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No Time for Patty-Cake

Straight-talking CrossFit trainers reveal why they believe the tough-love approach is best when it comes to coaching. Andréa Maria Cecil reports.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

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It was a foggy morning in rural Mount Vernon, Wash.

At 7 a.m., Jodi Monroe was biking alongside her three kids as they pedaled the 10 miles from home to school. As they neared a curb, Monroe's bike lost its traction in the corn-silage juice, a substance commonly seen on the roads in that part of the state. She went tumbling, suffering a stress fracture, deep bruising and a pointer in her hip, as well as a concussion. Her favorite helmet was split in half.

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No Time ... (continued)

About a month later, she returned to Mount Baker CrossFit in the nearby city of Burlington. She didn't mention her accident or her injuries and started her warm-up with wall-facing squats.

Skip Chase started barking at her.

"Go lower," the affiliate owner said.

"My hips hurt. I can't," she told him.

Chase was unmoved.

"He told me to 'get down.' He just kept saying it," Monroe recounted. "That's when I got a lump in my throat."

She stepped outside to regain her composure before the workout.

On the whiteboard, there were two choices: one involved handstand push-ups and the other was Cindy.

"I decided, 'OK, I'll do the pull-up one so I can knock that one out and get outta there,'" Monroe said. "I did not want to be there."

But two rounds into the workout, her emotions became overwhelming.

She stepped outside. This time, she didn't come back.

"It's the only CrossFit workout I never finished—even through chemo," Monroe said. "I decided at that time, 'Ya know what, I didn't need that.' So I didn't go back."

"She actually said she was going to do what she wanted to do that day. And that just doesn't happen in my gym."

—Skip Chase



Courtesy of Skip Chase

Athletes coached by Skip Chase (second from right) will tell you he has high standards and no time for excuses.



Courtesy of Skip Chase

Coaches like Chase (center) often form great relationships with athletes who appreciate their honesty.

She added: "I just got the hell out of there. I was crying. I mean, he triggered a chord."

Chase recalled things a bit differently.

"I remember Jodi coming in that day with kind of an attitude," he said. "I could tell right away when I coached her, when I corrected her, she had kind of a funny attitude. And she actually said she was going to do what she wanted to do that day. And that just doesn't happen in my gym."

A year later, Monroe got a phone call. It was Chase. He wanted to meet for coffee.

"It was basically, 'Let's get over it,'" Chase said of why he called.

So they met.

"I think one of the first things I told him was, 'Hey, don't ever talk to me like that again,'" Monroe remembered.

Chase smiled.

"We have a respect and understanding (now)," Monroe said.

She returned to Mount Baker CrossFit, where she had been training for a year before the squat incident, and today she talks about Chase as much more than a coach.

"When I think of Skip, it's kind of like a religion in a way," Monroe said. "He has impacted my family."

Her oldest daughter is a Division I rower, while a Division I football program is recruiting her son. And her younger daughter, a sophomore in college, regularly makes time for Chase's 6-a.m. class.

"Love, love Skip!!!," Monroe recently wrote in an email.

Hers might be the quintessential story of a coach dishing out honesty and hurting an athlete's pride before arriving at a place of mutual respect.

For a handful of straight-talking CrossFit coaches, the stern approach isn't about being abusive but rather making better people by getting right to the point.

No Pulling Punches

Although soft-spoken, Jeff Martin is known for being a straightforward coach at his affiliate, CrossFit Brand X in Ramona, Calif. And while he says his style has mostly yielded positive results, it hasn't always resonated with every member.

"We've had to fire a couple of clients, and it's ugly and hard. But it's for the best," he said. "And when it happens, ya know, nobody feels good about it."

One of the last members with whom CrossFit Brand X parted ended up creating a Facebook group called "I Hate Jeff Martin."

"It's terrible," Martin said. "But there's also successes."

Not mincing words has had a positive effect on the vast majority of the affiliate's membership, he continued.

"I'm pretty blunt and I'm pretty harsh, but I think it comes from a place," Martin starts, "my wife and I—we care more. I honestly believe that CrossFit makes people better. ... They end up being better at their jobs, at their relationships, at their marriages—people aren't just good inside the box but outside of the box."

He added: "I'm kind of willing to say whatever it takes to get them there."

And do whatever it takes.

Martin's even taken out his pocket knife and cut resistance bands members were using after he told them to do unassisted pull-ups.

"I try to handle it as levelheaded as possible: 'Look, this is where you're fucking up.'"

—Joe Marsh

He added that it's important for trainers and coaches to help athletes understand that they're being straightforward because they want them to improve.



Courtesy of Jeff Martin

Jeff Martin (right) believes success comes from being honest and uncompromising when it comes to standards.

And being straightforward isn't about being unkind, Martin noted.

"Honestly, I think when you give people ... very clear, concise goals, they thrive under that."

