
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Clearing the Air

Every gym has the occasional body-odor problem. Three CrossFit coaches share their strategies for dealing with a smelly athlete. Emily Beers reports.

By Emily Beers

July 2014



All Photos: Kim Bellavance

Although it was years ago, Andrew Swartz still gags when he thinks about the stench.

"His body odor was different than anything I'd experienced. It didn't seem to be restricted by the laws of physics as we know them," the longtime CrossFit coach said of a client he used to train.

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Swartz added: “The gag radius was really, really big, but where this guy stood out was that there was a battery-licking quality to his smell. And it seemed his body was impervious to deodorant. He showered regularly, and no matter how much pit stick he put on, it would surrender after about 20 minutes—an hour if he sat perfectly still.”

It seemed there was no solution, and other clients started to complain. The only thing Swartz could think of to do was to take his client outside to work out to avoid disrupting those breathing hard in the gym.

It was an extreme measure, and Swartz knew it, but he didn't know what else to do. There was no policy in place for handling a smelly client at the time.

Although it might sound absurd to adopt an official policy for dealing with clients who might not shower enough or who own just one workout T-shirt, any coach who has had to deal with such a situation understands the need for a carefully thought-out plan for addressing body odor.

“You Stink”

Chris Saini has been coaching CrossFit for eight years.

Like Schwartz, he noticed a member at his gym gave off an offensive odor that actually became disruptive to the class.

“The stench was thick. As in you could smell him 15 yards away,” Saini said.

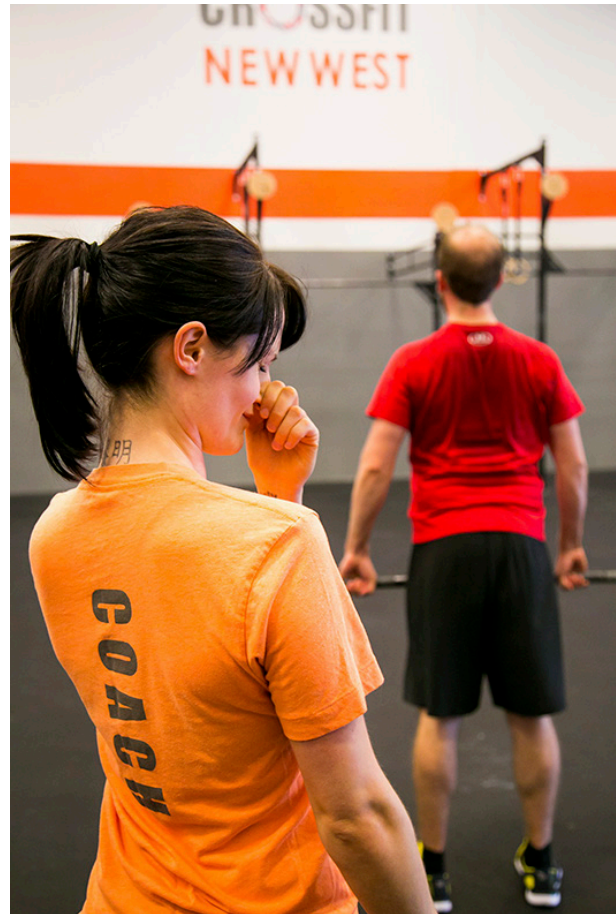
“The stench was thick. As in you could smell him 15 yards away.”

—Chris Saini

Saini let it go for a little while until it occurred to him one day that this guy always wore the same black shorts and red tank top. Day after day after day.

He decided to just come out and say it: “I asked him if he washed his workout clothes since the day before. He said, ‘No.’ And I said, ‘Yeah, no shit,’” Saini said.

“I explained that this is a common space for everyone, and if he wants to wear dirty clothes and sweat and stink at home, that’s his own prerogative. But in here he has to



Many coaches find it's best to address the problem before other members complain.

wear clean, fresh workout clothes every day he comes in,” Saini continued.

“Perhaps it could have been handled better, but I couldn’t take it anymore,” he added.

What happened next was the worst-case scenario.

“I never saw him again,” Saini said.

Poisoned Lungs in Lynwood

Jesse Ward is the owner of Lynwood CrossFit in Washington.

