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Fight Gone Right

CrossFit Striking combines punches and kicks with traditional CrossFit movements to introduce new elements into training.

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I closed my eyes and spun in a circle, around and around, until I felt a tap on my shoulder.

"Knee strike!" someone shouted.

I opened my eyes and dizzily threw three unsteady knee strikes into a focus pad held by Martin Aherne, a taekwondo instructor. Before I could finish the third one, I felt another tap on my shoulder.

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“Palm-heel strike!”

I whirled around and slammed my palm three times into the waiting focus pads held by Blanca Rodriguez, a border-patrol agent who earned her black belt when she was 18.

“Elbow strike!”

I turned again and faced Neal Abrams, one of the instructors, who has been practicing martial arts since 1996.

Each time I finished one set of three strikes, I'd feel a tap on my shoulder, hear a shouted command and throw another three strikes while the people surrounding me yelled and hooted, making the whole experience more confusing.

Then George Ryan, the CrossFit Striking Trainer Course leader, yelled, “Stop!” and it was over. The whole thing lasted about 20 seconds. I was left panting and disoriented.

“Add CrossFit and fighting together—wow, that’s powerful.”

—George Ryan

As CrossFit athletes, we pride ourselves on facing the unknown and unknowable. The truth is that after a while, things can get familiar around the box—the barbell, the pull-up bar, the box, the rings, even they can become routine if you fall into a programming pattern.

There are many ways to get fit, but as Ryan said on the first day of the seminar, “Fighting is a different type of fitness. Add CrossFit and fighting together—wow, that’s powerful!”

Rotational Power

I traveled to CrossFit Central in Austin, Texas, in the last weekend of September to attend the course. As a former amateur boxer, I know a few things about punching, but my martial-arts arsenal has a gaping hole: I don't know how to kick. Also, I couldn't quite picture how punches and kicks could be used in a CrossFit workout. Up until this point, I've kept boxing and CrossFit in separate corners.



Athletes learning the rear straight, or punch No. 2, which Ryan calls the “goodnight big right.”

Of the 20 people gathered at the gym on a humid Saturday, our group included eight border-patrol agents, not surprising given that Texas is adjacent to Mexico. A number of participants had extensive martial-arts backgrounds, but quite a few of them had never thrown a punch.

Leandra Bevans just started CrossFit in January.

“I was 247 lb. at Christmas,” she said, “I was turning 50 and didn't want to be a fat Hawaiian chick in a muumuu. I was taking nine pills a day for cholesterol and high blood pressure.”

Even though her doctor told her not to, she started CrossFit. She's since lost over 80 lb. and feels like a completely different person—the kind of person who travels from Arizona to Texas for a weekend of punching and kicking with complete strangers.



Ryan (right) demonstrates a right uppercut on fellow instructor Neal Abrams (left).

The CrossFit Striking course has many objectives, and they vary in importance depending on the goals and background of the participant. One of the primary objectives is to add yet more variety to CrossFit workouts. The two-day course teaches both coaches and athletes how to combine strikes and combinations with CrossFit movements to create workouts that improve core strength and rotational power.

Fighters get a lot of their power from rotating the body when throwing a kick or a punch. There's not much rotational movement in many standard CrossFit workouts, a fact that became abundantly clear to me by the end of the second day. I've been doing CrossFit consistently for three years, but after two days of punching and kicking I felt an unfamiliar soreness through my obliques. This was an area I was not reaching on a regular basis.

The course does not turn you into a fighter, and it doesn't involve any sparring. Punches and kicks are thrown against focus pads, kick shields and heavy bags. Participants learn how to throw strikes and combinations, how to teach

the proper striking mechanisms and self-protection techniques to clients, and how to increase the speed and power of strikes.

The Beginning

Ryan was introduced to striking in third grade, training with his dad, a former boxing coach.

"My first heavy bag was an old Air Force duffel bag stuffed with clothing, and it hung from a beam in my basement," Ryan said. "I would hit that every day for hours while listening to oldies on my mom's record player. My dad didn't want me competing and sparring in boxing due to potential head trauma, but I loved doing drills and workouts. Growing up, I also played sports all the time. This was until I met Billy Blanks when I was about 16 years old. Billy and his cousin George really encouraged me to do martial arts."

