

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

August 2014

TITLE	AUTHOR(S)
Torpedo School 3: Start Me Up	Palmer
On the Shoulders of Giants	Warkentin
Emotions in Motion	Beers
Functional Fighting	Achauer
Streets to Scholarship	Cecil
Amazing Grace	Cecil
Beyond \$20 an Hour	Beers
Mud in Your Eye	Cooper
Pulling for all You're Worth	Starr

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Torpedo School 3: Start Me Up

Getting into the pool with great technique can help you maximize speed and efficiency and reduce race times.

By Adam Palmer

August 2014



Agust Sigurjonsson/CrossFit Journal

Diving off a block for a swimming event is the only time in any race at which velocity peaks to a point that is unattainable during the swim. Casual observers of The Pool event at the 2013 Reebok CrossFit Games probably noticed Jordan Troyan in the final men's heat traveling halfway across the 25-yard pool with a combined dive and underwater streamline before taking a single stroke. The technique was fast and incredibly efficient.

1 of 10

One of the most effective ways to shave time in the pool—especially in a short race or in a CrossFit event that requires repeated entries—is to dedicate some effort to developing the start.

For many CrossFit athletes, a closer look at the start will provide an introduction, while experienced competitive swimmers can work to improve their racing start and gain valuable seconds.

Credit for introducing me to the U.S. national-team starts presentation must go to Casey Converse, swimming and diving coach of the U.S. Air Force Academy. The style is very different from what I learned growing up, but it makes a great deal of sense and is used by many of the top swimmers in the world.

Safety First

Diving head first into any body of water is an inherently risky activity. To practice any sort of dive or racing start, an athlete should always train with a spotter in a pool with a minimum depth of 6 feet. Preferably, this practice would be under the supervision of an experienced swimming coach. For more information on safety as it pertains to

racing starts, visit [USA Swimming Risk Management and Safety](#).

The Streamline Position

As discussed in “[Torpedo School](#),” drag and basic hydrodynamics require swimmers to streamline their bodies for maximum speed and efficiency. The streamline position requires some basic shoulder and scapular mobility from the athlete.

Standing on the pool deck, place one hand superior to the other and hold your arms outstretched overhead. Activate your shoulders and squeeze your ears between your biceps while standing on your toes. This is the proper streamline position.

Accentuating the streamline during entry is exceptionally critical to the start. Going back to the notion that drag increases quadratically as speed increases, slight variations in body position from an imperfect streamline will result in exaggerated deceleration. To illustrate this point, consider an athlete shaped like a needle entering the water smoothly vs. one shaped like a pancake entering the water with a belly flop. You can be certain the needle will win the



All photos: Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

The streamline position.

Torpedo 3 ... (continued)

race every time. Enter the water in a tight streamline: "Be a needle, not a truck."

The mechanics of underwater swimming will be covered in a future article.

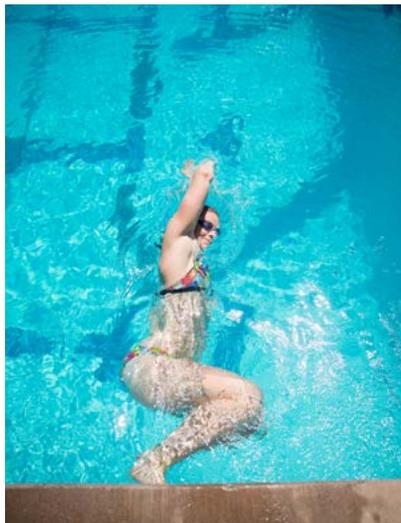
The Push Start

A push start off the wall is the simplest and safest way to begin any swimming event. As it is primarily used in a practice setting only, it is less critical for competitive swimmers, but it may be useful in an event setting requiring a push start.

There are a few key points to think about when starting on the wall. Typically, swimmers begin with one hand on the wall and the opposing arm pointing toward the intended direction of travel. The body should be in a tuck position with the knees pulled loosely toward the chest. The ideal amount of knee bend is approximately 90 degrees. To initiate the start, release hold of the wall and roll onto your back or side (depending on the stroke) and into the push-off position. As you push away from the wall for freestyle, breaststroke or butterfly, roll from your side completely onto your stomach to begin the underwater portion of the swim.



As the athlete releases the hold on the wall, she rolls into the push-off position.



After pushing off with power, the athlete will roll onto her stomach to swim underwater before breakout.

The Flat Start

Once the push start has been mastered, a next logical step is to begin using a starting block, or, if blocks aren't available, by standing on the side of the pool to begin a race. The advantage of having starting blocks is that they are normally elevated between 1 and 2 feet from the water's surface and canted toward the water by approximately 10 degrees, allowing for greater forward travel distance.

The main objective of a racing start is to get off the block quickly and with as much velocity as possible.

There are a few requirements for a great start. First, you need a very fast reaction time, defined as the time from

the start until the time the feet leave the block. For a racing start, that time should be between 0.7 and 0.8 seconds (1). Next, the direction of travel should be forward as opposed to up or down. Lastly, a smooth, shallow entry (between 20 and 30 degrees from the surface) is absolutely critical in order to maintain speed through the air and into the water, and the entire body should enter through the same "hole" in a tight streamline (2).

Setup

There are three commonly used positions to begin a race: the grab start, the front-weighted track start and the rear-weighted track start. Each stance has pros and cons.



The grab start is simple and can be used to generate significant velocity.



Jumping upward is common in the grab start. See Page 7 for the ideal takeoff position.



As the athlete extends, she fixes her eyes on the water and attempts to feed her body into the water through an imaginary tube.

The Grab Start

A basic starting technique, the grab start finds the athlete set up on the block with both feet pointing forward at approximately hip width, toes off the end of the block, hips high (as in a deadlift), eyes looking at the water and hands placed either inside or outside the feet while grasping the edge of the block.

Pro: Very simple setup.

Pro: Some advocates believe the potential forward velocity of the grab start is greater than that of the track start due to a more concentrated application of force from the core and legs.

Con: Creates a tendency to jump upward rather than forward, resulting in less momentum.

Con: Produces a larger transition time between the setup and takeoff positions as it offers less mechanical leverage than other starts.

The Front-Weighted Track Start

With feet approximately shoulder width apart, the athlete places one foot at the front end of the block, with the toes off the edge. The opposite foot is placed under the hips near the back end of the block. The athlete then grasps the front edge of the block with the hands, fixing the eyes on the water.



Somewhat similar to a running start, the front-weighted track start allows faster reaction times than the grab start.



The transition between the set-up and takeoff positions is reduced in the front-weighted track start.



Coming off the block, the angle of the athlete's body is often more horizontal than it is in the grab start.

Torpedo 3 ... (continued)

Pro: Allows faster reaction time than the grab start.

Pro: Better weight distribution allows for better use of leverage to overcome inertia and create shorter transition time between setup and takeoff positions.

Con: Produces slightly less power off the block than the grab start.

The Rear-Weighted Track Start

The setup is similar to the front-weighted track start with the exceptions that the center of mass is shifted slightly further back and the hips sit slightly lower. This setup also requires more flexibility in the forward leg because it will

be closer to extension than in the front-weighted start.

Pro: Generates a lot of forward momentum coming into the takeoff position.

Con: Having the center of mass slightly back from the front of the block requires more time to get to the takeoff position (slower than the front-weighted start but faster than the grab start).

Start the Debate

Which set-up position is best? This is a topic of debate within the swimming world. The bottom line is world-class athletes have used all three variations and been very



With the weight shifted back, flexibility in the front leg is required for the rear-weighted track start.



Due to the weight sitting toward the back of the block, the transition time to the takeoff position is increased.



The athlete carries significant momentum into the takeoff position in the rear-weighted track start. (Note Page 7 for optimal takeoff position.)



successful. I recommend learning all three, finding one you are comfortable with and then perfecting it. The one you choose will somewhat depend on your flexibility and limb lengths.

Sequence

1. Start to takeoff position—The movement for the flat start initiates with the athlete pulling the center of mass forward over the front edge of the block. The greatest force will come from the core, with support from the biceps and hands. The pull will continue until the athlete's hands leave the block with the leg drive. The head may lift slightly coming off the block in order to find the correct entry point in the water. However, excessive head lift may cause the athlete to jump more upward as opposed to forward, resulting in velocity loss going into the water.
2. The takeoff position—For the flat start, the takeoff position is optimal for driving forward off the block. There are a few key points to remember, as shown in Figure 1 below.
3. Entry—The optimal entry angle for a flat start is between 20 and 30 degrees from horizontal. Ideally, the athlete will be in a complete streamline from head to toe, with

toes pointed back. As the athlete enters the water, hand positioning aids the athlete's direction of travel. Tilting the hands toward the surface upon entry will bring the athlete closer to the surface, and vice versa. This is similar to the action of a rudder. The kick should be used underwater to maintain the velocity gained during the dive as long as possible. At this point, the athlete is in the transition phase, and the "breakout" initiates the actual swimming portion of a race. The breakout will be covered in a future article.

Pike Start Vs. Flat Start

When I was growing up, the pike start was all the rage. Many of the top athletes used a pike start. When we learned it, our focus was more on jumping up and forward, then piking the body downward toward the water.

There are a few problems with the pike start. It results in a deeper entry (think safety), potential forward velocity is lost due to increased vertical movement (slower), and this style of start is more technically difficult.

