It was a beautiful day, and he was enjoying it at his friend's new bachelor pad, sitting on the tiny balcony. He leaned against the railing; it gave way.

In a snap, Stoutenberg was on the ground in agony. He'd traveled less than 20 feet, but his world had dramatically changed.

Stoutenberg fractured three thoracic vertebrae falling from his friend's balcony on June 18, 1997. Paralyzed from the waist down, "Stouty" woke up with metal rods in his spine and a huge hole in his life: sports, at which he'd always excelled, seemed gone forever. He was 19.

A NEW PATH

Despite the injury, Stoutenberg fought to recover, copying the exercises of more "advanced" rehabilitation patients he saw in his therapy sessions. He spent extra time in the gym, arriving an hour before his appointment and staying hours afterward.

By September 1997, he was back in school. After a year at Guelph, he was offered a Division 1 scholarship for wheelchair basketball at the University of Illinois, where he played for three years. He won a gold medal at the 2000 Paralympic Games in Sydney on the Canadian Men's National Team and another in 2004 in Athens.

In March 2012, Stoutenberg's cousin told him about CrossFit. That led him to Ontario's CrossFit Industri. Over time, his coaches began posting videos of his workouts to YouTube. In short order, CrossFit found Stouty. Paraplegic athletes from around the world began seeking his advice.

In turn, CrossFit created a chance for these athletes to regain their strength, enjoy therapy more and compete. It's a sharp contrast to the many rehabilitation programs for the newly injured in which therapists don't challenge their patients.

"They're not teaching independence. They're teaching you limited things you need to do to survive. They're teaching you how to ask for help, not to help yourself," Stoutenberg said.

STOUTENBERG'S GRIT AND WILLINGNESS TO TAKE RISKS MAKE HIM THE SPEARHEAD FOR A WHOLE NEW MOVEMENT: CHAIRED ATHLETES DOING CROSSFIT AND KICKING ASS WITHOUT USING THEIR LEGS.

Stoutenberg's coach, Tyson Hornby, is familiar with the holes in therapy for new paraplegics. Through his wife's physiotherapy practice, Hornby has seen clients struggle with everyday tasks after therapy.

"Conventional medicine is not preventative," he said. "It's, 'Look after the problem after it occurs.' We see it with everything: diabetes, heart disease, obesity. I guess it's the same with adaptable athletes."

From the start, Hornby took the challenge of training Stoutenberg—and gave challenge in return.



A former football player, Chris Stoutenberg has won Paralympic gold medals in wheelchair basketball and is now training at CrossFit Industri in Canada.

“The first week or two, he wore a strap around his sternum to keep him upright,” Hornby said. “But things were just too easy for him, so I said, ‘Let’s just get rid of it.’ He struggled without it at first, but now he’s doing things like hollow-body positions and superman poses. Those would not have been possible a year ago.”

Hornby’s strategy might have been novel, but it was grounded in his theory of neuromuscular adaptation—that the body will adapt to almost anything.

“Your nervous system is basically a big electrical grid. If your body can’t go one way, you’ll find a way around it,” Hornby added.

Stoutenberg’s grit and willingness to take risks make him the spearhead for a whole new movement: chaired athletes doing CrossFit and kicking ass without using their legs.



Creativity is the hallmark of an adaptive athlete who refuses to accept limitations.

START WITH WHAT YOU HAVE

Most CrossFit coaches would be eager to have an athlete like Stoutenberg in their boxes: aggressive, gritty, experimental. He doesn’t create problems; he solves them. And there are hundreds more just like him—toughened both in the palm and the soul by their wheelchairs, ready to go to war over a Fran time.

How do they get started?

“First, I’d want to see what the athlete can do,” Stoutenberg said. “I’d like to see how mobile they are in their chair and how mobile they can be out of their chair.”

Asking a wheeled athlete if he or she is comfortable getting out of the chair and doing tasks on the floor is a good starting point. Knowing that an athlete requires help getting back into the chair can guide a coach away from push-ups, for example.

“Then you look for trunk strength: side to side, front to back. They have to be able to stabilize themselves anytime they’re putting weight overhead,” Stoutenberg said.

