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## Wrangling the Road Warriors

Three affiliate owners in destination cities share secrets to dealing with visiting athletes while ensuring members receive the attention they deserve.

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By Emily Beers

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Courtesy of Monique Ames

***At CrossFit Evolution in Florida, strict drop-in procedures are in place to keep the focus on members of the gym.***

Those who travel often constantly rave about the gracious hospitality they receive from CrossFit affiliates all over the world.

Visiting other affiliates for a workout away from home is part of leading a fit lifestyle, building the global CrossFit community, experiencing new coaching styles, bulking up the T-shirt collection and getting acquainted with the locals.

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But visiting athletes also create management challenges for affiliate owners. It's not uncommon for coaches to curse on the inside when a visiting student who claims to be very experienced shows up 10 minutes late and then exposes complete ignorance of the squat clean, resulting in a need to direct attention away from members and toward the visitor who wants to do the workout as prescribed no matter what. Even on-time and proficient athletes can pose a challenge if a box has limited staff and a busy coach has to try to get waivers signed and T-shirts sized in between running workouts.

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**The best policy for athletes is to be humble, gracious and low maintenance when visiting another box. When that happens, everyone wins.**

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The former problem has a lot to do with the athletes themselves, while the latter highlights another challenge of running a small business. Both, however, can be addressed in a variety of ways.

Joe Marsh, Monique Ames and Bryant Powers all run affiliates in destination cities and have dealt with just about every situation you can imagine. As a result, these affiliates have developed visiting-student policies that work for their specific business, and they might work for you, whether your box is in a high-traffic area or a remote location.

Although Marsh, Ames and Powers have adopted different attitudes and policies toward visiting students, they all agree on one thing: If you're ever visiting an affiliate for a workout, the best policy for athletes is to be humble, gracious and low maintenance. When that happens, everyone wins.

### **Case Study: CrossFit Las Vegas**

It was a regular day in early October at CrossFit Las Vegas. A dozen students were warming up for the noon group class that was about to start. Three of the 12 students were visiting from other affiliates.



Courtesy of Emily Beers

***CrossFit Las Vegas uses its website to get visitors ready so coaches can focus on coaching rather than paperwork when drop-ins arrive.***

As the clock struck noon, Marsh summoned the class, introduced the visiting students—one was from New York and the other two were from Canada—and got them started with T-spine and hip mobility, followed by some painful quad mashing.

After that came lifting: a 20-rep back squat. Each person in the class knew his or her fitness level, how much weight to put on the bar and how to approach the daunting 20 repetitions.

With 20 minutes left in the hour, Marsh smiled and announced Fran as the final part of the day's work. After a couple of groans, the athletes set up their bars, quickly warmed up their thrusters and prepared to enter the Fran pain cave.

One of the men in the class, a long-time regular at CrossFit Las Vegas, was a retired firefighter who calls himself "Pops."

"I don't even think people around here know my name. They just know me as Pops," said the man whose real name is Calvin Garland Sr.

Pops has been doing CrossFit for a couple of years, and one of the things he loves about CrossFit Las Vegas is the variety of people he gets to meet.





Courtesy of Emily Beers

***On the visitors board at CrossFit Las Vegas, pins indicate home cities of traveling athletes who've stopped partying long enough to hit a workout.***

"I love all the visitors. Usually about once a week or so, I'll drive some of them back to their hotels on the Strip. It gets expensive taking cabs in this city, so they usually appreciate the ride. And I get to talk to people from all over the world," he explained.

The class ended without a hitch. Pops loaded his truck with visitors and drove them back to Caesars Palace, and CrossFit Las Vegas carried on as normal.

Taking in visiting students wasn't always this smooth for Marsh, whose affiliate is just 4 miles off the infamous Las Vegas Strip in one of the world's major tourist cities. Although Marsh has always welcomed visiting CrossFit athletes, he didn't always have proper policies in place to handle them.

He used to spend countless hours answering redundant emails and phone calls from would-be guests, as well as

dealing with unexpected visiting students who often showed up late for class, disheveled and bleary after surviving a late-night Las Vegas adventure. By the time waivers were signed, payments were processed and a quick welcome was given, it was hard to start group classes on time. Meanwhile, Marsh's regular students—his loyal, paying members—took notice, and Marsh took action.