That said, the pike start is not a completely functionless movement. Performing a pike start requires the athlete to demonstrate greater body control in the air, and an athlete who can perform a pike start should have no problems

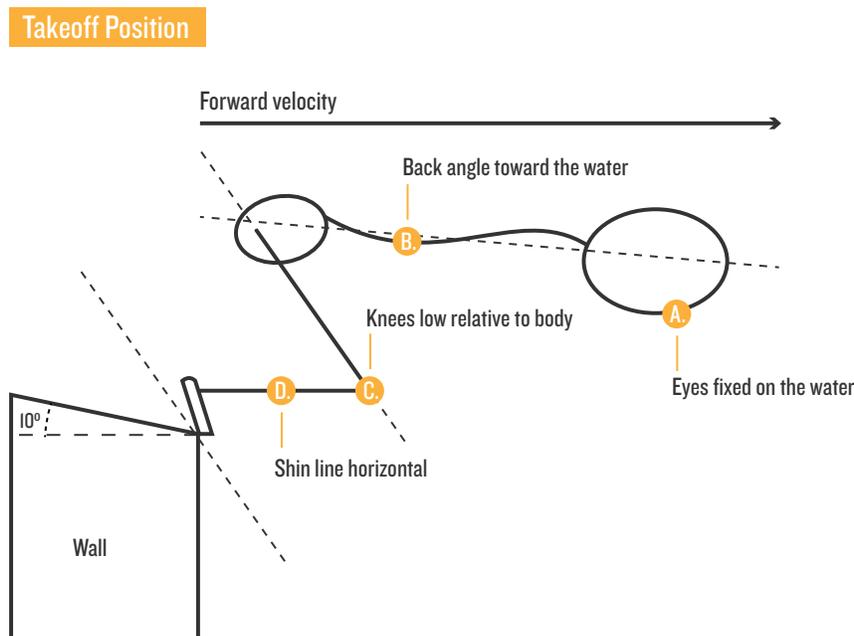


Figure 1: The takeoff position.

performing a flat start effectively. However, the flat start is faster, safer and more effective in the context of competitive swimming.

Starting-Block Progressions

Almost no athletes begin their careers by jumping on the blocks and executing a track or relay start correctly. Like any other complex movement in sport, it is a skill to be learned, and progressions develop fundamental mechanics for safe and effective execution.

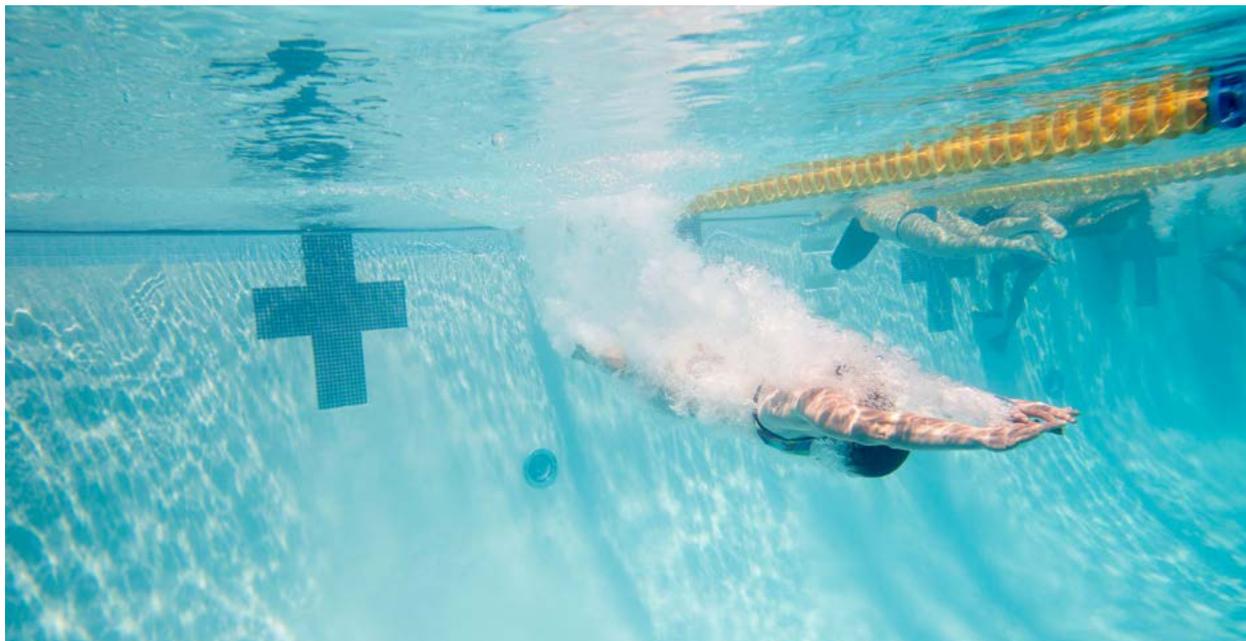
I will cover two main progressions. The first is used to instruct younger swimmers but can easily be applied to adult athletes who aren't as confident with leaping head first into the water. The second involves using the blocks to learn the dive. Both methods can be effective on their own or taught in succession.

Starting From the Deck

1. Sitting—Have the athlete sit either on the gutter or on the side of the pool. The athlete should gradually roll forward with the arms together, mimicking the streamline entry position, until he or she enters the water. The goal is to have the arms and head enter the water at roughly the same point.

2. Kneeling—Now the athlete will start on the knees on the side of the pool. The motion of entering the water will be the same as from the sitting position. However, the goal is to have the head, arms torso and hips enter the water at the same point. Imagine sliding the body into a torpedo tube.
3. Crouching—The goal with a crouch is to bring the hips higher, thus more closely mimicking an actual start. Again, the goal is to fall into the water with a tight streamline that feeds as much of the body as possible into the same “hole” in the water.
4. Standing—This is the highest point the athlete can achieve without standing on the blocks to perform the start. The goal here is to become more comfortable falling a greater distance forward into the water while still focusing on maintaining a body line that enters the water at a single point.
5. Add a starting position—A true deck start will never be as fast as a block start, but is still faster than a push start.

It's important to note this progression is virtually the same with or without a starting platform. A platform sets the athlete higher above the water, and the potential maximum velocity will be higher with starting blocks.



When entering the water, the goal is to “feed the body through a tube.” Note the hands tilted toward the surface to control the depth of the dive.

Performing these progressions on a starting block will allow the athlete to build confidence going into the water from the higher start position.

Key Points for the Block Starting Position

- Toes off the front end of the block with feet hip width apart.
- Ball of the non-dominant foot on the back end of the block.
- Arms fully extended to grasp the front of the block.
- Eyes toward the water.
- Hips high.
- Very slight bend at the knee.
- Center of mass as close to the front of the block as possible for the grab start and front-weighted track start or toward the back of the block for the rear-weighted start.

Learning to Use the Starting Blocks

1. Jump out (off deck)—Standing on the edge of the gutter as though it were a starting block, swing the arms back and then forward, jumping as far out into

the water as possible.

2. Jump out (off block)—While standing on the starting block, wind your arms back as if you were going to perform a box jump. Jump out feet first into the water as far as possible. Do this a few times to get used to the idea of explosive movement off the block.
3. Jump out from starting position (off block)—Establish a good, solid starting position. On the “go” command, simultaneously stand up and throw your head and arms forward while leaping out toward the water, again landing in the water feet first for this drill.
4. Put it all together—Full dive.

Common Start Cues

Slapping the water—This is a pretty common problem when first learning to dive. Essentially, the hips do not fully extend and end up dragging through the air, sometimes resulting in a loud pop when the body hits the water. Often, the arms and feet make contact with the water simultaneously. A good cue to help correct this problem: “Point your toes back toward the block when you dive.”



Note the full extension of the hips and the toes pointed back toward the block.

Hoop drill—Using a large hoop strategically positioned in front of the block in the water, have the athlete attempt to dive through it. A helper may be necessary to keep the hoop from floating away. The corresponding cue: “Put your whole body through a hole in the water.” The smaller hoop, the better for this drill.

Start Strong

Great starts will make a huge difference in your races. The shorter the distance, the more critical a good dive will be. In the context of CrossFit, multiple dives performed well in a workout will enable the athlete to shave a significant amount of time and save valuable energy during the transition from water entry to breakout. The best way to become proficient with starts is to practice them often with a knowledgeable coach observing.

As always, safety first!



References

1. Fischer S and Kibele A. Learning flat and pike entries during swim start from the block. A paper presented at the XIth International Symposium for Biomechanics and Medicine in Swimming, Oslo, June 16-19, 2010.
2. Mark RS. Gold Medal Starts: A USA National Team Tradition. Available at http://www.usaswimming.org/_Rainbow/Documents/121e5355-94d3-4721-a4a3-655719664989/Starts.pdf. Accessed July 31, 2014.

About the Author

Adam Palmer is an active-duty Air Force officer; CrossFit Level 1 certificate holder; coach at Praetorian CrossFit in Kathleen, Georgia; and the managing editor for [Reactive Training Systems](#). Prior to discovering CrossFit in 2008, he competed at the NCAA Division 1 level and was a United States Swimming club athlete for more than 16 years.

A man in a light blue t-shirt, dark shorts, and a black cap is walking on a grassy field. He is carrying a large, black, rectangular speaker on his right shoulder. The speaker has the word "ROGUE" printed on it in white. In the background, there is a large, blurred crowd of people sitting in stadium seats. The scene is outdoors on a bright day.

On the Shoulders of Giants

A look below the top of the podium at the CrossFit Games.

By Mike Warkentin

Rich Froning was high-fiving volunteers on the evening of July 26.

It had been one of the longer days of competition, with athletes starting just after noon with the Muscle-Up Biathlon and ending around 9 p.m. with the Push Pull. Froning had spent the afternoon and evening digging out of a hole created by a poor performance a day prior, when the fittest man on the planet had looked beaten, sluggish and all too human.

