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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## Training the Trainers

Experienced affiliate owners share key aspects of their coach-development programs, while owners of newer gyms explain how they're planning to raise their own coaches.

By Emily Beers

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Courtesy of Hunter Thornton

*Hunter and Jill Thornton of CrossFit Cumming look inside their gym when seeking out new coaches.*

Ultimately, the goal of a CrossFit affiliate is simple: creating excellence. This includes excellence on the part of the athletes and coaches, as well as excellence for the affiliate as a whole.

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Because affiliate owners have the ability to run their businesses as they see fit, they often seek to develop coaches who embody CrossFit's ideal of virtuosity and also understand and embrace each affiliate's vision.

In order to do this, many affiliates have adopted training or apprenticeship programs to develop knowledgeable coaches who enhance their business and produce fitter athletes.

CrossFit Hoboken, CrossFit Max Effort, CrossFit Cumming and Shadow CrossFit are four of these affiliates. Although each has its own approach, all four affiliates are committed to developing excellent coaches.

### **CrossFit Hoboken: Level Up**

Craig Parcels, 29, started a coaches training program at CrossFit Hoboken in New Jersey two-and-a-half years ago. The concept behind it was simple: quality control within his affiliate.

"As the gym grew, I couldn't coach it all myself, and I wanted to make sure everyone who represents me represents me well," Parcels said.

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**"There's a constant  
education happening."**

**—Craig Parcels**

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Through trial and error, Parcels' program is constantly changing, but his eight years of CrossFit experience serve him well. He completed CrossFit's Level 2 Seminar a number of years ago (the Level 2 is not currently offered), and more recently he took CrossFit's Coach's Prep Course. He explained that these courses have become the backbone of much of what he teaches his own coaches inside his affiliate.

The coaches training program at CrossFit Hoboken—a 15,000-square-foot affiliate with 500 members—is generally a four-month, invite-only program, but it ultimately depends on the time each coach has. Parcels generally runs the program, which costs US\$1,500, with three to five coaches at a time. There are four cycles to



Courtesy of Missy Myers

***Provided they have the personality needed for the job, athletes with great movement mechanics can often become solid coaches.***

his program, with each phase lasting approximately one month.

The first step for prospective coaches is simply to get through the reading material, which includes the *CrossFit Level 1 Training Guide*, as well as other recommended books on lifting, training and mobility.

On top of this, trainee coaches attend weekly group sessions in which Parcels covers topics ranging from coaching the squat to how different movements look according to different body types.

The second cycle of the program has trainee coaches attending fundamentals group sessions and shadowing the senior coach. Eventually, they get involved assessing and correcting movements.



Courtesy of Missy Myers

***At Shadow CrossFit, owner Sam Karoll places the greatest value on character when evaluating potential coaches.***

The third phase of the program involves shadowing coaches in regular group classes and taking notes. They have the opportunity to shadow and learn from different coaches in different types of classes ranging from the regular workout-of-the-day classes to skills, strength and Olympic-weightlifting classes. The expectation is to shadow three classes per week for four weeks.

“We want them to have a good variety between the different kind of classes they shadow,” Parcels said.

Parcells meets with the group once a week to cover various topics.

“We’ll go over things like transition times during a class and how much time should be allocated to what,” Parcels said. He explained that teaching coaches class-management strategies has helped his group classes run more smoothly.

And in order to keep up with the a constant flow of new information, Parcels’ head coach frequently sends out valuable articles and videos to trainee coaches on all sorts of pertinent topics ranging from anatomy and physiology to programming and scaling.

“There’s a constant education happening,” Parcels said.

The fourth and final phase of the program lasts two weeks and involves the trainees helping coach two classes per week. A head coach gives them feedback after each session and evaluates them.

Recently, Parcels added a new component to the program: He pairs the trainee up with a more experienced coach who essentially acts as a mentor.

Parcells can’t imagine where he’d be without his development program. It’s helped with quality control of his coaches—which, of course, trickles down to clients—and it’s improved client and coach retention.

Today, Parcels has 20 coaches on hand, meaning he isn’t forced to coach 40-plus hours a week on his own. Instead, he has time to focus on other aspects of the business, such as his website and coach development.

“My time is freed up for me to work on the business and on other things around the gym,” Parcels said.





Courtesy of Missy Myers

***Without a formal development program in place, Karoll relies on extensive interaction to develop potential coaches.***

“You could never do it all on your own,” he said of owning an affiliate the size of CrossFit Hoboken.

Parcells said he thinks developing coaches from within—the way he has been doing it—results in coaches who stick around longer.

“We don’t ever have anyone leave unless they move away” he said. Because his coaches really have to earn their stripes, they appreciate the position that much more, he believes.