Today, Marsh has a meticulous online system in place that both handles the intake logistics as well as pre-qualifies visitors, ensuring quality control.

In fact, when you log onto the CrossFit Las Vegas website, there's an [entire section devoted to visitors](#).

On top of registration policies, the visitors section of his website also has information for tourists—maps, directions, class schedule, fees—so visitors don't bombard Marsh with emails. It's all very common sense, Marsh

explained, but it's made a world of difference in terms of saving him time dealing with inquiries one at a time.

To speed up the process of waiver signing and registration, visiting athletes must fill out an online waiver prior to their arrival and create an online account that puts them into CrossFit Las Vegas' client-management system. Marsh requires drop-ins to have three months of CrossFit experience, though new athletes who want to try CrossFit while on the road can schedule an intro session.

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As strange as it might seem to some that a vacationer or business traveler would find his or her way into a CrossFit box for the first time, Marsh said it's actually common at his affiliate.

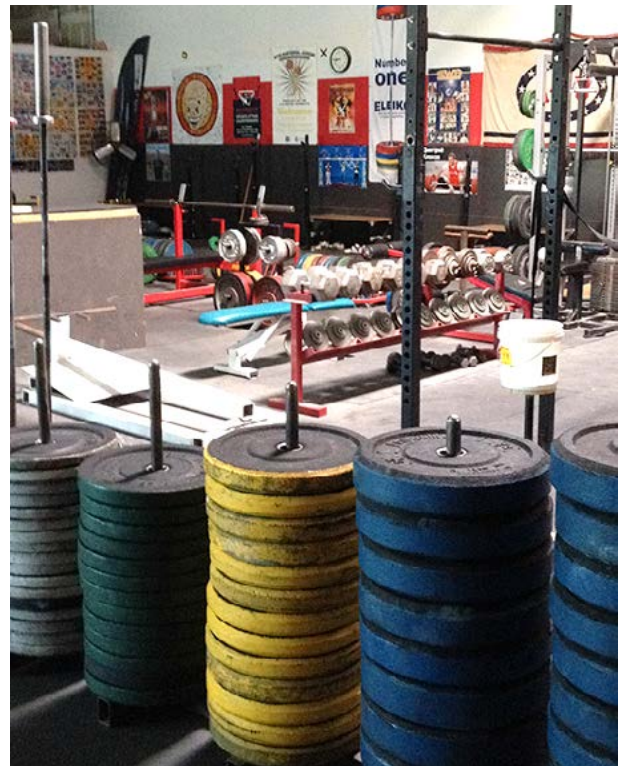
"We used to have way more situations where a CrossFit athlete would show up and bring some of his buddies who don't CrossFit. 'We're here for my stag. Can my friends work out, too?' they would ask me," Marsh said.

"No, they can't work out. If they don't CrossFit already, I'm not throwing them into this class," he added.

To solve this, Marsh's site specifically requests that members have at least three months of CrossFit experience at another affiliate in order to drop in at CrossFit Las Vegas.

Also, Marsh now pre-qualifies visitors by requesting an email from the athlete's coach, who must vouch for the visitor's competence in CrossFit movements.

For the most part, this has solved the quality-control issue. Every now and again, the visitor's coach will let Marsh know about an athlete's limitations, but generally visitors are well versed in the CrossFit movements.



Courtesy of Emily Beers

***If all this looks foreign, you probably need more experience before dropping into CrossFit Las Vegas.***



Courtesy of Emily Beers

***As is tradition, visiting athletes always want a T-shirt, and some will buy four or five as gifts for friends.***



"We've never had an email stating the visitor wasn't good to go," Marsh said.

At present, about 35 or more guests pay drop-in fees at CrossFit Las Vegas each week. The cost for a class is US\$20 for one visit and \$10 for any subsequent visit. In some months, as much as 20 percent of Marsh's gross revenue will come from visiting-student fees. But where Marsh really capitalizes financially is through the tradition of picking up a CrossFit T-shirt when visiting a new gym.

"I run out of T-shirts every month," said Marsh, who finds that many visitors buy three or even four T-shirts to bring back to friends.