So poor was his performance—at least by the shining standards he'd set in previous years—that many had written the champ off, taking to Facebook and Twitter to post king-is-dead proclamations. Froning was in the fiercest fight of his career, and he was under the weather—something he revealed to media only after he came back to win the CrossFit Games for the fourth time. He had every right to duck out of the stadium on July 26 to rest up for a showdown with Mathew Fraser on the final day of competition.

But long after other competitors and most fans had left the tennis stadium, Froning was still there, shaking hands with an army of volunteers, posing for pictures, thanking people for their contributions to the sport, the community and the event.

“He’s certainly a champion, and to be a champion I think you’ve got to remember the people that help you . . .,” said Dr. Sean Rockett, an orthopedic surgeon who volunteered with the Games medical staff. “He remembers, I don’t want to say the little people, but he remembers the guys that are behind the scenes.”

Indeed, Froning remembers the giants.

The Best and the Rest

Christy Adkins has competed in six CrossFit Games. She’s got a 2:49 Fran, a 210-lb. clean and jerk, a 419 Fight Gone Bad—the numbers roll by and put her in elite company.

She also has one other special accomplishment. First to the rings in Heat 1 of the chipper that closed out the 2009 Games, Adkins is the first woman to do a muscle-up in the CrossFit Games.

It was a skill she’d learned just a month before the Mid Atlantic Qualifier in April of that year, partially because of a [CrossFit.com picture](#) featuring Shana Alverson.

“The picture was just her transitioning through the whole muscle-up. I put that on the background of my computer until I got my first muscle-up. That was like, ‘OK, that’s what I want to do, and that’s what I’m going to visualize until I get it,’” Adkins recalls.

Adkins had been introduced to CrossFit in 2007 by Melody Feldman and John Main, two of her Globo Gym co-workers who went on to open CrossFit



Rich Froning thanking volunteers on the evening of July 26.

MPH in Washington, D.C. Adkins has been a member there since 2010 and hands credit for her success to the affiliate and those who run it.

“They created me as an athlete, to be honest, and so has the Washington, D.C., CrossFit community,” she said.

Once inspired by the likes of Alverson, Tanya Wagner and Heather Keenan Bergeron, it’s certain Adkins, who finished 21st this year, is now returning the favor for a new generation of CrossFit athletes.

“The coolest feeling in the world is to go into a CrossFit event or affiliate throwdown event . . . because you get that feeling of being a role model and being an inspiration, and you aren’t that in every part of your life,” she said.

“I think that gets back to even stuff that Coach (Greg Glassman) said years ago, where our needs don’t vary by kind; they vary by degree.” —Chris Spealler

Jordan Cook, a trainer at CrossFit Bay Area, finished 36th at the Games. He sees a clear link between the elite and the average athlete who just wants to get fitter.

“I want to help them be better in life, and I invest in their lives, and it goes down to a personal level, I think. I get excited every time I see them PR . . . It excites me. I invest in them, and so I think they feel very close to the coaches, and it’s a very personal relationship. And whenever we do something good, they feel just as excited.”

He added, “I think it’s just an exciting time of the year. It’s, ‘Hey, these are the best CrossFitters, these are the guys that coach us, these are the guys that we look up to, and we want to see our people do well, and we want to see our community grow, and so I think it’s Christmas for the CrossFitters.”

Chris Spealler, a seven-time Games athlete who finished 28th this year, owns CrossFit Park City in Utah. He agreed with Cook.

“I think all those athletes relate to us, and there’s this, you know, really cool blend of where athletes in an affiliate do the same things we do, so they get an idea of what it is, they know what it’s like to suffer and what it’s like to work hard and to earn your first muscle-up or PR. . . . That’s what I think makes them excited to come to all this,” he said of the Games.

The perhaps-unexpected connection between those at the top of the sport and those at the bottom isn’t a new idea, even if it’s often overlooked. In fact, it’s foundational to CrossFit—something that isn’t lost on Spealler,

who is a member of CrossFit’s Level 1 Seminar Staff.

“I think that gets back to even stuff that Coach (Greg Glassman) said years ago, where our needs don’t vary by kind; they vary by degree. I mean that’s the same struggle. That a newbie comes into the box trying to learn how to do an air squat, that fight and that struggle is still there for a guy like Rich (Froning) or any of us here trying to be better,” Spealler said.

Those Who Serve

It takes more than 750 volunteers to make the CrossFit Games happen—far more than all the athletes who compete.

While eyes are fixed on Froning, Camille Leblanc-Bazinet and the rest of the stars, volunteers scurry about, sunburned and sweating as they move gear, judge workouts, deliver water, clean blood off bars or do any of the thousands of tasks required at the CrossFit Games.

Most aren’t noticed. In fact, they’re given drab T-shirts that won’t stand out if they’re caught in the background by a camera. They’re like football linemen: utterly essential but mostly nameless.

But when teams couldn’t finish the Big Bob event and about 1,000 lb. of steel needed to get back to the starting line in a hurry for the next heat, it was a crew of volunteers that stepped up, leaning into ropes alongside the athletes. The image was both symbolic and less than subtle.

Video: [Thanks to Our Volunteers](#) by Jordan Gravatt

On Sunday at the Games, Nicolas Avila and David Granados, members of the medical team, were sitting for a moment near the warm-up area, waiting for an athlete with a torn palm or a sprained ankle. But it was a volunteer who limped up with a gnarly blister on her Achilles after several hours working in the sun. She was whisked off to medical and patched up.

Avila could have been in the stands above, beer in hand, watching the event live. Instead, he and his colleagues chose the fluorescent sunshine of the bowels of the StubHub Center.

“I get to feel part of the team, you know what I mean? I don’t get to compete like those guys do, but I get to do my part to make the whole thing run,” Avila said.

Leia Mendoza worked with the media volunteers and highlighted Mikey, a volunteer of about 8 or 9, and another, Jordan Demagante of Australia, who just showed up to help.

“He paid \$1,800 to fly out here and was, like, stoked about it. Didn’t care. He said, ‘I did it all for the love of CrossFit,’” Mendoza said.



Look behind the athletes at any CrossFit event and you’ll see an army of volunteers putting their fitness to good use.



August Sigurjonsson/CrossFit Journal



Scott Wallace/CrossFit Journal

For time: set up all the equipment for every single heat of every CrossFit Games event, then get it off the field before the next event starts.

The sentiment was common among all volunteers, most of whom simply love the sport and wanted to donate some time, expertise and sweat to make the Games a success.

“I think they like being part of something big, I think they like being sort of ... in the depths of CrossFit behind the scenes. I think this is their life, and (they like) to be able to use their profession and what they do to help other CrossFitters,” Rockett said of the medical team of about 30 care providers ranging from doctors to firefighters.

“I volunteer because I love CrossFit.”

—Josh Crawford

Josh Crawford of Build Up CrossFit West in Mesa, Arizona, took a minute between duties at the StubHub Center to step back from the special-operations crew and look at the big picture.

“I volunteer because I love CrossFit,” he said. “It’s a ton of fun. It’s taken over my life. I think it’s an extremely healthy way to live, and I just enjoy it.”

He continued: “I hope that it keeps taking over the way that it is because I have two young children, and I hope that it just takes off, it keeps going like a wildfire. That way my children are healthy, and all the children around them, and you just end up with a lot healthier nation.”

And at the end of the day, a handshake from Froning or another athlete makes it all worthwhile, said Erik Miller, also of Mesa.

“We actually walked out at the same time that Froning was walking out, and we walked next to him all the way up the ramp, and he thanked us. It was awesome,” he said.

“The appreciation we get from CrossFitters is unanimous,” Rockett confirmed. “They’re very appreciative. They’re very grateful for what we do. Having someone thank you is a very cool thing.”

The Future

“The fittest on Earth live here,” read the giant banner on the front of the Manhattan Beach Marriott during Games week.

According to volunteer Sue Burton of CrossFit OKM in Ohio, that was all it took to get one more athlete to try CrossFit for the first time.

Working at athlete registration at the beginning of Games week, Burton said a man and his wife came in off the street pushing a stroller. Earlier in the

day, they had seen the banner and done bit of research.

“They went home and YouTubed stuff, and they came in and he’s like, ‘I want to register for this stuff. How do I do it?’” Burton said. “So I explained to him, like, how those athletes got there, how they started with the Open. ... And I told them it starts with a local affiliate.”

She added: “You can even start at CrossFit.com.”

Beyond crowning the fittest athletes in the world, the Games celebrate what the community has built together.

And perhaps that’s the true purpose of the CrossFit Games, which are supported by a global community. Perhaps the Games are really just the grand equivalent of the guy who grabs his buddy and says, “I just did this brutal workout called Fran. You gotta try it!”

Beyond crowning the fittest athletes in the world, the Games celebrate what the community has built together. They show current athletes what’s possible and push them further, and they draw new faces out of Globo Gyms and into garages and affiliates to learn how to deadlift and snatch.

A select few of those new athletes will one day compete at the CrossFit Games, but all of them will enter the ever-growing ranks of a community that allows the very best to shine for one week in July. Some will even become coaches and affiliate owners, joining the thousands of trainers who teach others about nutrition, muscle-ups, and horrid couplets and triplets that taste like lungs.

Along the way, they’ll all get stronger and faster and fitter. They’ll work hard, eat better, suffer with their friends and become the best versions of themselves. They’ll change their lifestyles and become healthier.

And they’ll widen the base of the pyramid and allow it to grow taller, becoming giants themselves in the process. ■

About the Author

Mike Warkentin is the Managing Editor of the CrossFit Journal and the founder of CrossFit 204.



Emotions **in Motion**

Emily Beers finds the tests of the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games are more mental than physical.
By Emily Beers

When I qualified to the CrossFit Games, I was ecstatic. Overjoyed. Just happy to be there. My original performance goal was humble at best: not to come dead last. And I accomplished that by finishing 37th.

