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Lifeline to Independence

Anna Woods describes workouts that showcase the creativity needed to provide functional movement skills to clients with challenges including cerebral palsy, Down syndrome and paraplegia.

By Anna Woods with Emily Beers

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All: Courtesy of Anna Woods

It's almost 9:30 a.m. Cindy Scheer and Jeri Wells slowly roll into the dining room at the Disability Supports of the Great Plains building in Kansas, where they both work and attend day services.

I clear out the tables and make a large enough space for eight to 10 athletes and their wheelchairs. Cindy and Jeri are usually two of the first people to arrive.

I always divide my classes into two sessions: one session is for athletes who require wheelchairs, while the other is for those who can walk. Both Cindy and Jeri are always anxious to know when it's their turn to exercise. Today, we establish they're up in the first session. I quickly round up the rest of their classmates from their work stations and wheel them down to the dining room.

We chat about the happenings from the last few days. Cindy updates me on her ongoing desire to travel to Israel to do mission work. She is adamant that she won't let her physical limitations get in the way.

Jeri describes the newest colors of yarn she bought for the clocks she makes and sells at the local farmers market. Our conversation ends with an update on her dating status. Then, we get to business and start warming up.

I turn the iPod to some oldies rock from the '50s and '60s, and we work through some shoulder shrugs, arm circles, wrist rolls, breathing techniques and facial expressions. We puff our cheeks full of air and then make fish faces; we smile big and then purse our lips; we raise our eyebrows and squint.

For my clients, the face muscles are sometimes the only ones where they maintain motor control. And for others, facial movements are important to build better jaw strength needed for talking, eating and breathing. Working on making different facial expressions also helps with tongue control for my clients with Down syndrome, as they often struggle with tongue protrusion.

I follow this up with an ever-progressing game of "clap, snap, slap," where everyone mimics my pattern until we're all laughing so hard we can barely breathe.

Cindy hollers out, "My arms are going to fall off!" and I know we have reached the end of our warm-up.

Adaptive Programming

CrossFit for people with developmental disabilities involves adapting movements for mental and physical delays while nurturing and growing a culture that encourages improved function for day-to-day life. I usually have to adapt things such as the complexity of the movements, the length of time it takes to do the exercises, the arrangement of the class and the order in which we do the movements.

The movements I choose are key to working with my clients. When considering a class template, I plan exercises I know will fit the culture of the group in personal ways. I'll



For pull-ups, Woods ties resistance bands to an orange cone in the center of the circle. Each participant grabs a handle or two and pulls as far as his or her range of motion will allow.

use *Cupid Shuffle* and Michael Jackson dance moves and pair the movements up with workout cues that involve familiar day-to-day movements, such as cleaning the kitchen.

On top of the movements themselves, even the class structure often looks different for my clients than it does in most traditional CrossFit boxes. I have learned to keep my classes relatively short. They last about 30 to 40 minutes; many clients lose focus after that, and others simply do not have the endurance to exercise longer.

The arrangement is crucial to keeping the group engaged, too. When I coach clients who use wheelchairs, I arrange them in circle, and I stand in the center. For the group that does not use wheelchairs, we often stand in lines, and I stand in front, facing them. This has proven to be the most effective arrangement to keep class attention, as well as to allow me to be most accessible to each individual client.

In addition, most clients with developmental delays learn through experience, so repetition is key to proper movement patterns, which is why I do the same warm-up and cool-down exercises for most classes, and why we often do the same workout several times in a month.

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Despite the challenges, programming for this group of individuals can be very effective, but it requires a large amount of flexibility, creative thinking and patience.

“Don’t Stop Believin”

After the warm-up, we slow things down a bit while I explain the exercises for today’s workout.

We are going to do a dumbbell series for the strength portion of the WOD. I hand out just one 2-lb. dumbbell to each participant because most only have use of one arm.

I give Jeri a chance to slowly open up her fingers on her own and then assist her by unclasp her thumb to get it all the way around the dumbbell. I do the same for Cindy, as it takes a moment for her brain to communicate and tell her hand to open up.

Once I have everyone set up to do the movements, I tell the class we are pretending to clean the kitchen today. We shoulder press as we mimic putting things on the top



Jeri (left) and Cindy improve their functional fitness as a means of living independently.

shelf in the kitchen, chest press to open and close drawers, biceps curl to carry the grocery sacks, and do internal and external rotations to open cabinet doors.

For my clients, strengthening their limited range of motion in movements they see on a day-to-day basis will further their chances of independence in life, something most of them desire. They live in a world where much assistance is needed simply to get them through each day, so even the slightest ability to gain function and independence is empowering to them.

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We end class with a short Fran-like WOD. We practice the thruster portion of the WOD with weighted PVC pipe that I fill with dry beans. I figure if the PVC pipe ever cracks, dry beans will be easier to clean up than sand, and the pipe makes a cool rhythmic sound when it gets lifted, fulfilling the auditory needs of some class participants.

Again, I help Cindy get both hands on the pipe. She has very limited range of motion in her arms so the bar literally rests against her neck and face, but she is able to press it a few inches each time.

Jeri has great motion in her left arm, so she uses it to guide her right arm with the PVC pipe. She uses a lighter weight to do her thrusters.

For the pull-ups, I tie resistance bands to an orange cone in the center of the exercise circle, and then each participant grabs one or two loose ends and pulls on them for the 45 reps of Fran. We practice the "pull-ups" a few times before we start the clock.

