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Divided We Fall

Balancing the needs of competitive CrossFit athletes and general athletes can be done.
Andréa Maria Cecil surveys the community for solutions.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

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When CrossFit Dallas Central opened its doors, the CrossFit Games were in their second year. Broadcasting them on a major TV network wasn't at the forefront of most people's minds.

"When we started, the Games weren't even on the map," said Spencer Nix, of the Texas affiliate. "You didn't do CrossFit so you could competitively exercise. (You did it) so you could just go out and do other things."

Five years later, fans can watch the Games on ESPN outlets, and a few athletes can even make careers of competing in CrossFit competitions and other throwdowns offering prize money.

That evolution, however, hasn't changed the fact that most of CrossFit Dallas Central's members are still simply trying to improve health markers and feel better about themselves, Nix noted.

"Those two things have nothing to do with athletics," he said. "I still think that's what the majority of people who come in have on their radar."

But as the competitive aspect of CrossFit continues to grow, so, too, does the conundrum: how to balance competitors' needs with those of the general population, which comprises the vast majority of affiliates' memberships.

The solution for some is to create special programming for competitors or for individuals to follow their own programming, either during group classes or in other time slots. That can create a host of obvious problems including space management and group cohesion, but it also stands in contrast to these lines from the [What Is CrossFit?](#) page on CrossFit.com:

"The needs of Olympic athletes and our grandparents differ by degree not kind. Our terrorist hunters, skiers, mountain bike riders and housewives have found their best fitness from the same regimen."

A Separation

At CrossFit Dallas Central, members of the competition team—which placed 10th at this year's Games—train together during group class times but separately in a different room at the 11,000-square-foot facility.

"There's no way around having to have a separate group for the (competition) team," Nix explained. "They have to do workouts together. There's no way around having to increase the volume that these guys handle—that is, if you want to perform well."

He added: "With that kind of structuring and framing, it makes it not as confusing to our members."

And because the Games are so popular now, CrossFit Dallas Central members have come to understand why competitors need different programming, said Nix, a member of CrossFit's Level 1 Seminar Staff.

"It's not because they're better looking or we like them better, but because the sport demands these movements,"

he said. "It's taken maybe three years to come to a place where there's a little more healthy of a situation (at CrossFit Dallas Central)."

Nix said he and other coaches at the affiliate are careful not to make Regional- or Games-level competitors seem "like this elitist group."

Competitors are told: "Let's not lose sight that you are just a very tiny portion of this community." And community, Nix said, "is always what will trump" anything else.

Training competitors "can never take precedence over the rest of those people you are training," he emphasized.

**"Everybody needs GPP—
increased work capacity
over broad time and modal
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escape that."**

—Spencer Nix

CrossFit Dallas Central coaches have done such a good job of reminding competitors they are the 1 percent that now they need to remind the competitors of how much they're supported.

"Now it's like, 'How do you make those guys on the team feel special?'" he said. "It's a hard balance (to maintain)."

After the Games, team competitors return to regular group classes, providing a morale booster for the gym, Nix said.

Members realize competitors are "not assholes but the sport they do dictated (different programming)."

Roughly 240 miles south in Houston, CrossFit EaDo also has team competitors join regular group classes once a week. EaDo's Beau Schulgen described it as an "ego check."

Not only do members in the group classes give chase to competitive athletes, but they also get to experience what a tall order that is, Schulgen said.

"Their whole demeanor changes."

Kelly Levens, of CrossFit RX in Atlanta, described such situations as walking “a fine line.”

“It was more of an issue back when we would allow (athletes) to do different WODs during the class time because it was a gym divided between program A and program B,” he explained. “We quit doing that quickly.”

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programming more aggressive.”**

—Kelly Levens

Today there is a competitor’s class that meets when the gym is closed so as not to disturb group classes.

“Part of the way we dealt with people’s desires to get better is we made our general programming more aggressive,” said Levens, who added that his affiliate now follows CrossFit New England’s programming.

And while Nix says team competitors need to train separately from most members, he’s quick to add that’s not necessarily the case for individual competitors.

“I might be able to swing that a different way,” he said, “have them do supplemental stuff.”

At the end of the day, though, one truth remains for Nix: “Everybody needs GPP—increased work capacity over broad time and modal domains. Nobody gets to escape that.”



John Main, a member of the Level 1 Seminar Staff, thinks it's important for Games competitors to train alongside the rest of the community.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Top Games athlete Ben Smith has to train on his own due to responsibilities as a coach and owner at CrossFit Krypton, but his group programming reflects workouts he's doing himself.

Individually Speaking

At CrossFit MPH in Washington, D.C., five-time Games competitor Christy Phillips isn't sequestered in a corner, sentenced to training alone. Instead, she works out with everyone else.

"I think it's really good for our athletes to see that Christy works out with them, that she CrossFits right alongside with them," said CrossFit MPH owner Melody Feldman. "No matter how good you are at CrossFit, you're still going to have to put in the work."

The affiliate programs for elite-level athletes and then scales accordingly. That means Phillips might be doing muscle-ups while others are doing strict pull-ups.

"We focus on the stimulus," Feldman explained.

John Main, former owner of CrossFit MPH who recently became a coach at Reebok CrossFit One in Massachusetts, still creates the programming for the Washington box along with Feldman.

"We've never really bought into this idea that the needs of the competitive CrossFit athlete are different than the general population except for a couple of weeks out of the year," said Main, a member of the Level 1 Seminar Staff.

"Christy will train with the group at the gym and then we'll program some specific work for her to follow."

"We've never really bought into this idea that the needs of the competitive CrossFit athlete are different than the general population except for a couple of weeks out of the year."