But the problem with being competitive is you never enjoy being near the bottom—even when your competition happens to be the entire world.

So the Games—ostensibly a physical test—took my mind and spirit through a week-long series of tumultuous emotions: denial and isolation, bargaining, anger, sadness, and finally acceptance. While my body was tested time and time again, the physical component of the weekend was much less excruciating than the chaos in my mind.

The experiences that propelled me along my journey were the fleeting moments, the quick glimpses of pure human generosity, humor and inspiration, each moment temporarily removing me from my struggle to accept myself and lifting me up to a place of pure appreciation.

As athletes, we believe CrossFit makes better people. We talk about how the workouts require so much effort that people of weak character just don't want to do them, and we believe our trials make us stronger, physically, mentally and emotionally. At the Games, I learned that while the workouts themselves contribute to our growth, CrossFit is really about people making better people.

Denial and Isolation

It's Monday evening, and all the athletes have filed into a bus that's taking us to the StubHub Center for the first time.

I'm one of the last athletes to walk onto the bus. I see Julie Foucher and Annie Thorisdottir, Talayna Fortunato and Michele Letendre, women whose shoes I've dreamed of wearing for the last seasons.

"Holy shit. What am I doing here?" I ask myself.

I try to remember the words my close friend Kate Richardson told me before I left.

"Em, I was terrified when I went to my first World Championships in 1999," the two-time gymnastics Olympian said. "I walked in, and there was Svetlana Khorkina (world and Olympic champion), and I thought, 'What am I doing here?' But you just have to fake it. Fake it and pretend you belong there until you actually feel like you belong."

I take a deep breath.

"Fake it. Pretend like you belong. Act like you belong," I try to convince myself.

It doesn't work. Instead, I sit down alone—not because I want to be alone but because I'm too intimidated to step up and introduce myself to someone and strike up a conversation. I sit down near the back, isolating myself, in utter denial that I will actually find the courage to chat with the fittest women on Earth, let alone to compete with them on Wednesday morning.

And then Valerie Voboril walks onto the bus.

"She seems like such a nice lady," I think to myself.

"Lady" might seem an odd term for a badass athlete like Voboril, but the moment I meet her, she oozes classiness and mothering ability, and the word jumps into my mind.

She asks if she can sit next to me.

"Of course," I say. Inside, I feel like I'm 7 years old, relieved to make a new friend on my first day of school.

She strikes up a conversation, and before you know it she's showing me pictures of her adorable daughter Vin. It's such a simple moment—chatting about her career as a schoolteacher—but within minutes I feel considerably less isolated, almost to the point where I believe I can

jump into the waves on Wednesday morning, if ocean swimming happens to be our fate.

And of course it is. When the first event arrives, my body goes on autopilot, and even the 4-foot waves aren't as daunting as they appeared from the warm-up area.

I survive the event and return to grab my bags and head back to the hotel for a massage. On the way back, I check my phone and find texts from a number of people who were all in the know about my goal of avoiding a last-place finish.

"I want to do better than dead fuckin' last."

What kind of goal was that anyway?"

"You weren't last. You were 27th," my sister writes. Although I appreciate her support, I roll my eyes and put my phone away.

"I want to do better than dead fuckin' last," I think to myself. "What kind of goal was that anyway?"



A friendly chat with Games veteran Val Voboril helped Beers settle down before the competition started.



Beers set a pre-Games goal of not finishing last but slowly realized the goal was motivated more by fear than desire.



Seven-time Games competitor Becca Voigt offered tough love and kind words that demonstrated why she received the Spirit of the Games Award.

By Wednesday evening, fear has returned.

Not only do we discover that we'll all be performing our overhead squats alone, but I am also the first lifter in the second heat. I warm up my overhead squat to 200 lb.—ordinarily a light weight for me—but it's difficult to be steady on my jerk with my heart beating out of my chest.

My coach hasn't arrived in Carson yet, so I'm alone warming up. Nausea kicks in, and I decide to open at 195 lb. to be safe. I do not want to miss the first lift.

The moment arrives. While it's not a full house yet, one portion of the stands is completely packed with screaming fans stoked to watch their favorite athletes. Meanwhile, there's an anxious energy among the athletes. I feel out of my depth. I'm standing on my platform quite literally quivering at the knees.

Games Director Dave Castro gives me the go-ahead.

My mind goes blank, but my body is still unstable. My jerk is unsteady, but I manage to keep control. I just want this lift to be over, so I rush the squat. On the way back up, the bar gets in front of me. There's no saving it now. My face feels flushed, and a rush of heat enters my body as if I have a fever. That bar falls in front of me. Failed lift.

I can hear the crowd, but I don't make eye contact with anyone. I just stare at my platform.

"Holy fuck. I can't believe that just happened," I say to myself. "Get it together, Emily."

To my left, Lauren Brooks gets no-repped for depth.

As we wait for our next lifts, Brooks looks over at me with the fiercest eyes I've ever looked into.

"Hey, Hey," she yells to get my attention. "We got this," she adds firmly, making a fist to reiterate her point. "We have two more lifts. We got this. We got this."

Her words ring strongly in my ears, in my mind. They're just what I need to hear.

"We got this. We got this," I start saying to myself, as if Brooks has just enlightened me with some higher truth.

More than anything, though, Brooks' simple words are powerful. She didn't say, "You got this." She said, "We got this."

I'm not alone, after all. I'm in this with Brooks. And 40 others. I cherish this thought as I hit my next two lifts.

Bargaining for Double-Unders

It's Friday morning.

Ahead of me are my two CrossFit nemeses: running and double-unders.

Double-unders are the reason I didn't qualify for the CrossFit Games when I was a rookie in the sport in 2010. In 2012, I entered Day 3 of the Canada West Regional competition in first place, but during the snatch ladder, I was so focused on not tripping up my double-unders that I kind of forgot to think about the snatch.

Two years later—even after much practice—the best way to describe me with a speed rope is "inefficient."

I've received what seems like a million cues from a million people who want to help me get better at skipping. People just can't help themselves when they see me fumbling around. They walk over, pained and confused, to offer up the tip of the day.

A few days before I left for California, I told my mother I asked Kate how she dealt with performing a floor routine in front of 20,000 people at the Olympics.

"I don't know why I'm so scared. Kate had to perform routines in front of thousands of people. All I have to do is double-unders," I said.

My mother's response: "The problem for you is your skipping isn't very impressive, Em."

Before Triple 3, my greatest fear is to be the only one left on the double-unders, frantically skipping away as every other athlete motors through the 3-mile run. That vision leads me to start bargaining with myself, somehow thinking I can get myself far away from the fear.

"Your shoulder has been sore lately. Maybe I should sit this one out."

"Just put in 75 percent effort so the run doesn't hurt that much."

"It's OK if you walk on the run."

"Maybe your rope will break. It could be a blessing if it does."

"Just get through this workout, and if your shoulder still hurts you can chill the rest of the weekend."

I actually have a vision of myself sipping a margarita at the pool the next morning so I can avoid the Muscle-Up Biathlon.

Ridiculous thoughts, indeed—thoughts I know I will ignore. But they still creep into my mind, distracting me from the task ahead.



Camille Leblanc-Bazinnet (left) went out of her way to cheer Lauren Fisher up after a tough go in Sprint Sled 1 and 2.

And then a good friend of mine sees me standing near the ergometers and offers some kind words:

“Well, Eunice,” he begins, using my nickname. “I’ve been checking out all the women out there, and I think you win the award for the best natural tits.”

“It’s just exercise,” I tell myself, shaking my head at how seriously I take this sometimes.

“You have a couple rivals out there, but there are unconfirmed reports on whether or not they’re real,” he adds.

“Laughter is the best medicine,” I say aloud, letting out a genuine laugh. It felt good to laugh amidst the intensity.

And the truth is—as insane as it sounds—his words actually give me confidence that at least my boobs will look acceptable as I jump up and down.

But more than anything, the comment allows me to gain perspective, to appreciate that a friend of mine clearly recognized my bubbling-over stress and went out of his way to make me laugh just to help me get through the workout.

“It’s just exercise,” I tell myself, shaking my head at how seriously I take this sometimes.

When the horn sounds, I pace my 3-km row well and head to the 300 double-unders in eighth place. I take a deep breath, have a drink like my coach instructed and manage to stay calm on the skipping. I never redline on any portion of the event—which was my main goal—and actually feel recovered and fresh 20 minutes after the event, ready to hit it again.

Anger and Frustration Under the Lights

As the 21-15-9 Complex unfolds on Friday night, anger—rage—appears.

“Why the fuck do these snatches feel so heavy?”

“Why can’t I string 6 bar muscle-ups together?”

Rage is never a good thing for those around me. It usually stems from feelings of inadequacy, and tonight is no exception. My mother is metaphorically punched; my boyfriend receives uncalled-for, accusatory text messages, and I’m sure my body language is far from perky and positive.

The anger lasts for the night.

But the next morning, I witness a scene that snaps me out of my rage.

After the two Sprint Sled events, Lauren Fisher hops on an Assault bike to

cool down. She’s just taken 37th and 39th in the paired events, and she can’t contain tears of disappointment. Suddenly, she doesn’t look like one of the fiercest and most capable women on the planet, as she normally does. She looks like a dejected and vulnerable 20-year-old girl. She looks human.

I know how she feels. I, too, have been holding back tears all weekend, yet I’m still surprised to see her crying. What I see when I look at her is an unstoppable force, an athlete with the potential to win the CrossFit Games one day. What does she have to be upset about? Could it be that she, too, is having a hard time accepting her performance? Could it be that she has insecurities like I do?