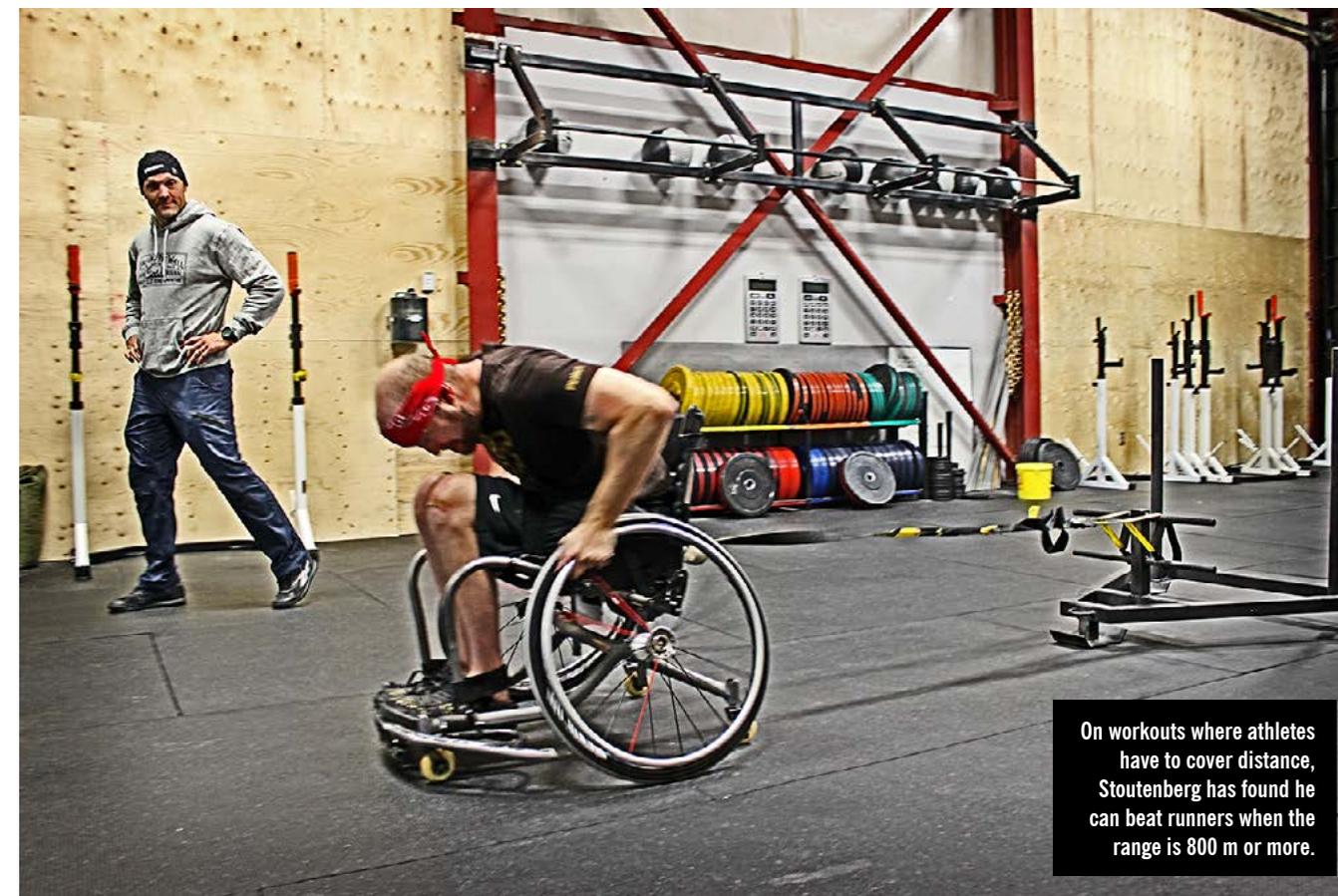
If an athlete can’t stabilize even a light weight overhead, he or she can be strapped a bit higher in the chair for support. That creates other difficulties: As the load is shifted to the strap, it’s also shifted to the chair, which can tip backward.

FINDING BRIGHT SPOTS EARLY MIGHT KEEP THE WHEELED ATHLETE ENCOURAGED AND ENGAGED.

“You need a sport wheelchair. I suggest one with two small, caster-like wheels on the back so you don’t tip when you lean back,” Stoutenberg said.

“Next, I’d be looking at their left-to-right. Are they able to lean left and touch the floor and come back up? Do they need to grab their wheel to push themselves back up or pull from the other side?”

If athletes can’t right themselves, they can’t safely hold a barbell because one hand will always be required to stop the lateral movement of the torso. Quickly dropping a barbell might not be an option for chaired athletes.



On workouts where athletes have to cover distance, Stoutenberg has found he can beat runners when the range is 800 m or more.