—John Main

That work includes skills or movements she's trying to improve and usually takes anywhere from 30 to 60 minutes a day, Feldman said.

It's key, Main said, to keep Phillips in the community.

"It's important that we don't create this caste system of competitor and then everyone else," he explained. "It's been our position from the beginning it's for the community. ... Being able to play in the group, it's important for everyone."

For competitive CrossFitters like Ben Smith and Jordan Troyan, the situation is more complicated because they also are affiliate owners and coaches. They can't train with the group if they're coaching the group.

"There's seven classes every day, and I'm there for at least five out of the seven of them," said Smith, who opened CrossFit Krypton late last year in Virginia. "I do my thing before a class might start or between classes in the middle of the day—really whenever I find time. I just find myself at the gym longer than usual."

At the moment, Smith only has one coach on staff.

"If we're there, we're coaching," he said. "We have a job to do."

But that doesn't mean he and his members don't experience the same suffering.

"All the programming that's at the gym ... is all my programming," Smith said. "I make up all the workouts and they're all workouts that I've done in the past or that I'm doing now."

And unlike other affiliates, he doesn't see a need for a competitor's course.

"The general programming at our gym, it's pretty tough," Smith said. "If someone wants to compete, we'll scale it up or push them at something that they're bad at that day."

He added: "That's the cool thing about CrossFit: You can be competing right next to someone who's competing at the Regional level or someone who just wants to get in shape."

Jordan Troyan, an all-American swimmer who finished 24th at his first Games this year, takes a similar approach at his affiliate in Pennsylvania.



Like Ben Smith, affiliate owner and Games athlete Jordan Troyan creates group programming based on his own workouts.

With only two other coaches who “help out,” Troyan coaches most of the classes at CrossFit Rage, which he opened last year. He’s joined the group class a total of about two or three times, he noted.

“It would definitely be nice to work out with the group class. Working out by myself, I push myself, but I know working out with someone else, I’d push harder,” Troyan said. “There’s more motivation when there’s someone else with you.”

Like Smith, he uses the programming he follows for his membership.

“I pretty much program the way I work out,” Troyan said. “I’m not really in the near future going to have a competitor’s class yet because I think my program pretty much covers everything.”

Finding Balance

Although not an affiliate owner, 2013 second-place Games finisher Lindsey Valenzuela is a coach at DogTown CrossFit in Southern California. Likewise, having her join group classes can become “a logistical nightmare,” said her coach, Dusty Hyland.

“It’s important to embrace our elite athletes, but it’s also just as important to keep everyone connected to a degree.”

—Dusty Hyland

Still, Valenzuela always has a training partner—even if it’s Hyland himself or her husband, Arsenio. And this year, the U.K.’s Sam Briggs and New Zealand’s Ruth Anderson Horrell both spent about a month at DogTown in preparation for the Games, where they competed as individuals.

“You can’t train alone in a vacuum and expect to get consistency, intensity and accuracy ...,” Hyland said. “Because they are the 1 percent of our community, most of the workouts they do our folks can’t handle. Every once

in a while, I’ll take their programming and throw it into our advanced class.”

Since DogTown opened three years ago, it has realized the importance of galvanizing the community.

“It’s important to embrace our elite athletes, but it’s also just as important to keep everyone connected to a degree,” Hyland said.

His advice: program for the middle-of-the-road athlete first.

“That way you can scale the workout in either direction based upon an athlete’s competence or inefficiencies with movements,” Hyland said. “These people are the meat and potatoes of our business and tend to get overlooked by the brand new folks and the elite athlete that needs more attention.”



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Cherie Chan (in red) said she and her husband Matt always put community ahead of competitors.

Mike Warkentin



A good coach can scale movements in a variety of ways to make them easier or more challenging.

DogTown offers classes for various ability levels, as well as specialty classes, so athletes who have general physical ability can progress to more advanced skills.

"These two feed directly into our advanced or competitors program as well or can be just for lifestyle and fun," Hyland explained.

For Matt Chan, though, finding a training partner can be a feat in and of itself.

With his wife, Cherie, and two dogs, the six-time Games competitor has been traveling the country in a diesel pick-up truck pulling an Airstream travel trailer. The Chans—both Level 1 Seminar Staff members—have been to Arizona, California, New Mexico, Nevada and Utah, among other states.

"Matt's currently looking for people to work out with," Cherie said. "Working out by yourself in the corner is not conducive to getting better."

So wherever they find themselves, the Chans seek out affiliates that either have open-gym time or will allow Matt to follow programming prescribed to him by his coach and fellow Level 1 Seminar Staff member Joe Alexander.

"We just really like going to affiliates, and we like ... meeting the gyms, and the people are amazing," Cherie said. "It has more to do with the community."

If the affiliate doesn't have open-gym time or requires visitors to follow its own programming, then Matt has the option to unload the equipment aboard the couple's Airstream for an outdoor workout. During Level 1 Seminars, Matt invites other L1 Seminar Staff members to join him in his training regimen.

The experience has caused the Chans to dramatically increase open-gym time at their own affiliate, CrossFit Verve in Denver, Cherie added, so visitors can continue following their own programming and so members can fine-tune skills.

Meanwhile, CrossFit Verve's competitor's program hasn't been as successful as they had wanted, Cherie added, because of conflicting schedules. But that might be OK.

"It's never ever been a priority of ours at Verve to make competitors No. 1," she said. "It's always the general populous—the people who want to get healthy—that's been our priority."

Cherie paused, then added: "What are you giving up to have 10 people be really good at CrossFit out of 300?"



About the Author

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