After training with Blanks for almost three years, Ryan started training with one of Blanks' first black-belt students. Then Ryan moved to California and attended

the police academy, when he shifted his focus to self-protection.

For the last 15 years, Ryan has taught his system of self-protection to police officers. He is a member of LAPD SWAT, one of the lead defensive-tactics instructors for his SWAT team and an inductee in the martial-arts Masters Hall of Fame. He's been doing CrossFit since 2005.

"As for my workouts, I've consistently added striking elements to them to promote skill work, fight conditioning and rotation," Ryan said.

This dual perspective gives Ryan—who maintains a noticeable Boston accent despite years in Los Angeles—a strong sense of how CrossFit and martial arts benefit each other. He understands both deeply.

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"Striking is at a higher tempo, a different frequency, than CrossFit. A pro fighter can throw four strikes in a second. You can't swing a kettlebell four times in a second," he said.

Ryan started CrossFit when T.J. Cooper took one of Ryan's hostage-rescue classes in 2005. Cooper told Ryan about what CrossFit Founder and CEO Greg Glassman was doing and how he said, "If you're working out more than 20 minutes a day, you're doing something wrong." That resonated with Ryan.

"I was mixing striking with most of my workouts anyway," Ryan said, so combining CrossFit with kicking and punching was a natural concept.

"It was what I was doing with the tactical community already," he said.

The Basics

The focus of the two-day course is how to teach the fundamentals of striking to CrossFit athletes, so the first day started off with a basic concept: how to make a fist. This approach also makes the course suitable for martial-arts neophytes.

Giving a reference point most CrossFit athletes can understand, Ryan told the group to place the tips of our fingers just below our calluses, and then fold down our hands. He reminded us to keep a straight wrist and hit with the first two knuckles, locking up the wrist before striking.

Then it was time to throw some punches. We started with the lead straight, or jab. It's punch No. 1. If you're right handed, the lead straight is thrown with the left hand. As a boxer, I was accustomed to using the jab as a way to keep my opponent at bay, to prevent her from setting up



Pull-up bars are an excellent place to hang a heavy bag. Ryan recommends placing a towel on the bar to avoid scraping the bar with the metal attachment.

Fight ... (continued)

and getting close, but Ryan reminded us that the primary purpose of our punches was fitness, so we'd be putting a bit more power into the punch. After practicing the lead straight, Ryan took us through the rear straight, punch No. 2, which he affectionately called our "goodnight big right."

The rear straight is the power punch: "It's the No. 1 technique to protect yourself," Ryan said.

When throwing the punch, the entire posterior chain is involved. In addition to being useful for self-defense, "It's an amazing movement for fitness," Ryan said. "It uses the entire body."

Ryan showed us how the proper technique for throwing the rear straight uses the same biomechanics as throwing a baseball, football or a javelin.

Each time he introduced a new strike, Ryan would give us just three things to work on at a time.

"Most people can only learn three things at once," Ryan said.

After getting the basics of the lead straight and the rear straight, we practiced putting them together. Then it was time to pair up and start hitting focus pads.

Working with the focus pads used to be one of my favorite parts of boxing training. A well-thrown punch makes a decisive "thwap," and after you've been doing it for a while, you fall into a rhythm; it's a dance between trainer and athlete. Jab, thwap. Right, thwap. Left hook, thwap. Right uppercut, thwap.

After the class got the hang of the focus pads, Ryan added an interesting element to our focus-pad training, one he uses with his tactical officers. To simulate a real-world situation, he had the person throwing the punches lie on the floor while the partner with the focus pad stood across the room. When Ryan gave the signal, the person punching jumped to his feet, ran across the room and threw a combination: one-two, one-two.

Then Ryan made it even tougher. The striker lay down on his belly and closed his eyes. His target—the partner



The author (left) and Bevans (right) practice training with focus pads.

Fight ... (continued)

with the focus pad—moved somewhere else in the gym. The striker's task was to stand up, locate the target and strike. The group made as much noise as possible while the strikers tried to locate their targets. It was surprisingly disorienting to open my eyes and search for my partner while 10 people hooted and yelled.