Although he sometimes misses the mark on T-shirt inventory, Marsh generally orders more before he needs them to ensure he has enough sizes in stock. He always carries four standard sizes for both men's and women's apparel, so transactions have become relatively seamless.

It's taken some time to hammer out successful procedures and policies for visitors, but today Marsh is happy with how his gym manages the flow of visiting athletes.

"We still get the occasional visitor fresh off the plane with luggage in tow who clearly hasn't read the website, but for the most part, the system runs smoothly," he said.

### Case Study: CrossFit Evolution

Monique Ames is the owner of CrossFit Evolution in Longwood, Fla., north of Orlando.

Her visiting-student policies have changed a lot over the last seven years. She used to welcome visitors, but when they started detracting from her service to her members, she banned drop-ins. Today, she allows some visitors but has strict policies about who can join in.

"When we first opened up, everything about CrossFit was new, and nobody in our classes really knew what they were doing, so having one more inexperienced person didn't interfere with the class because programming was made for people who didn't know what they were doing," Ames explained.

"But as our members grew and developed with us ... I stopped having time for the newbie," Ames said.

CrossFit Evolution puts all their members through personal-training sessions prior to allowing them to attend group classes, so a visitor who doesn't understand basic squat mechanics quickly becomes a problem to the group dynamic and the flow of the class. As CrossFit Evolution developed, visiting students started to become a problem in other ways, as well.



Courtesy of Monique Ames

*Years ago, inexperienced visitors fit right in with inexperienced members at CrossFit Evolution. As programming changed to accommodate skilled, experienced athletes, coaches didn't have time to bring raw guests up to speed.*

Courtesy of Monique Ames



***It isn't that guests are unwelcome at CrossFit Evolution. It's just that the gym members always come first.***

"I actually had a visitor write a bad review about us, saying that he didn't get enough attention in the class. The dude didn't know what he was doing, and it took away from the class," Ames said.

She added: "Our regular paying members were being overshadowed, and visitors were complaining about paying \$20."

It's not that Ames doesn't want to welcome new athletes into her gym; she just won't do it if it means detracting from the experience of her regular members. They come first.

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Monique Ames banned drop-ins.**

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In a situation many affiliate owners know and detest, some visitors insisted on training on their own in the corner—dropping weights aimlessly, sometimes crashing them into racks or the wall—and generally creating a ruckus as Ames was trying to coach a group class.

When it became obvious to Ames that visitors were hurting as opposed to helping her community, she decided to stop allowing visitors all together.

What happened after she made the announcement on her website surprised her: People started sending her hate mail. Some people who emailed threatened to post bad reviews of CrossFit Evolution, while other angry writers went so far as to say they hoped Ames went out of business.

"The first hate mail I received, I was just like, 'Wow, I can't believe the nerve of people,'" said Ames, who simply ignored the email. "It's not worth my time, and I believe you can't make everyone happy, so I don't try to."

As a sort of compromise, Ames currently allows only experienced CrossFit athletes to drop in, but she doesn't advertise this on her website. What she has found since implementing this policy is that her drop-in numbers



remain low and manageable and the visitors she does get add value to her group classes.

"We just ask when they call or email that they need to have six months of CrossFit experience," Ames said.



Courtesy of Monique Ames

***Experienced visitors are now welcome to drop in at CrossFit Evolution, but participation is not guaranteed if skills are lacking.***



Courtesy of Monique Ames

***When traveling, check in with the affiliate ahead of time to make sure it welcomes visitors.***

And if aspiring visitors don't have six months of CrossFit or more under their belt, Ames won't hesitate to turn them down. Ames is very clear to all aspiring visitors that if they don't meet her movement-standard criteria, she reserves the right to not let them in, regardless of how long they have been doing CrossFit.

"If someone comes in and doesn't have the experience they said they did, we'll tell them to leave," she said. This has only happened once, she said.

The reason her standard is so high isn't because she's an elitist; it's because she feels allegiance to her own members and wants to make sure movement quality is high in all her classes.

"We do a lot of strength training here, so everyone needs a decent foundation," she said.

With a strict policy in place, CrossFit Evolution averages just a handful of visitors each month, and the athletes happily pay the \$20 fee. On her end, Ames is happy to welcome experienced athletes who stop by for a workout.

