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Journey Behind Bars: Part 2

After getting caught with a suitcase of cocaine in November 2011, Karl Thorson was sentenced to 30 months in prison. From a penitentiary in California, he talks about finding fitness during two years behind bars.

By Emily Beers

November 2013



November 2012: It's moving day for Karl Thorson—though the move will last three weeks.

After spending four months at a Willacy County prison in Texas, he's been transferred to a new penitentiary and is traveling 2,000 miles from the southern tip of the Longhorn State to Lompoc, Calif. Once in California, Federal Correctional Institution (FCI) Lompoc will become his new home until he's released in February 2014.

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Sunlight and food are scarce on the uncomfortable three-week journey that has Thorson traveling in shackles. Riding in stuffy buses and uncomfortable airplanes, he can feel himself losing weight with each passing day.

Discomfort aside, Thorson is excited. Not only was it challenging being one of the few English-speaking inmates surrounded by Spanish speakers in Texas, but he also didn't have access to a gym at Willacy. He heard that his new home in Lompoc has a weight pile and a nice yard for workouts.

Whenever he can, Thorson finds an excuse to talk about CrossFit, a training program he has recently been reading about.

So far, fitness is the only thing that has made his first year in prison bearable; it has been the dominant force in motivating him to start transforming into a better human being.

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On the journey to Lompoc, Thorson meets a Croatian man from Kentucky who turns out to be an avid CrossFit athlete. The Croatian is traveling from a different prison, a place where inmates competed in inner-prison fitness throwdowns.

This new Croatian friend is the first confirmation to Thorson that others in the prison system know about CrossFit. Thorson gets excited as he visualizes the prospect of competing in throwdowns at his new home in Lompoc.

Although his obsession has been growing over the last year, Thorson doesn't know that much about CrossFit yet. He hasn't had Internet access since his arrest, so he's been relying on resources sent by his best friend, Errol Clark, one of the principals of Rocky Point CrossFit in Coquiltam, B.C.

Along with a hard copy of the *CrossFit Level 1 Training Guide* and a printout of some of the Hero and Girl WODs, Errol recently sent books such as Louie Simmons' *The Westside Barbell Book of Methods* and Jim Wendler's *5/3/1*.



Courtesy of Karl Thorson

Without access to a gym or equipment, Thorson spent his first year in prison reading about CrossFit, imagining what it felt like to snatch and clean a barbell.

Thorson can't get enough; he's been spending his days reading about clean and jerks and snatches, deadlifts, and overhead squats, but he hasn't had the chance to get his hands on any barbells to actually try the movements. Bored of doing burpees, push-ups and other body-weight movements and inspired by the promise of iron, Thorson embraces the long journey, knowing it will eventually lead to a pile of iron in Lompoc.

Seeds for Change: 2011 to 2012

When a judge in Seattle sentenced him to 30 months in prison, Thorson was angry—angry he was arrested, angry at the world.

Before he was transferred to Texas, he endured a month in solitary confinement in Seattle, living in darkness and utter silence with only his thoughts and one book to entertain him. In that tiny, stuffy cell, Thorson had to find a way to ease the boredom. The one thing he could take control of was his body.

A year and a half later, Thorson calls his time in solitary confinement a “significant point of change.” Or at least it planted the seeds for change.

Before Thorson was arrested, Clark had encouraged Thorson to try CrossFit. Reluctantly, Thorson attempted three introductory classes at Rocky Point CrossFit, but that was it. He didn't even manage to finish the fundamentals program. For one reason or another, taking care of his body wasn't a priority at the time. But in solitary confinement—lonely and bored—the one thing he could take control of was the fate of his body. So he started doing burpees, push-ups and sit-ups in an effort to maintain his sanity.

Soon his mood started to change.

“I honestly think there was a little seed of change in every squat, every burpee, every pull-up and every push-up from the beginning,” Thorson said of the gradual process.

“As I got physically stronger, so did my desire to focus my life on something more positive. I went from being

frustrated and angry to being overwhelmed by a sense of purpose that I never felt before. I just felt good about being involved with fitness,” he said.