Instead of letting Fisher pedal with tears running down her face, Camille Leblanc-Bazinnet goes over to Fisher, hugs her, gets right in her face and offers some words of advice: “It’s only one event.”

“It’s only one event.”

She repeats the words over and over as she continues to give Fisher an intense hug.

I can’t hear what Fisher says, but she starts nodding over and over as Leblanc-Bazinnet continues to console her with the words: “It’s only one event.”

Sadness: Working From a Deficit

I’m walking back from the tennis stadium, dejected, after Push Pull. I’m trying to convince myself I did everything I could out there, and the truth is that I did. I finished 6 of the 10 strict handstand push-ups at the deepest deficit, 4 reps from completion.

Had I tried this event last year, I wouldn’t have been able to do a single rep at the deepest deficit and likely wouldn’t have even made it through the previous round.

I’m not sure if I say anything to anyone as I walk back to the athlete’s area, but perhaps my body language speaks of disappointment. All of a sudden, Rebecca Voigt is consoling me.

As we walk back to the locker room, she speaks with confidence and certainty—borderline tough love—and I know I need to listen.

“I know it’s tough, and you’re probably not where you want to be in the rankings at least. Trust me, I know,” says Voigt, who was sitting in 28th place overall at the time, much lower than I’m sure she wanted to be.

I mumble something about it being a tough day emotionally.

"I know, but you can change that. There's one more day tomorrow. Go home tonight and look back at all the workouts and find one positive thing—even if it's just one tiny positive thing—from each workout," she continues.

"There are so many people out there who wish they were in your shoes." —Rebecca Voigt

"You've trained an entire year. This is just one weekend. Don't let it ruin your year of training."

I feel a tear coming and wipe my eye.

"There are so many people out there who wish they were in your shoes. I know it sounds cliché, but it's true. You're here," she adds.

Here is a woman, in her seventh CrossFit Games, taking time out of her competition to speak to me, to help me. She did this simply because she saw a human being in front of her hurting.

I'm so choked up I can't even say anything. Can't even thank her.

The next day, I gather myself and thank her for her words the night before.

She smiles.

"I don't like to see anyone suffering," says Voigt, who is later given the Spirit of the Games Award. They couldn't have picked a more deserving athlete.

Acceptance ... and Freedom

I wake up on Sunday morning clinging onto Voigt's words.

"You can change that," she said about my headspace.

And I know I can.

I'm not sure if the whole atmosphere is more relaxed on Sunday or if I'm finally in a place where I can appreciate the humor around me.

After the team competition, Pat Barber arrives in the warm-up area grinning ear-to-ear. His NorCal CrossFit team of all-stars narrowly missed the podium, but he doesn't seem to care.

"We're happy. For a team with a couple of has-beens, an Instagram celebrity and a couple of 'randos,' we're happy," he laughs. Everyone within earshot chuckles, as well.

Walking onto the field for the last time, I enjoy every minute of the Midline March. I'm completely in the moment during each step on my hands, each overhead lunge, each GHD sit-up.

For the first time, I let myself actually feel the energy of the crowd and think I even hear my friends and family in the stands cheering my name. I use it to my advantage as I kick up for my third handstand walk. My shoulders are numb and my core is wobbling all over the place, but I'm so determined not to fall over—so focused on the task at hand—that I manage to make it through.

When the event ends, I look into the crowd, appreciating the fact they've come from all over the world just to watch. I feel at peace and liberated for the first time since arriving in Carson.

Five minutes after the event ends, as we plunk ourselves down in the tunnel to watch the second and third heats on a TV, Nicole Holcomb, also admittedly relieved, turns to me and asks, "What are you going to eat tonight?"

"A burger and fries," I say.

"I can't believe I made it through," I think to myself.

Competition and Human Nature

The thing about CrossFit is it doesn't really matter what level you're at—the feelings are the same whether you're striving to make it through the workout of the day, testing yourself in the Open, fighting for a spot at regionals, or competing in the CrossFit Games.

One thing all CrossFit athletes share is an insatiable will to improve. This is as true of a Games athlete as it is of the 40-year-old athlete getting her first pull-up.

I'm thankful for the experience and even more thankful for the athletes who helped me survive my emotional journey.

Am I satisfied with where I'm at as a CrossFit athlete? Not really. Do I want to get better? More than ever. Do I still dream of being in the final heat of women? You bet I do.

But for now I'm thankful for the experience and even more thankful for the athletes who helped me survive my emotional journey that was the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games.

I wondered prior to the Games whether I had done enough volume to successfully make it through the physical aspect of the competition. Two days later, I barely remembered the physical pain of the events. I thought I would take two weeks off, but I felt ready to get on a strength program right away.

The Games were much more difficult on my ego. I spent half my weekend feeling inadequate, and it wasn't the physical events that provided validation of my abilities. It was the people around me who did. Once I realized the other athletes and the fans weren't judging me, I could finally accept who I currently am as an athlete—and I could even be proud of who I am.

If I ever get back to the CrossFit Games, I'm hoping I can start with the acceptance phase. Then again, maybe an entirely new process will await. ■

About the Author

Emily Beers is a CrossFit Journal contributor and coach at CrossFit Vancouver. She finished 37th at the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games.



After missing an attempt at 195 due to nerves, Beers was inspired by Lauren Brooks' words and hit her next two lifts.

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Functional Fighting

While some Brazilian jiu-jitsu athletes don't see the link between CrossFit and martial arts, others say general physical preparedness can help athletes win on the mat.

By Hilary Achauer

August 2014



Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

Garth Taylor started doing Brazilian jiu-jitsu in 1994, and by 1998 he was winning national-level championships. But Taylor wanted more. What he really wanted was a world title.

Taylor's coach, Claudio Franca, told him if he wanted to win a world championship, he didn't need more time on the mat. He needed to be a better athlete.

1 of 8

Functional Fighting ... (continued)

Franca knew just the person who could help. He had been working with a personal trainer at Spa Fitness in Santa Cruz, California, who was combining Olympic weightlifting, gymnastics and high-intensity training and producing impressive results. The trainer's name was Greg Glassman, and he was teaching CrossFit.

The next year, in 1999, Taylor competed in Brazil and became a world champion as a purple belt. It was his first of three world titles.

Brandon Cunningham won the International Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu Pan American Championships in the ultra-heavyweight division in 2011 and 2014. Both times he won, he used CrossFit as his principle mode of training.

"Those workouts that I'd grind through and push, those would be the fight so to speak. Then the technical piece of jiu-jitsu I would just drill," Cunningham said.

Not everyone is so sure CrossFit is an asset on the mat.

"The CrossFit people need to get the fuck out of there (the gym) and get on the mat, and do some real competition ... the CrossFit guys, believe me, they would have to pay their

dues. It would take them a long time to adapt to jiu-jitsu or wrestling," said Steve Maxwell on the April 28, 2014, episode of "The Joe Rogan Experience" podcast. Maxwell is a fitness coach and Brazilian jiu-jitsu instructor, and he was the first American to earn a black belt from Relson Gracie.

"Work is very specific to the particular sport. A high-level swimmer is going to be exhausted in minutes on the mat ... there's no substitute for doing the actual activity," Maxwell said.

More recently, jiu-jitsu black belt and judo Olympian Travis Stevens wrote an editorial for Men's Fitness about why he will never do CrossFit. It's clear from his comments that he has never actually tried CrossFit, but he points out the same thing as Maxwell: Different sports require different abilities.

No serious jiu-jitsu athlete would completely replace jiu-jitsu training with CrossFit. But CrossFit isn't supposed to replace time on the mat, or any sport-specific training for that matter. CrossFit gives athletes general physical preparedness, and several top martial artists say gains through CrossFit transfer particularly well to Brazilian jiu-jitsu, crediting CrossFit training with helping them win at the national and world level.



Courtesy of Brandon Cunningham

CrossFit affiliate owner Brandon Cunningham (left) has won the Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu Pan American Championship twice, and he's won the Firefighter Combat Challenge three times.



Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

CrossFit HQ in Scotts Valley, California, has a judo room in which Garth Taylor teaches classes.

Where It Began

Brazilian jiu-jitsu's roots go back to judo, which was created in Japan by Jigoro Kano in 1882. His style, which he called "kodokan judo," differed from other martial arts at the time because of its emphasis on "randori," or free sparring practice, rather than "kata," a prearranged sequence of attack and defense. In 1886, Kano's new style was put to the test in a tournament hosted by the Tokyo Police. Kodokan judo fighters won 13 of the 15 matches and tied the other two. The results were clear: The training was effective.

Judo was the dominant style of martial arts in Japan for many years, until the turn of the 19th century, when Mataemon Tanabe began using an obscure system of classical jiu-jitsu, the fusen ryu. This style emphasized ground fighting; kodokan judo techniques were almost all composed of standing throws. When kudokan judo went up against fusen ryu, the fusen ryu competitors took the fight to the ground and won.

Kano began incorporating ground grappling into kodokan judo, using the techniques of fusen ryu. It was during this

time that Mitsuyo Maeda (also known as Esai Maeda Koma) began his training. Maeda learned the classical styles of jiu-jitsu, then trained in kodokan judo. He was undefeated in judo tournaments in Japan and spent the early 1900s fighting around the world. He never lost. Some say Maeda won 1,000 fights, while others say it was closer to 2,000. After retiring, Maeda settled in Brazil and opened a jiu-jitsu studio. One of his students was Carlos Gracie.

After studying with Maeda for several years, Gracie opened his own academy in 1925. His academy became well known for the "Gracie Challenge," in which all challengers from any martial-arts background were welcome to fight the Gracies in a no-holds-barred match. The Gracie fighters almost always won.