Ultimately, Parcells thinks good coaches are the key to CrossFit Hoboken’s success.

“We are blessed with a lot of coaches, and I try to hang onto them and make them as happy as possible. It’s about coach management,” he said.

### **CrossFit Max Effort: “Not a Jedi Yet”**

Zach Forrest opened CrossFit Max Effort in Las Vegas, Nev., in July 2011. Today, he has a booming business with five full-time coaches and four part-time coaches.

The more the gym grew, the more Forrest realized the importance of raising his own coaches and training them to understand and embrace CrossFit Max Effort’s vision.

“Classes were getting bigger, and we decided that instead of adding more hours—since we have plenty of space and equipment—we wanted more coaches, and so we needed to start developing more coaches,” Forrest said of his decision to create a development program last year.

Currently, Forrest has 21 prospective coaches in the program, 19 of whom have already completed the Level 1 Certificate Course—a prerequisite.

“The Level 1 is a necessity. It’s an experience you can’t get anywhere else,” said Forrest, who is a member of CrossFit’s Level 1 Seminar Staff.

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Most of the current trainees were longtime members who had naturally developed into leaders at his box, although some members of the program came to CrossFit Max Effort specifically to gain more coaching experience from Forrest.

In his first crack at running a coach-development program, Forrest created three levels: Youngling, Padawan and Jedi Knight.

“I’m pretty much a geek and a nerd,” Forrest said of his decision to name the levels with reference to *Star Wars*.

## Training ... (continued)

So far, Forrest hasn't graduated anyone to the Jedi Knight level, and he suspects the Youngling and Padawan levels will take most people about six months to a year.

To begin the program, Forrest asks all prospective coaches to submit a letter of intent to show their passion.

"It's kind of like how you apply to become an affiliate," he said, referencing CrossFit Inc.'s requirement for prospective gym owners to write an essay on why they want to affiliate.

From there, Younglings begin by shadowing senior coaches, much the same way Parcells runs his program in New Jersey. During the time, senior coaches mentor prospective coaches, who must accumulate 40 hours of shadowing.

To become Padawans, Younglings have to pass a practical test in which they must identify common faults in various movements. Two wrong answers on the practical exam and the Youngling has to go back and shadow some more.

At the Padawan level, coaches start assisting during fundamentals classes. The head coach is still present to observe the Padawan, but as the Padawan gains experience and confidence, he or she takes more of a leading role in coaching.

Outside of shadowing and practical tests, members of Forrest's development group meet twice a week to cover corrective-movement drills, learn anatomy and physiology, and discuss pertinent topics such as programming and scaling.

"The topic changes every class," said Forrest, who also recommends articles for his coaches to read, including many of CrossFit Founder and CEO Greg Glassman's early work in the *CrossFit Journal*. Forrest is putting together both written and practical exams for Padawans to take when they're ready.

In his first go at formally developing coaches, Forrest charged in-house members \$550 for the program and \$800 for non-members.



Courtesy of Zach Forrest

**Lightsabers are made of PVC at CrossFit Max Effort, where "Younglings" work to become "Jedi" in Zach Forrest's Star Wars-inspired apprenticeship program.**



Courtesy of Zach Forrest

***Working under the supervision of experienced coaches, apprentices will often act as “backup” while the head coach leads the class.***

Sarah Lyons, a current Padawan, said she’s getting more than her money’s worth. She said the program is especially helpful in teaching her to tailor her coaching cues to individuals.

“Everyone responds to different stimuli. Some need a quick verbal cue, while others require a tactile gesture, and it becomes visible during the workout,” Lyons said. “I’ve also become more aware of what I’m saying, since the way I may describe a setup or a movement often sounds foreign to new athletes.”

She continued: “Overall, I’m becoming more efficient and succinct in my coaching methods, which is critical as corrections are time sensitive.”

Like Forrest, Lyons thinks the program is helping the greater Max Effort community, which is exactly why Forrest created it.

“It’s helping to create leaders in our community, and those leaders reinforce the atmosphere and quality of the gym ... and that’s one of the best things for your business,” Forrest said.

## **CrossFit Cumming: Looking Within**

Jill and Hunter Thornton opened CrossFit Cumming in Cumming, Ga., in April 2013.

For the first few months, Hunter, who also works full time as a software developer, and wife Jill were doing all the coaching. Although being too busy is a good problem to have in some ways, pretty soon they were living lives that were more hectic than they wanted.

“Jill was doing 60 percent of the hours and I was doing 40 per cent of the hours, and by the time we got home it was, ‘K, I love you. Good night.’ And repeat,” Hunter said.

The day had come to bring on more coaches. They had no official coach-development program in place at the time, but slowly they started working with clients who were interested in coaching, teaching them all they knew.