He had a similar situation to Saini’s more than a year ago: It became apparent one of his clients—a really good athlete—had a terrible body-odor issue to the point that other coaches didn’t even want to train the guy.

“Dude, I can’t train with him,” Ward said of the feedback he started receiving from his coaches.



Sometimes a smell can be eliminated with a simple reminder to layer on some deodorant or trash a workout shirt that's past its best-before date.

"I kind of laughed it off a couple times," he added.
Until he no longer could.

"We did a workout on the mezzanine one day. There were 12 people in class, and we were doing a bike workout—a Fight Gone Bad-style rotating AMRAP," Ward began.

"And he was especially stinky that day. He gassed everyone out. I saw this poor guy get off the bike, and there was a legitimate moment of, 'How am I going to do this?' because the smell was so strong," he said.

Ward knew he had to deal with the problem.

He didn't want to approach his athlete at that moment right after the class and embarrass him. But talking to him the moment he walked in the following day still smelling didn't seem right either because it would put his athlete in a position where he'd be uncomfortable staying for class.

So Ward turned to a more mild form of confrontation: email.

"It seemed like a better idea for something that touchy," said Ward, who emailed his client that same day.

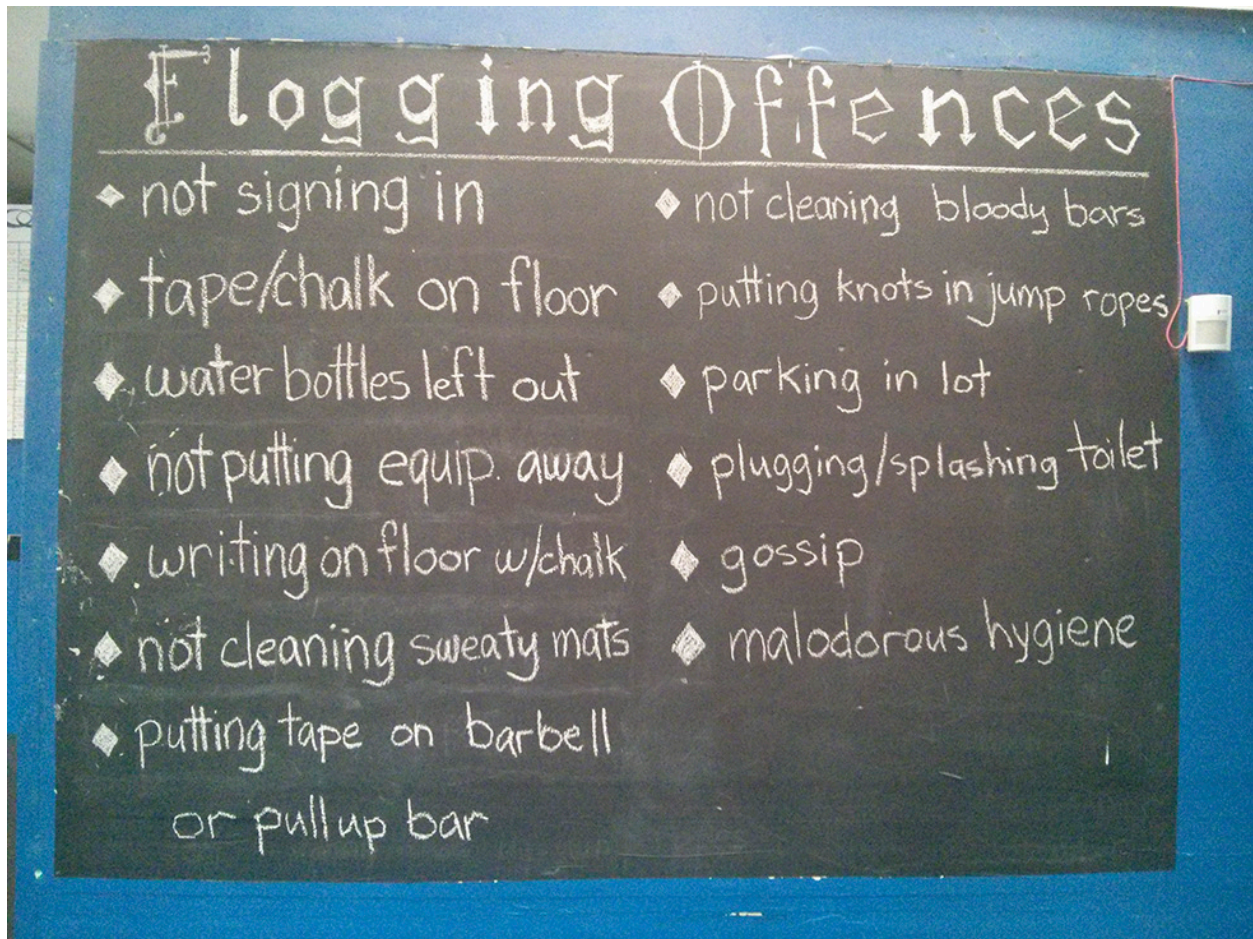
"Hey, bro ... I wanted to talk to you about your body odor," Ward started.