Throwing punches at focus pads is great training for boxing, but this was great training for life.

Fight Night

Then it was time to throw CrossFit in the mix for a pre-lunch workout. (This is not a course for those looking to sit in a chair for two days. Ryan kept us moving, and learning, almost constantly.)

To make it easy on us, Ryan had us do a shortened version of his Fight Night Workout, which he called Mini Fight Night. It was two rounds, with a minute rest in between rounds. The first round consisted of 30 seconds of throwing

punches at the pads, 30 seconds of kettlebell swings, 30 seconds on the pads, and 30 seconds of push-ups. Then, after the minute rest, we mixed the pad work with 30 seconds of burpees and 30 seconds of pull-ups.

As Ryan had warned earlier in the day, striking moves at a different pace than most CrossFit movements. I felt the power drain from my punches each time I returned to the pads, as I tried to preserve my form and keep moving.

Just like most movements in CrossFit, striking rewards good body mechanics and technique.



A well-thrown punch recruits the entire body to deliver an explosive, powerful strike.



Multi-year Regional competitor Ingrid Kantola (left) works next to Blanca Rodriguez, who earned her black belt when she was 18.

Another challenge during the workout was getting used to wearing MMA striking gloves while swinging a kettlebell or doing push-ups. (All participants must bring their own striking or bag gloves to the class.) My gloves don't have an open palm, so I struggled to remove them before the pull-ups at the end. I was so tired at that point I didn't mind the break, but I'd recommend finding gloves with an open palm for those planning on combining striking and CrossFit.

Four minutes of work left me gasping but exhilarated. Just like most movements in CrossFit, striking rewards good body mechanics and technique, and the challenge is to uphold those standards while exhausted.

Aherne is a fifth-degree black belt and a trainer at North Austin TaeKwonDo and Jui-Jitsu. Even though he's been teaching taekwondo for 25 years, he said he was learning from the course.

"It's good to hear new ideas, different ways to explain concepts," Aherne said.

Participants who had never thrown a punch were also seeing the value in learning striking techniques. Ingrid Kantola, who has been doing CrossFit since 2009 and placed fifth at the South Central Regional competition in both 2012 and 2013, was already thinking about how she'd introduce CrossFit Striking to her women's class, who are still reeling after trying to implement Carl Paoli's headstand progression.

"I'll see what I can get them to do," she said. "I could get them to strike a medicine ball."

Kantola said many of the correct body positions in striking are similar to Olympic lifting.

"I've seen parallels to the jerk—keeping the chest up," she said. "I also really like (Ryan's) three-prong approach, that you can only (focus on three cues) at a time."

Under Pressure

After a lunch break, we returned to learn hooks, uppercuts, palm-heel strikes, elbow strikes, and finally, what I had been dreading: front kicks, roundhouse kicks and knee strikes.

"We're going to start exploiting the lower half of the body for fitness," Ryan said. As in Olympic lifting, a well-thrown kick incorporates the hips and the posterior chain for a burst of explosive power.

It turns out learning how to kick from an experienced martial artist is completely different than flailing away in a cardio-kickboxing class, which is how I originally learned how to kick. Ryan and Abrams broke down the kicks the same way they did the punches, and soon I was confidently throwing knees and kicks, getting a thrill when my foot made contact with the kick shield.

Once we had learned all the strikes, it was time to put them to the test. We ended the day with the pressure drill. That's how I found myself standing in front of 20 people with my eyes closed, spinning in a circle.

I opened my eyes and faced three opponents who took turns tapping me on the shoulder and calling out a strike, which I threw to the focus pads they held. To make it even more exciting, the rest of the class was encouraged to make as much noise as possible during the drill.

"I want to create the intensity of a real fight," Ryan said about the pressure drill. He told us the drill tested our skills in an "asymmetrical environment," meaning our targets would be unpredictable and constantly changing. The noise of our fellow participants would force us to home in on the instructions from the pad holders, negating "auditory exclusion," a temporary loss of hearing that occurs under high stress.

It was fascinating to watch the variety of reactions to the drill. Some people exploded immediately, throwing strikes with ferocious intensity, driving the pad holders across the room. Others took a moment to collect themselves, fighting against the challenge of using a new skill in a disorienting, high-pressure environment.