Although he knew little about CrossFit, he remembered some of the concepts he learned at Rocky Point, and he started wracking his brain to conjure up everything he could. He had never gotten a chance to try any of the Olympic lifts, but he had learned to deadlift and squat.

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—Karl Thorson



Courtesy of Kim Bellavance

Originally from British Columbia, Canada, Thorson was arrested, charged and sentenced in the United States, serving time in Washington, Texas and California.



Courtesy of Errol Clark

Thorson's friend Errol Clark introduced him to CrossFit and regularly sends him resources to help him train while incarcerated.

"I remembered a few things about the deadlift, and to stay back on my heels in the squat, and to use my posterior chain. I didn't know what (posterior chain) was at the time. I just thought ass and hamstring," Thorson said.

"And I remember Errol telling me about my rack position during the front squat. I remember being inflexible and thinking Errol was crazy to think I could lift my elbows up more," he said.

While in Seattle, Thorson made it his mission to learn as much as he could about fitness during his time behind bars.

"It's difficult to learn those skills and lifts without the Internet," said Thorson, who started learning the old-fashioned way. Books became his new best friend.

"I've had to piece a lot of things together and go through a lot of trial and error to learn what I've learned," he admitted.

More than anything, though, through the learning and the trial and error, Thorson has found a new purpose in life.

"I started to become excited, really excited about the things I was learning and how good I felt physically and mentally from the training I was doing. I started to see other options on how to live my life," he said.

"Little by little, crime became less of an option . . . I hung onto little ideas for a while, never really ruling them out, until gradually I didn't even consider them anymore," he said.

Society's Dilemma

When Thorson—a Canadian citizen—was sentenced, the judge in Seattle told him that after he served his time and was sent back to Canada, he would never be welcome in the United States again.

Travel is just one of the difficulties Thorson will experience once he is released in the early months of 2014.

In fact, many ex-prisoners have a hard time adjusting to freedom once they're released. While programs exist to help newly released prisoners adjust, the social stigma they face often makes it difficult for them to stay on a good path.

Dr. Jennifer Reiss is a psychologist in Thorson's hometown of Vancouver. She works at a remand center with pre-sentenced individuals awaiting trial.

"A released prisoner's transition moving from a structured and regimented life—where three meals a day are provided for him, where lights out happens at a certain time ... —to go from a structured, institutionalized environment like that to one that is much more fluid when he is released can make it really hard for him to cope," Reiss said.

Once prisoners are released, coping with their newfound independence is only the beginning.

"There's a societal bias, a stigma against people who have been in jail, and this can affect their ability to get a job," Reiss added. "So often when they're having a hard time coping, it's easier just to go back to their old ways, to hang out with their old friends and go back to making easy money."

Reiss thinks released prisoners need two things to adjust to life on the outside: a job and a support group. She admits, though, that it's not that simple. Society has a bit of a moral dilemma on its hands when considering how to treat ex-prisoners. Do we give them the benefit of the doubt and forget about their pasts completely? Or do we make them prove themselves over time? What about when it comes to employing someone who has spent time in prison?

Society has a bit of a moral dilemma on its hands when considering how to treat ex-prisoners.

You can't blame an employer for not wanting to hire a released prisoner, said Reiss. Yet, hiring a former prisoner might be the best thing an employer can do for both the prisoner and for society, as former convicts who quickly get jobs and successfully adapt to life after prison are more likely to live honest lives, which benefits everyone.

In a 2012 article published in *Verstehen*, a sociology journal put out by McGill University, Rebecca Greenberg makes a similar argument to Reiss.

In *Out from Behind Bars: Canadian Ex-Prisoners' Perspectives on the Transition from Prison to the Community*, Greenberg lists family relations, community support, education and the ability to get a job as key points in helping prisoners successfully reintegrate.

"Research shows that employment is the largest concern for prisoners in the pre-release period with 88% of inmates reporting that they need either more job training or more education in order to become employable upon release," Greenberg said in the article.

She added that "productive education directed to postrelease employment helps to mediate individual levels of stress and anxiety."



Courtesy of Kim Bellavance

Thorson went to school in North Vancouver, and friend Errol Clark remembers him as a "shit disturber."