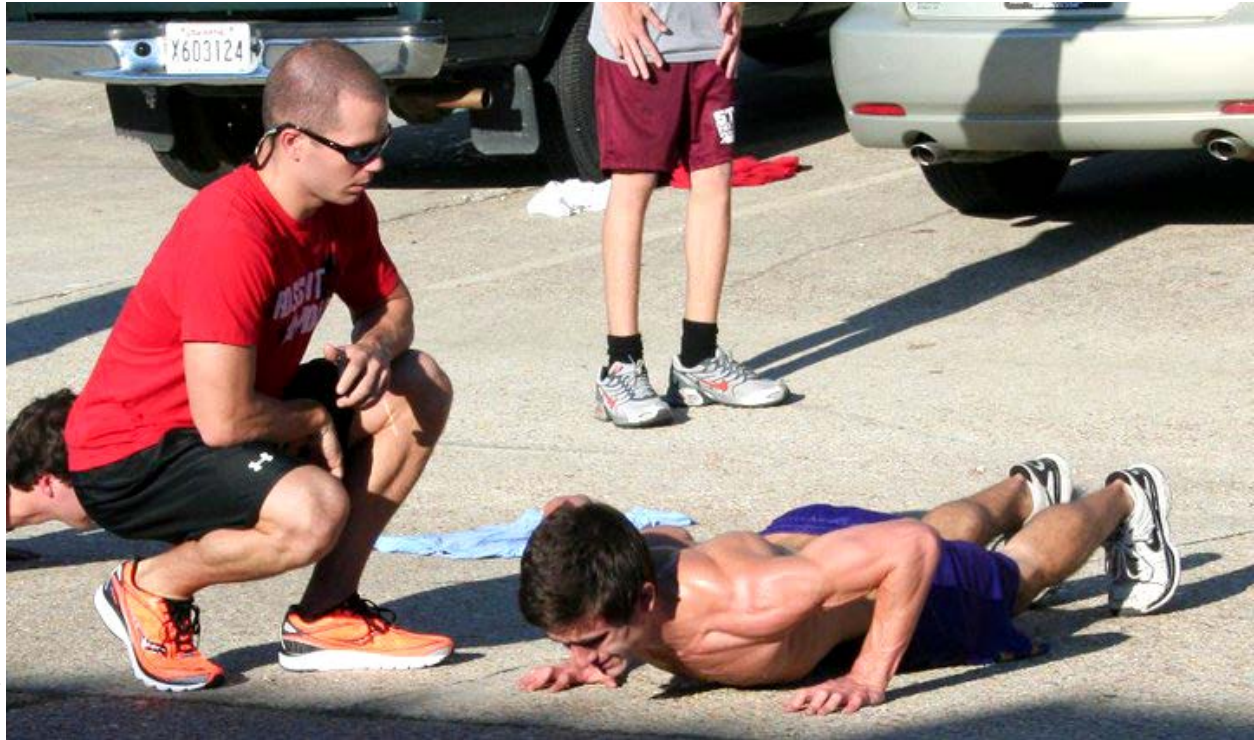
Joe Marsh echoed those sentiments.

"It's never from a place of animosity," said the CrossFit Las Vegas owner. "I try to handle it as levelheaded as possible: 'Look, this is where you're fucking up. You're not getting any sleep, you keep feeding yourself garbage, you only come to the workouts that you're good at.'"

Good coaches should know when to say what to whom, said Kelly Brown, of CrossFit Agoge in Montrose, Colo.

"I think that our job as trainers is not so much to make (athletes) feel good about who they are, (but it's also) to help them actually be better. And sometimes that means telling someone they should scale even though they don't want to."

It's a delicate balance, Brown said, of "giving clients what they need, which isn't always what they want."



Courtesy of Brad McKee

Listening carefully to clients during the warm-up will often reveal quite a bit about an athlete's state of mind.

"You have to pick your moments," she continued. "If that person's had a crap day, then maybe let them have their moment."

In an ideal world, all coaches would be quick with the truth, Brown said.

"I think that when people don't do that, they put their clients and themselves at risk."

Marsh went a step further, saying a trainer who doesn't speak the truth is one affiliate owners should avoid.

"If someone isn't comfortable telling their client what they need to hear ... then they're in the wrong business," he said.

While CrossFit Las Vegas coach Mike Ty isn't aware of anyone leaving the affiliate because of his truth-only cues, he said there are some members who will avoid his classes—specifically to avoid him.

"If they don't want the truth and they're happy and they're living a lie, I don't want to be a part of that. At all," he said. "The truth sucks, but it's better served straight up than with a bunch of sugar coating, especially in the gym, especially in CrossFit."



Courtesy of Brad McKee

Most people usually have a little bit more to give, and a good coach will bring out that extra effort.

“The truth sucks, but it’s better served straight up than with a bunch of sugar coating, especially in the gym, especially in CrossFit.”