“You won’t be able to just drop it. You have to push it out past your lap. It’s almost a toss forward,” Stoutenberg said.

Locking the wheels of the chair also has pros and cons. Lifting from the floor is more challenging when the wheels are free because the chair will tend to be pulled toward the weight. An athlete can lift more with the wheels locked, but it’s harder to escape a missed overhead lift.

“If I’m doing anything where I’m locked down, then I have a spotter. But if I have to move in the middle of a workout, you have to be able to get yourself free and moving again quickly,” Stoutenberg said.

In that scenario, Stoutenberg places sandbags in front of and behind his chair to block his wheels.

“When you’re done (with) the exercise, you grab the bag in front, move it and you’re on to the next thing,” he said.

Other assessments Stoutenberg recommends include pulling strength, pressing strength and grip strength. The way an athlete turns the wheels is also important: a shorter-armed athlete can’t grab as much wheel on each turn but might be more explosive off the starting line.

“I find my best is the longer runs,” said the 6-foot-4 Stoutenberg. “I can grab from way back and push all the way through until I have to let go again. In a longer run, like an 800 m, I can get out in front almost every time. Once you have your momentum, it’s easy to hold it. But I get beat off the start.”

Finding bright spots early might keep the wheeled athlete encouraged and engaged. Like any other athlete, those in wheelchairs want to know they can be good at CrossFit someday. But the real motivation might be far beyond the desire to look good naked.

A PRESSING MATTER

Stouty’s real motivation isn’t on the whiteboard. It’s on the floor. And it drools.

“I have an 11-month-old son. When my wife was pregnant, I thought, ‘I can’t even pick this kid up.’”

Limited by a lack of lower-back strength, Stoutenberg knew he had to find a way to interact with his child. He feared being left alone with his own son.



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—Chris Stoutenberg

"If I go down to my knees and he's on the floor, what do I do? Do I have to be on the floor the whole time? If something happens, am I supposed to call an ambulance or hope for help?" he shook his head. "No. Not good enough."

When he started CrossFit, Stoutenberg couldn't sit upright without using his arms. If his chest dropped to his lap, he was stuck.

"I can deadlift 120 lb. now," he said. "If he needs to be picked up when he's 120 lb., I can do it."

Stoutenberg's deadlift even requires an exaggerated range of motion as the 60-lb. kettlebells he uses are closer to the ground than a barbell would be.

A paraplegic's chair can impair quality of life if it affects independence, play and human contact. The constant

separation from others, though only by a few inches of steel and rubber, can negatively affect many aspects of a paraplegic's life. A choice of spouse, career and hobby can no longer be taken for granted after a catastrophic injury. Worse, Stoutenberg said many rehabilitation programs set their sights too low.

"They were preaching to me, 'Here are all the ways you need to be limiting your mobility to stay safe.' What they should be doing is taking people out of their wheelchair, setting them on the ground and saying, 'What would you do if this happened to you and you're all alone? How do you get up? How do you get back to your chair?'" he said. "You're supposed to get a nurse to help you survive or have your family take care of you. They should be pushing you along and asking how you're going to take care of yourself."

Without the use of his legs, Stoutenberg spends twice as much time on pushing and pulling movements; almost every lower-body exercise can be traded for an upper-body equivalent to make his workouts comparable to those of other athletes in the box.

Training for real-world challenges is just as important for Stoutenberg as it is for any other CrossFit athlete. Some exercises require him to tip his chair over and then regain an upright position. For example, his burpees require sprawling on the ground, wheelchair still strapped to his waist—a situation many paraplegics fear. In sharp contrast, Stoutenberg believes the ability to right himself when tired is critical.

"In everyday life, in a wheelchair, at some point in time, you're going to fall. It's going to happen. You're going to

catch yourself on a curb, something. If you can't get back up, you're screwed."

It's about independence, Stoutenberg continued.

"The value of being able to get back up means you aren't scared to leave your house. It gives you the independence to be able to live on your own or with someone who doesn't have the strength to pick you up."

"THEY SHOULD BE PUSHING YOU ALONG AND ASKING HOW YOU'RE GOING TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF."

—CHRIS STOUTENBERG

He added with a laugh: "That's why I got my wife into CrossFit: when I get older, she can carry me around."

Stoutenberg isn't the first athlete to transition from able-bodied sport to a wheelchair. But his CrossFit exploits have made him a role model for others, and he hopes his process of trial and error can ease their initiation. When function has limitations, functional fitness becomes even more important.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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