Cindy requests Journey's *Don't Stop Believin'* for today's workout music, so I crank it up and we start counting our way through 21 thrusters.

Everyone counts each rep out loud as we work our way through the WOD. I help transition between the thrusters

and the pull-ups mainly by re-clasping stubborn fingers around the PVC pipe and resistance-band handles.

I give very few cues during the conditioning portion of the workout because I don't want the class to slow down on the exercises to process what I'm saying. I stick to small shouts of encouragement and feedback: "Good job, Cindy," and, "Pull with your arms, Jeri."

After we finish, we clap and cheer and then cool down with the same exercises we did at the start of class.

Class ends with hugs and high-fives, and then I return everyone to their work stations for the morning.

At this point, everyone is on a high and endorphins are flowing.



The PVC pipes are weighted with dried beans, which offers resistance and makes a rhythmic sound as the pipe moves.



Like most CrossFit athletes, Heather Wedel eagerly looks forward to her workout, and is anxious to know the WOD as soon as possible.

Thriller Workout

After the non-ambulatory class, I make my way over to set up for the ambulatory class.

I assess the noise level and anxiety present in the room before I determine exactly what we will be doing today. When the noise level is high and there is a lot of commotion in the room, I choose a shorter workout and use calmer, quieter music. I do not want to feed into the anxiety and fear already present in the room by amping up the music and the heart rates.

Because it seems pretty low key today, and there is no holiday approaching, I plan to do a longer workout for this class. Many of my clients travel to see family around holidays, and even the thought of a change in routine can lead to high anxiety and increased behavior problems.

Heather Wedel is always waiting for me at the door to the day-service building to help me carry my equipment inside. She greets me with a hug, which is common for a person with Down syndrome. Then we talk about what we are going to do for that day's class; she likes to be the first to know.

Today we will do sled pushes and pulls, ball slams, and a ladder drill. I chose the ladder drill to help with coordination and balance, the ball slam for aggression training, and the sled pushes and pulls for calming.

Heather is excited because this means she will have a partner to train with. She is hopeful I will be her partner today, already asking me if there will be an even or odd number of people participating in class.

I announce that we are starting class if anyone wants to join, to which I don't get much response. So I turn on *Cupid Shuffle* on my iPod and begin to dance by myself. Heather soon joins in. One by one, people slowly make their way over to join us. I change the song over to *Wobble, Wobble*, and a few more guys and girls holler and run over to participate in the hip shaking.

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I've discovered that a dancing warm-up works for the culture of this group. Music and movement speak to people with developmental delays more than anything else I have tried.

After I have a good-sized group dancing, we do the hokey pokey and slowly transition into some dynamic warm-up movements such as quad pulls, knee tucks, leg kicks, arm circles, push-ups at the wall and hops in one place.

Today, I use the ladder to finish the warm-up, and then I go over the movements for today's WOD. Heather pushes her way to the front and designates herself as the leader. She demonstrates the ladder drills for me, and everyone falls in



A creative coach can find a way to modify a movement for just about anyone.

behind her. We partner up to work on the sled pushes and pulls. Instead of an actual sled, I use body weight to push and pull.

Heather stands on one side of a PVC pipe while her partner stands facing her on the other side. Heather pushes her partner, who walks backwards trying to resist Heather's pushing. They go to the other end of the room, then reverse roles and make their way back to where they started. We do this same pattern for pulling as well.

We follow up with ball slams. Time is not a motivating factor for this group, so we almost always count reps, ignoring how long they take.

To begin the WOD, everyone stands in line near his or her partner, behind one of the ladders. They work their way through ladder drills such as Fred Flintstone twinkle toes, penguin walk and zig-zag shuffles before partnering up with the PVC pipe for more sled pushes.

Michael Jackson is blaring in the background, and every once in a while Heather grabs a stray PVC pipe and begins

jamming out her version of *Thriller*. It's hard to keep her on task. This is how the class works: give and take. Although music might be distracting, it's also the motivating factor in each workout, so I allow the distraction because it means I end up with a large group of participants both rocking out and working out hard.

We wrap up class with some yoga stretches and plank holds on rubber mats before we give hugs and a quick pat on the back.

Heather helps me carry my equipment back to my truck. She figures out exactly when I'll be back, tells me she will be practicing her workout moves while I'm gone, gives me a hug and runs back inside.

Discovering They Can

For my clients, working out has changed the culture of their living environment. Exercise is no longer just another "therapy" in Cindy's or Jeri's day; it's no longer just another task to check off on their daily planner.



Many of Woods' clients have started working out on their own, doing exercises they learned in their class.

The workouts have become a part of their daily lives, and improved health is now something they're conscious of. They think about where they are going out to eat and what healthy options might be available. They request their night staff to help them work out. They ask me to buy them dumbbells for their own apartments, and they notice how much better they feel.

When I arrive each morning, Jeri usually greets me right away and tells me what she packed in her lunch that day, always asking me if it's good for her.

Jeri, who was born with cerebral palsy, wants to lose weight, so she is very concerned about what might help or hurt her efforts. This is a far cry from her previous way of life.

Living in a wheelchair used to mean very little opportunity for physical activity—or at least a kind she enjoyed. But today, Jeri has found new motivation with CrossFit.

Similarly, Cindy loves that she can actually do the workouts and feel the muscle burn just like a participant in the ambulatory class.

For so long, when it came to exercise, both Jeri and Cindy were told that they can't do this or can't do that.

But now, neither one of them believes this is the case.



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.