Arguably as important as education is community support. “When released offenders feel isolated from the community and blocked from society’s opportunities and freedoms, they are more likely to return to a life of crime,” Greenberg wrote.

In Thorson’s case, educating himself behind bars has been his priority. He can’t wait to become a free man again in February 2014. He’s already thinking about eating a good steak and drinking a cold beer, and he’s stoked to finally be able to get his hands on a pair of gymnastics rings and bumper plates.

But more than anything, he’s eager to get involved with CrossFit for youth at risk. He can’t wait to use the knowledge he has gained in prison about strength and conditioning—and CrossFit specifically—to help others avoid the path he chose.

For the most part, Thorson thinks the adjustment will be relatively fast and smooth. He has a supportive family

and friends to turn to, and he has an education and employment plan.

That said, Thorson knows there will be challenges. He knows there is a stigma; he knows people don’t always embrace ex-prisoners; he is expecting people might judge him. Ultimately, Thorson knows some people won’t look past his mistakes

But he’s hoping some will.

“I hope that those that have strong opinions of the law can look past people’s mistakes and keep in mind that many have the ability to effect positive change,” Thorson said.

He’s serving his time. He’s learning. He’s changing. And he’s hopeful he’ll be a different person this time around. He’s also hoping the CrossFit community will understand, hoping it’ll recognize the power of fitness in terms of its ability to change someone.



Courtesy of Kim Bellavance

Thorson hopes his newfound focus on fitness and health will keep him out of trouble when he returns home to Canada.

"The real magic of CrossFit is not how it improves your performance. That's a bonus," Thorson said. "The real magic is how it makes you feel when you come home to your families, how you feel playing sports with your kids."

He continued: "It's in the healthy example you set for them; it's in the eyes of your husband or wife as they look at you. People who have found themselves behind bars need that, too."

That's where the change begins, Thorson believes. "Don't lump all inmates into one category," he pleads.

That's all Thorson is asking for when he is released: a chance to prove that he has changed.

Arriving

November 2012:

The minute I arrive (at Lompoc) I make it clear to everyone that training hard is my priority. I came here for the weight pile; not much else concerns me. Once I'm settled in, I start to explore the yard. It's bigger than I'm used to. It has everything I need. Now all I have to do is teach myself how to lift.

I'm told it's difficult to get your hands on weights. I'm told it's better to join a workout "car." But it will take time for me to be accepted.

My time is now. I'm not here to wait to be accepted.

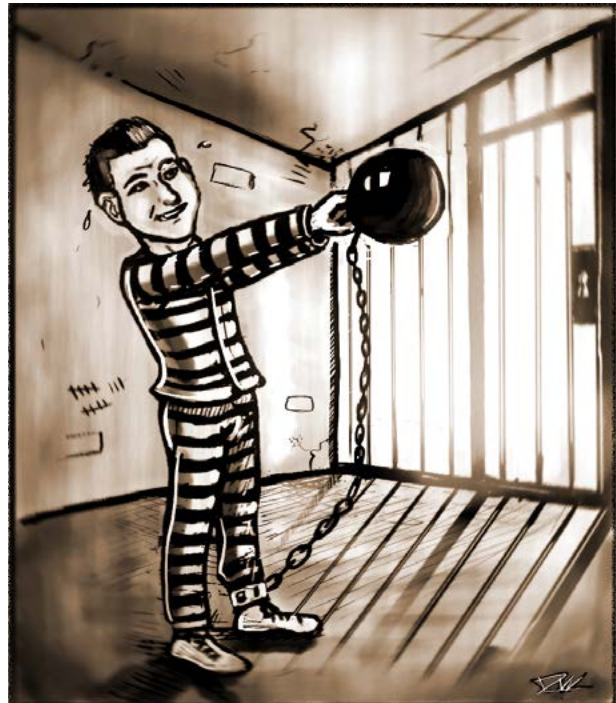
"One guy sprints while the other skips, and then they switch. I can tell they're two of the fittest guys on the yard."

—Karl Thorson

I just start hanging out by the weights, watching for an opening. Eventually I fit myself in. I decide to test my strength.

