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Thanksgiving: Judgment Day

Holidays force many CrossFit athletes to leave the comfort of their boxes and face questions about their workouts, eating habits and bloody shins from friends and family who think they're completely insane. Hilary Achauer reports.

By Hilary Achauer

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Donovan Winters/CrossFit Journal

"What I've been doing lately is kickboxing, which is, uh, a new sport, but I think it's got a good future." —Lloyd Dobler, Say Anything (1989).

In the classic '80s movie *Say Anything*, John Cusack's character, Lloyd Dobler, is sitting at the dinner table and trying to explain his commitment to a sport nobody has heard of.

It doesn't go well.

Each time I try to explain CrossFit to a confused relative, I think of Dobler, who flounders while John Mahoney's eyes bore into him.

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CrossFit is growing by leaps and bounds, and even though it's appeared on ESPN outlets, CrossFit is still an unknown to many people. More mysterious still can be the eating habits, clothing choices and workouts of CrossFit athletes. Our antics appear strange and cult-like to the uninitiated, which is why we surround ourselves with like-minded people or at least spouses, family and friends who tolerate our obsession. However, life cannot—and should not—be lived inside a CrossFit bubble. Sometimes we have to take our coconut oil and knee socks into the great, wide world.

All over the country, CrossFit athletes are leaving the comfort of their boxes and venturing out into the wide world.

I recently found myself in Austin, Texas, for a CrossFit course. The two-day seminar included workouts, so when I dressed for the day I put on my standard CrossFit gear: Spandex shorts and tank top.

I ran down to the hotel's dining room to grab some coffee before the course, and when I turned the corner I saw the breakfast room was packed with a group of about 20 men. They were all in their 60s and 70s and wore jeans and

matching red polo shirts with a Ben Hur Shriner's Club logo on the front.

My tight shorts, modest in the context of a CrossFit gym, suddenly felt like they had shrunk. I tiptoed in on my minimalist shoes, trying to unobtrusively make my way to the coffee maker. The room got extremely quiet as I filled up my cup. Conversation stalled out. I think a number of them thought I had forgotten to wear pants.

In that moment, I was reminded that the world is not a CrossFit gym and that context is everything.

Thanksgiving marks the beginning of the holiday season in the United States, and all over the country, CrossFit athletes are leaving the comfort of their boxes and venturing out into the wide world.

And it doesn't always go well.

The World Outside the Box

Strange things can happen once relatives find out you do CrossFit.

Nicole Scott Smith, a trainer at CrossFit SoMo in West Plains, Mo., has been doing CrossFit since 2008. She is known as "the strong one" in her extended family. It's not uncommon for her to show up for Thanksgiving in heels and fancy clothes only to hear a relative say, "Do something strong! Show us how to squat!"

When anything requiring any sort of strength comes up, Smith and her husband are of course called into action.

Donavan Winters/CrossFit Journal



"You can eat turkey? What about turducken? Is turducken in the Zone? Why are your hands so rough? Are your shins bleeding?"

Smith recalled that she and her husband “had to slice the turkey once because the electric knife broke.”

The focus of Thanksgiving is food, and while carving up a big bird suits many protein fiends just fine, some of the other dishes on the table end up being a source of contention for many a CrossFit athlete. Confusion reigns.

Smith and her husband eat well for most of the year but treat Thanksgiving like a cheat day. She said she and her husband look forward to Thanksgiving dinner for weeks.

“We’re like addicts,” she said. “We can’t wait to eat the green-bean casserole. We look forward to this one meal.”

Inevitably, Smith will approach the table groaning with food, getting ready to load up, and a relative will say, “You probably can’t eat any of this.”

One year, a confused relative of Smith’s pointed to the turkey and said, “Now, can you eat that?”

Smith has heard other gems:

“This casserole is healthy. It has corn.”

“You might want to bring something that you’ll eat.”

“You won’t like this. It has fat in it,” from her mom.

“We’re not really in a cult,” Smith said, though she also admitted her eating habits seem incomprehensible to most people. But on Thanksgiving she just wants to be left alone to pig out.

“Our plates were bigger than anybody (else’s),” she said with a laugh as she recalled a recent Thanksgiving feast. Apparently her holiday cheat meal never fails to confuse her relatives.

“They said, ‘Wow, I wish I could eat like you,’” Smith said. “It’s just one meal for us. We normally wouldn’t eat all of this stuff.”

Smith was lucky she had so many delicious—if not entirely healthy—choices. Other CrossFit folks have run into issues at the dinner table, and it got more than a little weird.

Anders Varner of CrossFit Pacific Beach in San Diego, Calif., showed up eager and hungry at a Thanksgiving dinner only to be confronted with a vegan, raw “turkey” made of nuts, seeds and herbs and molded into the shape of a holiday bird.

“It was made of crushed almonds, green-bean purée, and a host of other ingredients that have never amounted



Donovan Winters/CrossFit Journal

Don't be surprised if you're called in to do some heavy lifting on turkey day.

to a 400 lb. back squat. To think someone would eat this concoction was embarrassing,” he said.

Jennifer Tan works out at CrossFit Singapore in Singapore. Chinese New Year—Jan. 21 in 2014—is their equivalent to Thanksgiving. It’s a time for family, friends and food. It’s the food that causes trouble for Tan.

By now, she’s used to the strange looks from her family. She doesn’t eat noodles, she uses coconut oil (“Isn’t that fattening?” her family asks) and eats eggs with abandon.