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**—Hunter Thornton**

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Today, the couple have one coach and three apprentice coaches working for them, all of whom went through an ad hoc apprentice program. Hunter believes even if you’re a new affiliate without a well-structured program, it’s important to find the time to invest in proper coach development.

“You have to make it work. It is an investment into the business. Otherwise your business is tied to you and the business will run you,” he said.

The biggest thing Hunter has learned in the last year is the importance of choosing the right people to coach at your box.

“They have to be a friend. If I cannot get along with them socially, then they can’t be a coach. I cannot invest into someone that I do not like being around, so it turns into fun to see friends grow. And you make time for your friends,” he said.



Jill added: "We always ask what we can do for them. We take them out to do fun things. We want it to be the best work experience they've ever had."

And when you're friends with your coaches, even coaches meetings don't feel like work. Hunter and Jill host coaches meetings every two or three weeks at their house, turning the evening into a social gathering.

"We make some desserts and we chat," Hunter said.

Having coaches they raised themselves—coaches they trust wholeheartedly—has given them more time to focus on business development and community events.

One year into their business, Hunter only coaches one or two hours a day, while Jill coaches nine classes per week. The lighter schedule has freed up Jill's time, leaving her more hours to do personal training to prepare new members for the demands of group classes.

Looking to the future, Hunter and Jill are confident they have the foundation of a system that can be used to raise the coaches they want working for them. Even if an experienced coach shows up at their doorstep in the future, Hunter believes each coach should still go through the same process his first coaches went through.

"We would consider an expedited process, potentially, but they have to earn their stripes," Hunter said. "There is a uniqueness in having all coaches go through a similar process—much like your first time doing Fran. Everyone remembers the first time doing Fran ... We all share that experience."

### Shadow CrossFit: The Waiting Game

Sam Karoll is the owner of Shadow CrossFit in Quincy, Ill. The 23-year-old majored in business and played football in college and had always dreamed of owning a gym. He opened Shadow CrossFit in March 2013.



Mike Warkeintin/CrossFit Journal

***Whether the development system is formal or informal, the goal is always to create a way for more experienced trainers to help newer trainers learn the finer points of coaching CrossFit.***

Like so many affiliate owners, Karoll was a one-man show and quickly realized he needed to find a way to develop some coaches so he didn't have to work from open until close.

"When I realized waking up at 3:30 a.m. for a 5-a.m. start and being there until 8 p.m. was getting exhausting, I knew I needed to make a change," Karoll said.

Like the Thorntons at CrossFit Cumming, Karoll didn't have a formal development system in place, and he didn't want to hand the keys to anyone just to relieve himself from the gym for a couple of hours, so he waited until the right person came to him.

"Eventually, a client of ours who had started with us on Day 1 came to us and expressed interest in getting his Level 1 (Certificate)," Karoll said of coach Bob Beswick. "So we pushed him in that direction, and when he got his Level 1 (Certificate), I got him to start helping with classes."

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**—Sam Karoll**

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Because Karoll knew Beswick was going to become a coach, he didn't mind spending a little extra time with his prospect to ensure Beswick's mechanics and knowledge of the movements were sound.

"He'd come to class, and I'd coach him a little more during class," said Karoll, who started to raise Beswick first as an athlete and then as a coach in an impromptu one-on-one mentorship program.

As Beswick progressed, Karoll gave him more and more coaching responsibilities. Today, Karoll's first homegrown trainer is Shadow CrossFit's morning-crew coach.

"He is absolutely adored by those morning clients ... his 5-a.m. class has become one of our busiest classes," Karoll said.

Karoll believes one of the keys to his success was refraining from rushing for a bandage coaching solution. Instead, he made sure he knew Beswick's character was sound—by watching him interact with the community for nine months—before turning him into a coach.

"That's the philosophy we're taking on: Instead of searching for coaches, we want to wait for people to come to us—people who have that passion for coaching and teaching. Mechanics are coachable, knowledge is teachable, but personality is something that is priceless," Karoll said.

And once you know the person is passionate about coaching and has a good personality for it, you can take him or her under your wing and teach the prospective trainer everything you know, Karoll explained.

So far, his patience had paid off. Karoll now has a group of loyal clients all planning on taking the Level 1 Certificate Course in the near future.

"Eventually, I would like to have it where my people are the ones leading our community and coaching the majority of the day," Karoll said. "I would like to coach 50 percent of the time and spend the other 50 percent of my time on the rest of the business ... I'll be (in) more of a mentor role, so I'll be able to handle the business end and help my coaches be the best coaches they can be."



### **About the Author**

*Emily Beers is a **CrossFit Journal** staff writer and editor.*