Over time, the Gracies developed their own version of jiu-jitsu, calling it Brazilian jiu-jitsu. Brazilian jiu-jitsu emphasizes fighting strategy, which allows a smaller or weaker opponent to defend against a larger attacker. Using leverage, Brazilian jiu-jitsu practitioners developed methods of fighting while the defender is on his back, a position weaker fighters often encounter.

Members of the Gracie family immigrated to the United States in the late 1980s, and Brazilian jiu-jitsu became well known in the mid-1990s when Royce Gracie won a series of victories in the newly created Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) competitions.

It was around this time, in 1998, that Glassman moved his personal-training business out of Spa Fitness and into Franca's Brazilian jiu-jitsu studio.

"Glassman had a CrossFit area off to the side. The mats were off to the other side," Taylor said.

"He would train us," Taylor said about Glassman. "B.J. Penn, all the guys who fought in UFC and went on to win world championships in jiu-jitsu, he would train us all, and he'd do some workouts where he'd incorporate a round of grappling in the workouts."

Penn certainly found some common ground between CrossFit and fighting: He's responsible for the name Fight Gone Bad. Penn used the phrase to describe the harsh effects of the three- or five-round CrossFit workout Glassman designed to mimic the rigors of a UFC match.

Taylor said Glassman exposed him to ideas about Olympic weightlifting, high-intensity training and gymnastics movements.

"I got to be with Greg during that development stuff and watch this happen and directly, directly benefit from it," Taylor said.

A year after starting CrossFit, in 1999, Taylor won his weight class at the world championships and took third in the open division of the world championships in Brazil as a purple belt.

"When I won, a lot of what I won on was my fitness," Taylor said. "I was able to just go. I could go, go, go. I could push the pace at such a level that I was able to break some of the guys I was fighting," he said.

"Over the next three years I was really, really competitive," Taylor said. "Using CrossFit and jiu-jitsu together, I placed in the worlds three times ... I took a silver in the worlds as a black belt. That was probably my best achievement, the black-belt silver in 2001.

"From 1999 to 2001, I was working directly with Greg, and those were my achievements. My jiu-jitsu got better. I also evolved as an athlete, and I credit that to CrossFit."

The Mental Edge

Brandon Cunningham started CrossFit in 2006 as a way to train for the Firefighter Combat Challenge, an international fitness competition for firefighters. Cunningham won his first Firefighter Combat Challenge world championship in 2006, and around that time he took his first jiu-jitsu class.

"I came to the conclusion that all the stuff I was doing in the gym was a ridiculous waste of time or so time consuming because of all the things I wanted to do—try to grapple, compete in (the firefighter challenge), whatever."

Cunningham wanted to push boundaries, to go harder and faster.

A friend of Cunningham's told him about CrossFit, and he eventually found CrossFit Atlanta.

"Went up there and just got destroyed. It was a humbling experience—I was a world champion. That summer I went and got my L1 in Charlotte. Coach Glassman was there. From then on, I kept going with it and have always used it as my foundation for fitness and also my own preparation for competition," he said.

Cunningham, 33, won the Firefighter Combat Challenge three times as an individual (with multiple tandem and relay titles) and then decided to focus on jiu-jitsu. In 2011,

he won the ultra-heavyweight division of the Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu Pan American Championship, and he placed first in the same class again in 2014.

Cunningham didn't compete in 2012—that's the year he opened his affiliate, CrossFit Good Vibes in Grovetown, Georgia. In 2013, Cunningham took silver at the Pan Am Championships. Looking back, he realized 2011 and 2014—the years he won—had something in common.

"This year's training was very identical to 2011, the last time I won. In 2011 I was actually training at another gym, an MMA gym, a local one in town. It wasn't that great in preparing for high-level competition. I often trained by myself. What I did is I used my CrossFit workouts as my primary competition, so to speak. ... In 2011, it was primarily because I didn't have any training partners."

This year was busy for Cunningham. He teaches wrestling, coaches CrossFit, works as a firefighter and has a wife and a 5-year-old son.



Courtesy of Brandon Cunningham

"I can mentally break a human. I cannot do that to a CrossFit workout. I'll lose every time. Every single time. I don't care how fast I go: I'm going to get beat. Mentally, I think it's a huge thing." —Brandon Cunningham

"Every weekend I'm traveling and coaching, and obviously my students come first," Cunningham said. "Although (I was) getting mat time, pretty much all the time (was) dedicated to the students."

Cunningham's jiu-jitsu coach was in Atlanta, a five-hour round trip. That meant he couldn't get out there and train with the upper-level belts very often. To make up for it, Cunningham would push himself in his CrossFit workouts.

"I would push with (the workouts) as if those were the training partners that I needed, and the technical aspect is easy: I can do that with a dummy, I can do that with some of my students, I can do that with a training partner," he said.

Cunningham went into the 2014 Pan Am Championships injured but confident.

"Everything came down to knowing I was conditioned ... trusting my technique and my game plan from what little time I could fit in for myself," he said.

Although he spent more time on the mat in 2013, Cunningham thinks the increased amount of CrossFit led to his victories in 2011 and 2014.

"A lot of it is the mental aspect of it, which you get ... in every workout. I can mentally break a human. I cannot do that to a CrossFit workout. I'll lose every time. Every single time. I don't care how fast I go: I'm going to get beat. Mentally, I think it's a huge thing. I think that's what a lot of people don't understand, or haven't tapped into that potential, the mental game of what CrossFit gives you," Cunningham said.

Crossover Skills

What is it about CrossFit and Brazilian jiu-jitsu that work so well together?

"It's critical for a fighter to be able to explode and recover. The more often you can explode and the faster you can recover, the better your fitness is for fighting," Taylor said.

"I believe (CrossFit's) ... combination of movements, intensity and ability to scale workouts accordingly make it an ideal strength-and-conditioning program for the competitive grappler," he said.

Ray Regno is an owner and trainer of CrossFit Stronghold in San Diego, California. The affiliate offers CrossFit and Brazilian jiu-jitsu instruction.



Courtesy of Garth Taylor

Taylor (left) was an early client of Greg Glassman (center), who at one point taught CrossFit in a Brazilian jiu-jitsu studio.



Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

"I know that from my personal experience it has tremendously benefitted me, and I have my students do it. My athletes, on my comp team, are all doing a version of CrossFit." —Garth Taylor

Regno said both CrossFit and Brazilian jiu-jitsu rely on using the body's leverage to generate power.

"(CrossFit) transfers directly to jiu-jitsu because you learn how your body moves ... knowing your own limitations and joint limitations will help you understand other people's limitations," Regno said. "If it's uncomfortable for me to get in this position, it would be uncomfortable for them. That's the thing with jiu-jitsu. It's so technical it's like a chess game."

Regno said improved mobility is the biggest benefit for Brazilian jiu-jitsu competitors who try CrossFit.

"If their mobility was better they wouldn't have to tap out so soon. A lot of the joint manipulation you see in jiu-jitsu plays on the (stiffness) of the joint, but if you are working on that joint mobility, if you are working on overall flexibility, you have a lot more wiggle room to get out," Regno said.

Taylor teaches three days a week at the CrossFit Inc. Headquarters in Scotts Valley, California, and he said he noticed a difference teaching Brazilian jiu-jitsu to advanced CrossFit athletes.

"They have everything they need to be good grapplers. They are bull strong, they move quickly, they have good

endurance, and they get the concept of exploding. They take coaching really well, they are used to being in a class environment, and they learn complex movements easily," Taylor said.

The only CrossFit habit that gets in the way of Brazilian jiu-jitsu is the intensity CrossFit athletes bring to the mat.

"They are ready to run through the wall," Taylor said.

"They make mistakes and run headlong into traps," he said.

"A wrestling match is not a WOD. You don't get a better score for finishing fast, for finishing first. They gotta learn some play. But my experience coaching elite CrossFitters and having them grapple, it's completely clear to me that this is beneficial. I have no idea why anybody would say it's not."

While he believes CrossFit and jiu-jitsu are complementary, Taylor said competitive athletes should be careful not to overtrain when combining the two.

"There certainly is a balance," Taylor said. "With the intensity of CrossFit, and with the demands of the sport of jiu-jitsu, you can definitely overtrain. You can definitely become where your performances on the mat are going to be diminished."

Functional Fighting ... (continued)

The key, as with any sport, is to balance CrossFit training for general physical preparedness with the demands of sport-specific training or competition.

As someone who has a foot in both worlds, Cunningham said he frequently sees Brazilian jiu-jitsu athletes bashing CrossFit.

"The classic meme is 'I don't do CrossFit, I play a real sport,'" Cunningham said.

"People are just uneducated. That's the biggest thing," he said. "You don't do CrossFit to get better at jiu-jitsu; you do CrossFit to be a better athlete, which translates to being able to perform better. That's the focus—human performance—and no matter what arena that is, that's going to make you better," he said.

Laura Hart, who owns CrossFit Indulto in Sandy Springs, Georgia, has been doing CrossFit for four years and Brazilian jiu-jitsu for about six. She said community is very important in jiu-jitsu, just like with CrossFit.

"Both of them are 'individual team sports,' (and they are both) all about community and team and the people you surround yourself with, but it's still just you out there. It

really impacts your whole situation if you can't surround yourself with people you are comfortable with," Hart said.

Hart found a jiu-jitsu academy supportive of her love of CrossFit and said the athletes in her CrossFit gym are very interested in learning about jiu-jitsu.

She thinks the two disciplines work very well together—her grip strength helps her hold on tight to her opponent's gi, for example.

"My guard in jiu-jitsu is pretty sick," Hart said. "Even if I'm with people who are better than me, it gives me time to think, because I can get my leg in there. Having strong legs, if I need to open my hips hard, or jump to my feet ... it's much easier because of my balance."