“While visiting a relative, I skipped the rice, popped some pork belly on my plate and braced myself,” Tan said.

The comments started almost instantly.

“Trim off the fat—you don’t want to put on weight.”

“No rice at all?”

“Yolks are bad for you; try to just eat the whites.”

“If you don’t want Coke, we have soy milk.”

And, finally, “Weightlifting?”

“If it’s not questions about marriage and babies, it’s concerns over your lifestyle choices,” Tan said. “I’m not sure which I prefer.”

Donovan Winters/CrossFit Journal



Relatives may not understand or appreciate your burning desire to get a workout in before dinner.

Rock It—Or Not

Once CrossFit athletes sort out what to eat over Thanksgiving, there's still the matter of fitting in a workout away from home. CrossFit affiliates are springing up in every corner of the globe, but many traveling CrossFit athletes still find they need to work out someplace other than a CrossFit gym.

Carmen Abramian, who trains at CrossFit Metropolis in New York City, said she frequently finds herself going to a hotel gym and trying to cobble together a workout with the tools available when on the road.

"I slowly pick out all the other CrossFitters in the room who are trying to do box jumps on an incline bench or some other stupid adaptation," she said.

The experience does not always go as planned.

"I nearly decapitated a lady with my rope trying to do double-unders in a small hotel gym in Northern California and then—mortified by the near miss—went outside to finish and totally destroyed the cable of my rope on the cement," Abramian said.

Smith will never forget the year she went home to rural Ohio for the holidays. When Smith's mom comes to visit, she goes to CrossFit with her daughter, so Smith thought she would return the favor and accompany her mom to Curves.

"She wanted to share her workout with me," Smith said. So Smith and her mom headed off to the gym.

Smith attracted attention almost immediately.

"I nearly decapitated a lady with my rope trying to do double-unders in a small hotel gym."

—Carmen Abramian

"They told me I was working too hard, that I was going into the red (zone)," Smith said. "On the overhead press, I guess I pressed overhead too hard. The second time around (the circuit), they told me not to use it."

Then one of the trainers started following Smith around, keeping an eye on her.

"They told me I was squatting too low and doing everything too fast," she said. In between stations, the trainers instructed Smith to stand on a pad and "rock it."

Smith did not rock it. She decided to do some air squats. Finally, when the circuit was over, Smith's mom spoke up. "My daughter can do a pull-up!" she said proudly. "Nicole, do a pull-up!"

"This used to be a nice neighborhood, but I heard there were these weird people squatting with a rock."

—Frightened villager

Smith walked over to the pull-up bar, kipped back and ripped the anchored station off its platform.

The trainer rushed over, horrified.

"That's a pull-up bar for stretching!" she said.



"Yes, I can open that jar. Time me. And get more jars."

Smith never returned to Curves. Smith's mom still goes, however, and every now and then the trainer asks, "How's your daughter?"

And then, nervously, "Is she coming in?"

Smith didn't fare much better outside the gym. One year, she and her family spent the holidays with relatives in a small town in Kentucky. Her husband mapped out a 5-kilometer route and went for a run while Smith stayed back with the kids. He returned and reported there was a big rock at the turnaround that was perfect for front squats.

So Smith took off, and when she reached the turnaround, she did some front squats with the boulder. While she was squatting, she noticed a car slowly drive past her.

Later that day, Smith's sister-in-law came in with the latest gossip: "This used to be a nice neighborhood," she said, "but I heard there were these weird people squatting with a rock."

Opting Out

Not everyone leaves town for Thanksgiving. Josh Bunch, owner of Practice CrossFit in Troy, Ohio, elects not to make the six-hour drive home from Ohio to Tennessee for turkey day.

"Thanksgiving is a worthless, fake holiday," Bunch said. "I don't want to eat a bunch of bad food."

Because Bunch is always around for Thanksgiving, he's found a variety of ways to celebrate the holiday in his own way.

In 2008, his affiliate had just opened its doors, and he hosted a workout Thanksgiving morning.

"We had 100 people show up," Bunch said. "We didn't even have that many members at the time. It was tons of out-of-towners."

The next year, Bunch hosted a month-long nutrition challenge called "Wait for the Bird." The idea was that participants in the challenge would clean up their diet from Nov. 1 until Thanksgiving, at which point an epic cheat day would commence.

To celebrate the end of the challenge, one of the members, who owned a local McDonald's franchise, brought cinnamonets with him. In retrospect, Bunch said the mistake was eating the cinnamonets before the workout.



Courtesy of Josh Bunch

Practice CrossFit's pre-Thanksgiving feast.

"That was a horrible idea," Bunch said. "It made everyone sick."

The dinner was so popular he's continued the tradition. "We get about 70 percent of the members," Bunch said.

"The food is a million times better (than a traditional Thanksgiving)," he said about their healthy potluck turkey day.

"The first year it was just lots of meat, but now it's Brussels sprouts with bacon, sweet potatoes wrapped in bacon. Everyone brings their best paleo meal!"

Then, on Thanksgiving morning, Bunch hosts a big group workout. He encourages people to bring their out-of-town friends. In the early days, the visitors were mostly people who had never before tried CrossFit.

"So many people do CrossFit now," Bunch said, so now it's mostly CrossFit athletes looking for a pre-Thanksgiving workout.

Bunch does something different every year: "We like to do team workouts and incorporate odd objects like tires and sledgehammers."

Just like the hardworking pilgrims would have wanted.



About the Author

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