I test my deadlift, my push press, my squat, and my bench press. I'm not as strong as I thought I'd be. It's time to try the O-lifts—the clean and the snatch—but I'm not 100 percent sure which is which. I think I need more reading material.

I thought I would be stronger, but really, I'm lean at 170 lb.



Donovan Winters/CrossFit Journal

and have been doing mostly burpees for a year, so I guess I should expect it.

I've been reading so much about power lifting and it starts to influence my programming. I feel I need to get stronger so that I can get closer to the prescribed weights in the CrossFit WODs I've been reading about. I'm not sure how to scale things down.

I ask a few people what they know about CrossFit. Some ... know about it, or they talk about another group that does it, but I'm not sure they really know what CrossFit is.

Soon, I notice two guys training together off in the distance near the baseball field. I haven't seen them on the weight pile yet, but I can tell they're in good shape. They're doing 100-meter sprints mixed with skipping.

One guy sprints while the other skips, and then they switch. I can tell they're two of the fittest guys on the yard.

I asked a few people about them and they all respond respectfully by saying, "Yeah, that's so and so—they go hard." I make a mental note to get to know them if I can.

Not everyone is friendly here at first.

One day at lunch, I find myself sitting beside one of two guys I saw sprinting and skipping and decide to bring up CrossFit. He tells me he got WODs sent to him and started doing it a few months ago. He says he loves it.

Journey Part 2 ... (continued)

I tell him my best friend co-owns Rocky Point CrossFit. I tell him I will explain everything I (know) about it, including my limited experiences in his box before I was arrested.

He instantly asks if I wanted to do some workouts with him and we set up a time.

I don't know it at that moment but this man is about to take my training to the next level.

Day-to-Day at Lompoc

In an eight-man room on the third floor of his building, Thorson sleeps on the top of a two-man bunk beside a pair of small windows with bars on the inside. His room looks down on a courtyard. Steel tables and benches line the yard.

He has his own locker; it's five feet tall and a foot and a half both wide and deep. Other than his body and his books, his locker is the only thing Thorson can really call his own.

Breakfast, which is served at Chow Hall, starts at 6 a.m. Breakfast for Thorson is usually coffee and oatmeal.

Then it's time to shower in one of the two bathrooms on his floor. In each bathroom, there are six individual showers, sinks and toilets to serve the 90-man dorms on each end of the hall, as well as the 10 eight-man rooms, one of which is Thorson's.

After breakfast, Thorson usually reads or watches the morning news on one of the TVs near the courtyard. When watching TV or sitting at the tables in the courtyard or Chow Hall, Caucasians sit with Caucasians, blacks with blacks, Mexicans with Mexicans, and so on.

Sometimes Thorson hits an early-morning workout. But usually he works out in the afternoon or evening.

He could go to the education department in the early mornings, but it's usually too busy, so he saves that for



Space is limited in correctional institutions, and many prisons don't have weights. For about a year, Thorson trained with body-weight exercises while dreaming of barbells.

the afternoon. This is where he reads the strength-and-conditioning books Clark sends him.

Lately, afternoon workouts involve pull-ups, dips, push-ups and maybe some skill work or light conditioning. He always has to keep track of the time, though, because at 4 p.m. he is called back to his unit for the daily count. This is also when mail gets handed out. Mail's a big deal to Thorson right now.

Dinner is served at 6 p.m. Each floor is called separately, and Thorson has to wait until it's his floor's turn. Then it's time for another workout. He usually hits the weight pile from 6:30 until 8:30 p.m. But there's a lot of standing around waiting for weights.

After his post-workout shower, he eats a late dinner of rice and tuna or mackerel—food he buys from a commissary at the prison. This is also where he buys powdered milk for his post- or pre-workout drinks. He adds some chocolate to sweeten it up.

By 9:30 p.m., it's back to his room, and at 10 p.m. it's lights out.

Thoughts on Happiness

August 2013:

In a way, I'm happier than when I was free. I'm happier with who I am.

Lompoc isn't a place that is designed for comfort, so it's difficult to be really happy here.