However, much like a CrossFit workout, once it was over everyone smiled and laughed, feeling a mixture of adrenaline and relief.

Ryan said the drill was to let us experience the feeling of giving everything we've got.



Ryan showed the class how to use common equipment, such as bands, to practice striking techniques.

"Plus, it's fun," he said with a grin.

Bringing It to The Box

On the second day of the course we learned how to teach the strikes we had learned the previous day. Like in the CrossFit Level 1 Seminar, we took turns correcting our fellow participants, developing an eye for common errors. Ryan told us techniques for enforcing good mechanics, such as holding a focus pad next to a person's arm so his or her elbow doesn't flare out, or using a wall or a PVC pipe to correct technique.

Ryan recommends structuring a CrossFit striking class much like a regular CrossFit class, starting with a warm-up and then moving on to skill or strength work. The skill can be one of the strikes the athletes will use in the workout. Then, the session finishes up with a conditioning workout.

Fight ... (continued)

"AMRAPs work best," Ryan said. The class can be run in two heats if there is limited equipment, and Ryan recommends a 15-minute time cap on the workouts. An easy scaling option is shadow fighting, in which the fighter punches the air instead of a bag or focus pad.

Ryan includes a number of CrossFit striking workouts in the manual that accompanies the course, including some of the benchmark Girl workouts with striking substitutes.

Striking Fran is 15-12-9 (for novice or intermediate) or 21-15-9 (for advanced) reps of 95-lb. thrusters and a four-strike combination. Each four-strike combination counts as one rep in all striking workouts. Even as the athletes get more accustomed to striking, Ryan said there should usually be no more than five or six strikes per rep.

Michael Leigh, a martial-arts instructor who is also opening his own CrossFit affiliate, said the best part of the course was the teaching breakdown.

"It's great learning how to break down the movements for non-martial artists," Leigh said.

After we worked on our coaching skills, Ryan addressed the question on most people's minds: how does all of this fit within a CrossFit gym?

First, Ryan talked about the equipment needs. They aren't extreme: a few heavy bags, focus mitts and kick shields. Ryan said a mass email or Facebook post will often uncover heavy bags and focus mitts languishing in garages and basements all over town. Participants will have to invest in their own MMA or striking gloves, because the health code in many states forbids sharing gloves.

The next issue is how to get people up to speed on the basics of striking. Many affiliates have had success with two-hour foundations or introductory classes over the weekend. Once people get the hang of the movements, trainers can introduce a weekly class and work on refining the skills in class—much like they handle any other CrossFit skill.

Ryan admits the hardcore CrossFit enthusiast might not like striking at first.

"They don't know what they don't know," Ryan said. "But once they get a taste of it, they are gonna love it."



The skill portion of a CrossFit Striking class is a good time to practice the strikes athletes will use in the workout.



Bevans (middle) said she didn't feel comfortable floating down a river in an inner tube a year ago. Now she's lifting weights and punching heavy bags.

Abrams, who taught the course with Ryan, runs a popular CrossFit Striking class at CrossFit Rep Scheme in Northridge, Calif. The hardcore CrossFit athletes "are always watching" as he teaches the striking course, Abrams said. He said they're intrigued but intimidated. Once you get comfortable with something, even with something as difficult as CrossFit, it's hard to get out of your comfort zone and try something new, even if doing so is part of Greg Glassman's *World Class Fitness in 100 Words*.

Many affiliates have had success with "Friday fight night," with everyone going out to dinner together after the CrossFit Striking class.

On the plane ride home from Austin, I thought about my kids' reaction whenever I pull out my boxing gloves. I have a 5-year-old boy and an 8-year-old girl, and when they catch sight of the gloves, they lose their minds a little bit with excitement. If I let them play with the gloves it's highly supervised, of course, because things can get out of control very quickly, but they understand the visceral joy that comes from striking.

Then I thought about Bevans, the woman who lost 80 lb. since starting CrossFit in January. I was paired up with her when she figured out how to land a solid rear straight to the focus pad. Her gloved hand made that satisfying "thwap," and a huge smile spread across her face.

"Wow, that was fun!" she said.



About the Author

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