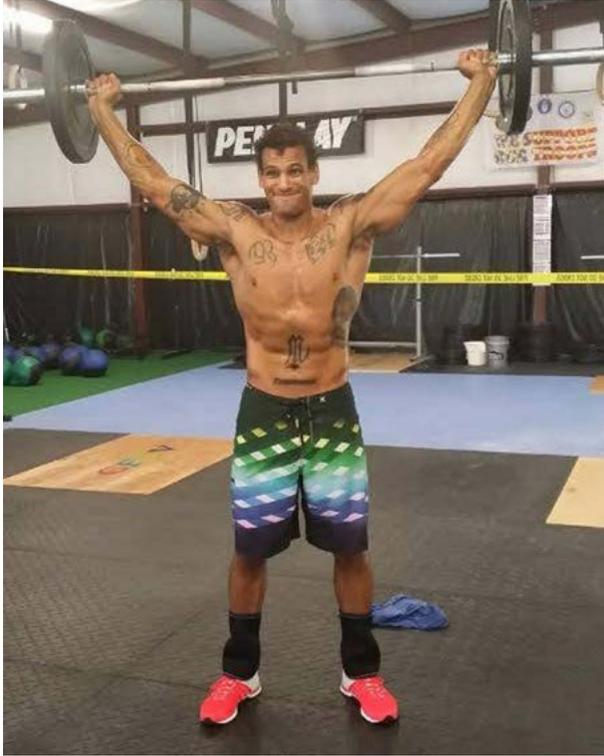
Along the lines of CrossFit's advice to "learn and play new sports," Hart thinks CrossFit athletes could learn something from jiu-jitsu.

"In jiu-jitsu you learn respect," Hart said. "You respect your teammates, you respect your belt, the ground that you walk on. When your teacher speaks, you don't speak. In CrossFit, especially as your gym gets busier, and it starts



Courtesy Laura Hart

Laura Hart owns CrossFit Indulto and said CrossFit gives her advantages on the mat.



Courtesy of Brandon Cunningham

“You don’t do CrossFit to get better at jiu-jitsu; you do CrossFit to be a better athlete, which translates to being able to perform better.” —Brandon Cunningham

to get more mainstream, you start to have people coming who kind of lose the fact that ... people work really hard to be good at CrossFit, and I think that people forget to respect that.

“You can’t just come in and throw the barbell around and be awesome. You have to respect your equipment. You have to respect your space and the person next to you.”

Cool and Healthy

Taylor witnessed the birth of CrossFit and has been doing Brazilian jiu-jitsu for 20 years. He says he’s not sure why so many jiu-jitsu athletes dislike CrossFit.

“CrossFitters talk about funny stuff and wear funny clothes, but let me tell you, jiu-jitsu guys talk about funny stuff and they wear funny clothes,” Taylor said.

“I know that from my personal experience it has tremendously benefitted me, and I have my students do it. My athletes, on my comp team, are all doing a version of CrossFit,” he said.

Taylor said the bottom line is simple. Both Brazilian jiu-jitsu and CrossFit “are both really cool and they are both really healthy, and being involved in either one is going to make your life better, so what’s the problem?” he said.

Although Brazilian jiu-jitsu’s history is longer than CrossFit’s, both sports are hybrids of other disciplines. Brazilian jiu-jitsu is a mix of the most effective elements from judo and jiu-jitsu to create a dominant fighting style, just like CrossFit combines gymnastics, weightlifting and high-intensity training in the pursuit of overall fitness.

As many have discovered, bringing the two together is a powerful combination.



About the Author

Hilary Achauer is an award-winning freelance writer and editor specializing in health and wellness content. In addition to writing articles, online content, blogs and newsletters, Hilary contributes to the CrossFit Journal and the CrossFit Games site. An amateur boxer-turned-CrossFit athlete, Hilary lives in San Diego, California, with her husband and two small children and trains at CrossFit Pacific Beach. To contact her, visit hilaryachauer.com.

STREETS TO SCHOLARSHIP

A homeless high-school dropout with a felony charge and a son, Damian Relierford now has a football scholarship and wants to help kids like him.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

The tattoo on his forehead reads “Damebo.” It’s his nickname. He got it when he was high.

“I do regret it but I don’t.”

It’s a reminder of his missteps, but also of how far he’s come.

“I was a thug, a street guy, basically. . . . Selling weed, doing weed, doing cocaine.”

Damian Relierford dropped out of high school, had a child by the time he was 19 and twice went to jail—the first time for fraud, the second for throwing an empty beer can at his son’s mother. All along, one thing never wavered: his passion for football.

Relierford had shown talent for the sport early in life. And it was no surprise. His uncle is Fresno State wide receiver Josh Harper, whom the Tallahassee Quarterback Club Foundation named to the 2014 Biletnikoff Award preseason watch list in mid-July. Another uncle, Matt Harper, is assistant special-teams coach for the Philadelphia Eagles. And his grandfather is Willie Harper, outside linebacker for the San Francisco 49ers from 1973 to 1983 and a 1972 All-American at the University of Nebraska.

When Relierford found himself in jail for the second time—at 20—he started having some realizations. Looking back on his short life of transgressions, he began thinking about what could have been.

“I felt like I wasted a lot of time,” he said.

In the moment, he thought, “I did all that to myself. If I want to give my son a better opportunity than I had, I need to get myself together.”

And he did.

Today, the 23-year-old is enrolled at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas, after earning a football scholarship to the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics school. He left Aug. 12—his first time on an airplane, his first time outside California.

His goal: The NFL. But “No. 1 is get my degree.” He promised grandma. He’s focused on majoring in social work and minoring in special education or physical education.

“I wanna work with kids like myself, try to help them and guide them in a different direction, give them the help that I didn’t have,” Relierford said.

Most importantly, he added, he wants to “make it” for his mother, Nikki, a single parent who raised him and his two siblings by working multiple jobs.

“To give her the life she never had.”

STRUGGLE AND SUCCESS

Relierford’s politeness and discipline hide the fact he used to be a self-described thug. His sentences often include “yes, ma’am” and “yes, sir.” And at 5:30 each morning during the summer, he walked about an hour from his grandparents’ house where he lived to the bus stop. The bus took him roughly 23 miles north from Tracy, California, to Stockton, where he took summer-school classes at San Joaquin Delta College. That’s also where he played football.

As a wide receiver at the community college he’s recorded 26 receptions and one touchdown, and he averaged 19.1 yards per game and 7.3 yards per catch, according to California Community College Athletics. The folks at Benedictine see potential.

“He will block and take the right path in traffic,” said George Papageorgiou, the school’s assistant football coach.

It’s through football that Relierford learned about CrossFit 209 Sport and met one of the box’s coaches, Vince Carter.

Carter, 36, had been through some rough patches himself. He, too, grew





A self-described former "thug," Relierford has now dedicated himself to turning things around in college.

up with a father who didn't want to be involved. His mom had two jobs to provide for six kids. Carter was a talented runner but had a lot of anger growing up because of his father's absence. He had a son at 17. And the summer after his senior year in high school, he ended up in jail for a week-and-a-half following a street fight. To raise money for a lawyer, his mother—with the help of four friends—made and sold 2,000 tamales. After that, Carter moved to Southern California to run for Mt. San Antonio College outside Los Angeles; three years in, he left the school to pursue custody of his son, who is now 19.

Relierford started showing up at Carter's Elevate Your Game class at CrossFit 209 Sport in the summer of 2013. But he didn't stick around.

"I knew that I couldn't afford how much it cost so ... I just quit," he explained.

Still, the program made an impression.

"I could definitely tell that the stuff they were doing was different from anything that I've done."

At the time, Relierford was homeless.

He had been living with some of his teammates since his grandparents kicked him out of their home in July 2012 because "we had a disagreement on some things." But in April 2013, he and his teammates were evicted after noise complaints from neighbors. He used his financial aid to stay in hotels when he could. Sometimes he would couch surf at friends' places. Other times he would sleep in what he called an "alleyway" at Delta College; there was a vending machine and, likewise, an electrical outlet to charge his cell phone overnight.

Moving in with his mother, a head preschool teacher, in San Jose—nearly 78 miles south—wasn't an option if he wanted to stay enrolled at Delta and pursue his football dreams. Besides, he didn't want to burden to her.



Vince Carter, a coach at CrossFit 209 Sport, worked through troubles of his own as a youth and now helps others stay on the right path.

"I was sleeping at Delta, walking all night, walking around Stockton. I was stressed out," he said. "There was a couple of people who knew I was homeless, but there was nothing much I could do."

"I refused to go back to my old ways.

I wanted to do it the right way."

—Damian Relierford

Relierford added: "I kept it to myself and just did what I had to do. Some of the coaches knew my situation; they would offer me food. Other coaches would offer me jobs—painting, helping someone move. I just made that work like that."

In July, he moved in with another group of teammates. But that only lasted until January, when they all decided to move back home.

For the next four months, he was homeless. Again.

In April, he returned to CrossFit 209 Sport, making the nearly 3-mile trek from Delta College to the box by foot. Eventually, he opened up to Carter about his struggles.

Carter was "just blown away" by the 23-year-old going to school, playing football—all while he had no place to call home.

Finally, in the spring, Relierford broke down.

"I couldn't take it no more. I started crying. I refused to go back to my old ways. I wanted to do it the right way," he said.

So he called his grandparents with an apology.

"That's where I've been ever since," he said in mid-July. "I've been doing a whole lot better."

And he managed to pass his spring semester.

“Me basically sleeping outside and walking around all night paid off.”

A Coach’s Purpose

To watch Carter interact with kids in his 5-year-old Elevate Your Game program is to watch something special.