**"Hey, bro ... I wanted to talk to
you about your body odor."**

—Jesse Ward

"Are you aware of this?" Ward added, suggesting it could be a medical condition.

Then he signed the email with, "Rock on, Jesse Ward."



If you make it clear that hygiene is important, it's often easier to address a problem when it appears.

The result of Ward's email was the best-case scenario. His client replied by thanking Ward for letting him know. He also admitted it was probably his T-shirts, which he had left in his gym bag one too many times, and that he was headed to buy some new gym clothes that evening.

After that, it was water under the bridge.

The smell did turn out to be the T-shirts, and Ward hasn't noticed a bad smell since that day. More than a year since the confrontation, Ward's client still comes to the gym and continues to be a dominant athlete.

Ward said if he had to deal with the problem again, he'd do it the same way, regardless of whether he's dealing with a man or a woman.

"If it was a woman, I'd just say, 'Hey, girl. Just to let you know—the smell—it's pretty bad. Maybe it's a medical

problem.' And then you know, I'd say something like, 'Rock on, Jesse.'"

The key for Ward is not to make a big deal about it, to limit the embarrassment for his athlete.

"It's not an uncommon problem. Every gym as one or two (with body odor)," Ward said.

Flogging Offense

Like Ward, Saini has come up with a solution to body odor that doesn't involve public shaming through the words, "You stink."

Instead, he suggests including bad odor and hygiene in your gym's list of rules.

Many gyms post a list of rules or flogging offenses in plain view for members to see the moment they walk in. The list

often includes things such as, “Don’t cheat the movements or the reps,” or, “Say hi to one new person each day.”

“Add ‘malodorous odor’ to that list,” Saini said.

At the very least, public statement of regulations allows for a more open conversation about hygiene with clients, as sitting down with an athlete for a one-on-one about deodorant can be awkward. If the client is overly sensitive or embarrasses easily, or if the trainer handles the situation badly, the two might not see each other again.

A list also allows coaches to nip the problem in the bud. You can point out the list to new clients to explain the gym’s culture and community, and you can have a chuckle together about the odor clause.

“You can say something like, ‘You’d be surprised how many people we’ve had through these doors that don’t shower or change their workout clothes,’” Saini said.

The idea is that the new client will immediately strive to avoid being one of the stinky ones in class.

And if a stench does persist even after a client has seen the public statement of flogging offenses, Saini said the best thing to do is deal with the problem right away.

“Now I deal with this thing much earlier in my client’s development so I don’t lose patience,” he said.

Readily Available Deodorant

Swartz, too, has a unique solution to the stink-bomb client.

More recently, Swartz had a personal-training client who seemed secure and confident in himself, so Swartz decided to end the problem before the guy joined his first regular group class.

“It helped a lot,” Swartz said.

It sounds kind of mean to hand someone a stick of deodorant, but Swartz nipped the problem in the bud, and he helped his client avoid being “the stinky one” in class, the one people didn’t want to team up with.

And if you’re not comfortable handing a stick of deodorant to your client, looking him straight in the eye and telling him to slap some on, another option is to provide your bathrooms with spray-on deodorant.

Even if you’re not a regular stinker, we’ve all had a day when we forget to put on deodorant or we come in for a workout straight after work smelling unlike a rose.

And in that moment, some spray-on Secret or Old Spice would ensure a stink-free workout.



About the Author

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

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He subtly handed his client a stick of deodorant, told him to stroke his pits a few times, leave the deodorant in the bathroom and come join the class.