### Case Study: Hawaii

Bryant Powers' affiliate is CrossFit Oahu, and he's involved with running four others in Hawaii. They're all located within 20 to 30 minutes of each other, and CrossFit Oahu in Honolulu is the largest.

Powers welcomes visitors with open arms and doesn't even charge them a drop-in fee.

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**"I decided not to charge visitors because when I went to the original CrossFit gym in Santa Cruz, they didn't charge me."**

**—Bryant Powers**

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"I decided not to charge visitors because when I went to the original CrossFit gym in Santa Cruz, they didn't charge me, so I guess it's what I was brought up with," he said.

He added: "A lot of affiliates started out that way."

Courtesy of Bryant Powers



***Located in prime vacation territory, CrossFit Oahu relies on great coaches who can quickly get visitors up to speed and scale workouts as needed.***

Powers admits it's hit or miss in terms of the level of knowledge any given visitor displays.

"Of course we have people that come in that have no clue, but what we tell the coaches is to keep the visitors safe. We don't spend all our time with the visitors," said Powers, who sometimes has as many as eight guests show up for a Saturday-morning class at his Honolulu facility. Usually they aren't a problem.

"We just scale down what they have to do (if they're inexperienced). So if it is snatches, we just have them do overhead squats or air squats. Our coaches are pretty good at this point," he added.

"Most people just want to come in and complain about how humid it is, take a picture outside, get a workout in and buy a T-shirt."

As he doesn't charge for drop-ins, Powers generates revenue from T-shirts sold to traveling CrossFit athletes. He's an artist, so he draws and designs all his T-shirts

himself, creating different ones for each of the five boxes he's involved with.

Powers believes not charging people a drop-in fee makes them more inclined to purchase merchandise. From T-shirts to wrist bands to socks to gymnastics grips, Powers simply asks visitors to buy something before they leave if they've enjoyed their time at his box. More often than not, visitors do more than he asks.

"Not only do most people buy a T-shirt, they often buy lots of things. People go to Hawaii and want to buy something Hawaiian, and CrossFit athletes like to buy CrossFit stuff," he said.

"I think we have the perfect storm for visitors. We have a bunch of cool stuff, and most people buy between \$30 and \$500 worth of merchandise," he said.

Sometimes Powers even has tourists come by with no intention of working out; they just want to buy T-shirts.





Courtesy of Bryant Powers

**Drop-ins to CrossFit Oahu are free, but most visitors purchase something from the affiliate's apparel and gear collection.**

Because of the large number of drop-ins, Powers has front-desk employees who help with the logistics of signing waivers and T-shirt sales, as well as a full-time employee who deals with maintaining and delivering inventory.

Between the five affiliates, merchandise sales are between \$10,000 and \$20,000 each month, which amounts to approximately 10 to 20 percent of gross monthly revenue.

### Being a Quality Visitor

Marsh, Ames and Powers have very different policies in place for visiting athletes, but they all agree that guests have the potential to be good, bad or seriously challenging—and it all depends on the attitude of the guest.

They've all had the visitors who have never done a thruster before, who show up late, and who bombard them with emails and phone calls asking for directions, taxi numbers, and info on class schedule and fees. Some of these guests are genuinely in need of assistance, but others are simply lazy and could have taken the time to read the website and follow the instructions.

Other guests have a knack for leaving equipment lying around after a workout, while others respond to instructions with charming sentences that begin with "at my box" or "when we squat at home."

And all the affiliate owners have had the guy who is "training for the Games" and demands to make noise and clank barbells in the corner as the class unfolds.

The good visitors who make up the majority of traveling athletes understand CrossFit movements and are willing to listen to the advice of a new coach. They know that working with different trainers is a great way to get perspective, learn different cues and even find new solutions to old problems. They know they're guests, so they keep their feet off the coffee table.

They do their homework, read the affiliate's policies and complete any requisite paperwork prior to their arrival if they can. They use Google Maps or a GPS to navigate their way through the city. They respectfully show up on time. And they graciously and humbly join a class.

"It's just common sense," Marsh said. "But it makes all the difference."



### About the Author

*Emily Beers is a CrossFit Journal staff writer and editor. She competed in the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games on CrossFit Vancouver's team, and she finished third at the Canada West Regional in 2012. In 2013, she finished second in the Open in Canada West.*