—Mike Ty

But Brad McKee warned that while it’s important to be honest, it’s also important to ensure the gym remains a getaway.

“One thing I’ve experienced with clients: You have no idea what they just experienced when they came in the gym that day,” said the owner of CrossFit Hammond, about 60 miles north of New Orleans. “You have to ensure you’re not another stressor to the stresses of their life.”

The Criticism Sandwich

Although Martin advocates the so-called criticism sandwich—a criticism between two compliments—for coaching children as the co-founder of CrossFit Kids and CrossFit Inc.’s Director of Youth Programs, he says it’s best not to pull any punches with adults.

“I think being honest and straightforward is always the way to go,” he said. “It’s really better to say, ‘Stop. Look, this is just tragic and I want to help you be un-tragic.’ I think it’s always better to be straightforward like that. I have the reputation of walking up to people and saying things like that.”

For her part, Brown said she sees value in the criticism sandwich as long as it’s genuine.

“I think there’s a way to do that criticism sandwich that isn’t false. And I use that shamelessly,” she said.

Brown’s husband, John, noted that it can go both ways: a coach who ignores poor movement because he or she doesn’t want to make an athlete feel bad vs. a coach being a hard-ass for the sake of being a hard-ass.



Courtesy of John Brown

John Brown recommends trainers discover which clients need the soft approach and which will respond to blunt criticism.

"Really, really good coaches ... go out of their way to know their clients on a more profound level and get that client what they need to be successful," he said. "Some require a pat on the back. But a lot of people respond really well to, 'OK, I think we should shut it down for the day because that last rep looked like shit.'"

"It's really better to say, 'Stop. Look, this is just tragic and I want to help you be un-tragic.'"

—Jeff Martin

The criticism sandwich, John said, took him time to develop.

"I wouldn't say that I already had the criticism sandwich ready. That's something I had to work toward," he said. "Coaching is just like being an athlete—you've got weaknesses."

Ty, on the other hand, said he doesn't have time for criticism sandwiches.

"Some (of my) classes run right into each other," he explained. "In general, that strategy, in my opinion, it really kind of mutes the overall intent of that conversation. I want the athlete to realize what's going on (right away)."

He added: "As long as the conversation comes from a good place ... it's something positive."

Monroe said she can do without the criticism sandwich: "This is CrossFit. It's straightforward. No time for patty-cake."

Telling an adult what they need to hear to become better shouldn't be "a big production," Martin said.

"For crying out loud, that's what they pay us for," he continued. "When did we get so soft that telling an adult that they need to push their knees out needs to be qualified with, 'You have really cool socks on today?'"



Courtesy of Skip Chase

Being honest to clients, especially when they don't want to hear it, takes courage and conviction.

"The Church of Skip"

To this day—seven years later—Monroe hasn't told Chase about her cycling injury.

"People know that Skip Chase is a rock-solid trainer. But he's tough. And he absolutely has no time for excuses. And, ya know, that's probably one reason I didn't tell him about my hip—that would be an excuse."

Chase confirmed as much.

"A lot of people respond really well to, 'OK, I think we should shut it down for the day because that last rep looked like shit.'"

—John Brown



Courtesy of John Brown

Kelly Brown will use the “criticism sandwich” but says it’s important to give clients what they need rather than what they want.

“I don’t remember an injury,” he said recently. “If she had an injury, she hadn’t told me.”

Nonetheless, their temporary parting did not feel good.

“When you lose a member, especially over something like that,” Chase said, “that wore on me every day. That bothered me every day. I finally had the courage . . . to reach out and say, ‘Let’s get together and have coffee. Let’s get over this.’”

He made an effort to heal the relationship because Monroe is special.

“There are those people that you meet in your life that you determine there’s something special about them, there’s something different about them,” Chase explained. “She speaks her mind. And mentally and physically she’s like my twin sister.”

It was a trait he noticed immediately.

“Right away I could tell Jodi has a level of desire that most people don’t have. If she was a guy, she would beat Rich Froning,” he said. “I wanted her back in the gym because I wanted to coach that, I wanted to mold that. I saw in Jodi Monroe a Games athlete.”

After reconciling, Chase was there through Monroe’s breast-cancer treatment—standing beside her as she competed in last year’s CrossFit Games Open, blood streaming down her face from her nose—and Chase trained her husband and her children.

“I think he’ll just go down as one of the most passionate, thoughtful coaches in CrossFit. He’s that caliber. He really is,” she said. “He has a huge following and I think that sometimes people’s egos get in the way of allowing them to accept his training, but they know he’s good.”

As for him being a religion, Chase heartedly laughs.

“It went from a family to a community—in the church of Skip.”

These days when Monroe hears complaints like, “God, he’s tough today,” she has a simple response: “Right on.”



About the Author

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

Updated Jan. 9, 2014, to correct an error in a caption on Page 3.