Your freedom, privacy, contact with friends and loved ones, are all taken away. That's been the hardest part.

Confinement is a constant stress that just sits under the surface waiting for some kind of release that never comes.

It's hard to judge my actions at the moment because, well I'm in prison, and this is a different world all together. It doesn't translate well to the outside world.

That being said, I feel good about my prospects for the future.

I have a different mindset; I have more positive motives.

So when I ask myself what my motives are today, what my plans are, they are different than before, more positive, and that's something in itself. That's a change in the right direction.

I was really confused before coming here; I don't think I had much direction. Or at least, I think my direction was twisted, and it feels like I have found a better path to follow.

The Sounds of the Iron

April 2013:

I woke up this morning and literally had to drag myself out of bed. I'm rarely in a good mood when I'm woken up at 5:30 a.m., and today was no exception.

I ate my breakfast and prepared myself for the walk to our weights. It was a little cold, but the blue sky and morning mist promised me beauty and I forgot my disgruntled disposition.

As I walked closer to the weight pile, the sound of iron clanging filled my ears.

Our weight pile isn't your average weightroom. There are no clamps for the barbells, no rubber weights, no machines—there's just iron. The weights clap together as they're being lifted, and bang the ground hard with finality when sets are done.



Courtesy of Kim Bellavance

Upon returning to Vancouver, Thorson will look to his friends and family to support him as he reintegrates himself into society.

As I watched the sun rise, I realized that the sounds that my workouts make are different than most of the other guys. The sounds that my plates make as I lift, push, pull, are louder and faster.

The sounds of my workout are distinct—they form a pattern.

First, I can hear the explosion of power cleans. The force from the pull vibrates through the plates, rattling them together. Then they crash down hard as gravity pulls them to the ground.

“The other guys know what these sounds mean. They can hear the intensity. They may not know what CrossFit is, but they respect the work.”

—Karl Thorson

There is a pause of silence as I do pull-ups, an echo from the hollow box during box jumps, and finally the snapping sound of double-unders, to be repeated round after round after round.

The other guys know what these sounds mean. They can hear the intensity. They may not know what CrossFit is, but they respect the work. They know that whoever makes those noises is headed somewhere.

Anyone that works hard on this yard is respected.

Thorson’s Plea

Thorson believes fitness is one of the only hopes for many prisoners to reform.

“I’ve heard about policies being implemented in the BOP (Bureau of Prisons) and other prison systems that have begun to take away exercise equipment or ban upper-body workouts. I don’t believe this will solve any issues,” Thorson said.

“It will only limit the positive affects programs like CrossFit can have,” he added.

Recently, Thorson met an inmate who has been behind bars for 18 years. And over the course of his incarceration,

the inmate has noticed something remarkable: the guys who spend all their time in their bunks watching TV, the ones who don’t commit themselves to a fitness program, are the ones most likely to find themselves back in prison.

But the guys who dedicate their time in prison to getting fit, the ones who test themselves every day through intense workouts, they never come back, the man explained.

Weightlifting in prisons has been an issue at times, partially due to budget concerns and a desire to limit prison “frills.” The 1996 Zimmer Amendment addressed public concerns with supposedly luxurious recreation options of inmates, and some have questioned whether allowing criminals to become stronger and more powerful is actually a good thing for both corrections officers and the general public after the inmate is released.

“Too many criminals spend their time in prison becoming even more violent, criminal machines. We need more books in prison and less weight-lifting equipment,” Rep Steve Chabot (R—Ohio) said in a 1995 article [Laws Target Prison Weightlifters](#).

Those views, dated as they are, are not uncommon, and budgets have only grown tighter as the number of American inmates has increased dramatically over the years. In California in 2008-2009, it cost over \$47,000 to hold an inmate for one year, and the total expense of the California corrections system is in the billions. Recreation as a means of rehabilitation is far from a pressing concern.

All that stands in contrast to the story of Karl Thorson, who’s found a new path through fitness.

“Sport has the ability to teach us so many things that form the foundation of a fulfilling life,” Thorson said.

He added: “These things transcend a government’s laws and delve deeper into the core of our own humanity.”



About the Author

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