As the hands on the clock struck noon, Carter walked into the small adjoining room inside CrossFit 209 Sport and greeted the 18 kids who had shown up on this particular Monday in mid-July. There were fist bumps, bro handshakes, hugs.

He started the group on a warm-up and then broke it into smaller groups to rotate through a sled drag, bench presses and max-effort kettlebell swings.

As each group rotated through the stations, he walked around, occasionally stopping, checking in on each athlete.

“Slow down, fast up. All the way up,” he loudly said as one athlete bench-pressed.

“Come on, come on, come on. Finish,” he yelled as another pulled the sled the final few meters beneath the scorching sun.

When Relierford took to the 70-lb. kettlebell, Carter counted each rep.

“This is where we eat,” he shouted at him while he swung. “They don’t know what’s comin’!”

Relierford finished with 62 swings.

The day’s workout was one Carter had concocted while on vacation.

“I don’t like you on vacation, Vince. You think of some weird shit. That felt real,” 18-year-old Blake Smallie said after the sled drag.

Carter smiled.

It’s typical to see him at his athletes’ games and meets, cheering from the sidelines as if they were his own children.

“I want to be that kind of coach that makes a difference,” Carter said. He added, “You gotta change someone from within first.”

Both Carter and CrossFit 209 Sport owner Gabe Subry believe in CrossFit as “a life-changing tool.” Subry, a member of CrossFit’s Level 1 Seminar Staff, opened the affiliate with Carter in 2009.

Relierford, Subry said, is an example of someone who “went straight to the bottom and came back up.”

He added: “That’s the kind of stuff that gets you fired up.”

And Carter, Subry continued, goes “above and beyond,” giving these kids rides home and checking in on them to be sure they’re doing their homework.

“You can tell when he’s training, it’s not just training,” Subry explained. “He loves it.”

For Relierford, Carter is the one who lit a fire in him, told him he was just as good at football as his uncle Josh, told him to stay off drugs and keep his nose in the books.

“I want to be that kind of coach that makes a difference.” —Vince Carter

“Not only does he train me but he cares about my well-being,” Relierford said. “I really appreciate that dude.”

He later added: “I’m going to work with Vince as long as I can—till the day I die.”

Carter laughed.

“I’m definitely gonna look for a CrossFit” in Kansas, Relierford said.

CrossFit, he went on, did more than just increase his back squat from 185 lb. to 255 lb.

“CrossFit’s not only made me better regarding being fast and strong but an all-around good dude,” Relierford explained. “People just love comin’ there. It’s a family thing. We got love for the trainers, and we know the trainers got love for us.”

Roxane Harper, Relierford’s grandmother, credits Carter with motivating her grandson.

“Something happened,” she said. “I have to give Vince all the credit. What he did is what we tried to do all these years. . . . He just helped Dame get that confidence that he needed.”

Carter sees the changes, too.

“You can tell the difference because he’ll call me and tell me ‘thank you,’” he said. “Besides fitness, we’re building character.”



Sometimes a change in attitude is all it takes to turn a life around.



While playing football at Benedictine College in Kansas, Relierford plans to seek out a CrossFit gym to continue his training.

He added: “It just shows what fitness could do and what it is doing. And I think (some) coaches don’t understand that. What’s your purpose?”

Turning It Around

After Relierford’s grandparents kicked him out of their house, his grandfather, Willie Harper, made a habit of calling Delta College football coaches. He checked to see how he was doing, if he still was going to practice, still attending classes. And he kept doing it even after Relierford moved back in.

“I still check,” said the stoic Harper in mid-July, sitting near a dining table inside his home in Tracy. “I still check.”

Roxane, surprised, burst out laughing.

Willie calls Relierford D-bo. Both he and his wife are pastors, explaining they found Jesus after a stint with drugs themselves and coinciding marital problems.

D-bo used to be irresponsible and quick to anger, but now he’s calmer and focused, Willie explained. He’s taken his grandmother’s words to heart: “If you want to get even, get better.”

“I tell him, ‘You have to forgive. You can’t act out. If you lose your cool, you’ll only make yourself feel worse.’ I can take about 90 percent of his ‘OKs’ and (take) them to the bank,” Willie said.

He continued: “He’s been very much accountable. . . . That’s forgiveness: ‘I can’t change it, so I’m not gonna make myself angry.’”

It’s accountability that eventually convinced officials at Benedictine College to admit him as a non-traditional transfer student after weeks of evaluation.

“It was a hard sell,” Papageorgiou said. “Damian’s fairly rare.”

With enrollment close to 2,000 students, every individual is “that much more identified and highlighted.”

“The end product is graduating,” Papageorgiou explained, “not just bringing in a ton of bodies.”

Papageorgiou, known as “Coach Pops”, first started talking to Relierford in the spring.

“I’m goin’ out there to take care of business.”

—Damian Relierford

“Damian and I talked about our school, and then I let him known in no uncertain terms that I didn’t want to spend a lot of time talking to him until he showed he could turn things around academically.”

The next time the two men spoke was May.

“Lo and behold he had just done a bang-up job with his spring grades, and that turnaround is why our admissions people thought he was fit for our school,” Papageorgiou said.

That and some reassurances from grandma.

“Mrs. Harper was instrumental in talking with those in admission and housing so they understood he has a support system,” Papageorgiou added.

What impressed him most about Relierford’s football film was how he’s translated his work ethic on the field to his academics. He’s willing to be a behind-the-scenes player, Papageorgiou noted.

“(He’s) not puffing his chest and letting everybody know he’s out there. . . . He just wants to help everybody, and I think that’s the right track that he’s taking.”

Papageorgiou continued: “In the pyramid of talent in every endeavor, it gets smaller at the top. If you’re going to compete and stand out at the top, you’re going to work very hard . . . and so far Damian has done that.”

Still, Relierford will be on a short leash while at Benedictine because of his felony fraud charge. And he gets it.

“I know I’m a big black dude goin’ to Kansas with a tattoo on my forehead. I know,” he said, sounding understanding. “I’m not goin’ out there to cause trouble. I’m goin’ out there to take care of business.”

While he didn’t have it the best, Relierford noted, he didn’t have it the worst.

“I had a few obstacles,” he said, “but I did it.” ■

About the Author

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

Amazing Grace

Rich Froning overcomes adversity and pressure to stand atop the CrossFit Games podium for the fourth consecutive year.

By Andréa Maria Cecil



He looked determined, almost angry.

It was seconds before Sunday's Midline March at the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games—the first individual event of the final day. Three-time champ Rich Froning awaited the buzzer.

Between the athletes and the finish line were 3 rounds of 25 GHD sit-ups, a 50-foot handstand walk and 50 feet of walking overhead lunges with 155 lb.

Noah Ohlsen, a rookie who had been near the top of the Leaderboard for most of the competition, was ahead early in the event. When he moved on to the second round, it looked as if he'd win—as long as he could keep that pace.

He couldn't.

In quintessential fashion, Froning surpassed his competitors on the second round of lunges. Spectators in the 27,000-seat soccer stadium inside the StubHub Center erupted in cheering, rooting for the unexpected underdog. Then they rose to their feet as Froning finished the final lunge and recorded a time of 5:25 flat. He dumped the barbell and extended his arms straight out to his sides, vigorously waving them upward to elicit roars from the crowd.

He wasn't done.

After winning the heat and the event, he went on to encourage nearly every competitor who remained on the field, one by one, until each man crossed the finish line.

That was followed by a short, live on-camera interview. Then he made his way toward the tunnel beneath the stands only to be stopped by incessant fans seeking autographs and pictures.

"Rich! Rich! Rich!" seemed to come from every direction. Fans shoved in his face a postcard-sized advertisement, a trucker hat—one threw a pair of sunglasses down from seats too high to make a handoff—and smartphones. "Rich turn around," yelled one woman from the stands on the other side of the tunnel. He did; she snapped a picture. And then he went right back to signing his name and taking selfies.

"Thank you, guys. Thank you, guys. Thank you, guys," he said as he finally made his way inside the tunnel.

Three cameramen, trotting backward to capture footage as Froning walked, promptly accosted him.

"Talk to my camera, talk to my camera," joked CrossFit HQ's Sevan Matossian with a smile.

Such is the life of the man who—with struggle—would later that day become the fittest man on Earth for an unprecedented fourth consecutive year.



Ruby Wolff/CrossFit Journal

Froning started the final day of competition looking determined and fiery, and he won Midline March by more than 35 seconds.

An Unlikely Underdog

The previous two days hadn't been kind to Froning.

He finished five events outside the top 10, and there was talk that this year would be of a changing of the guard. Ohlsen, 23, was at the top of the Leaderboard after multiple events. Out with the old, in with the new.

Froning started the four-day competition well. Swimming hadn't been his strong suit in previous years, yet he recorded an eighth-place finish on

the opening event, The Beach. That was followed by a tie for first with former Olympic weightlifter Mat Fraser on Overhead Squat. Both men squatted 377 lb.

As expected, Froning was in a good position after the first day of competition. He would either place in the top five or win all the events that followed, onlookers theorized.

So when Friday morning's Triple-3 arrived, the 27-year-old was expected to dominate. The event called for a 3,000-m row, 300

double-unders and a 3-mile run. The story was playing out as expected until the cameras focused on Froning during the event's last leg. He was walking. It was difficult to believe. He'd pick up the pace, only to walk again; competitors breezed past him. Froning finished the event in 37th, his worst finish in any Games event since The Pool in 2013. In that event, he finished 30th.

As Froning exited the event area and proceeded toward the athlete tent, he was visibly upset and stone-faced as he hurried along to the ice baths—a stark contrast to his typically relaxed demeanor.

“I just turned into a wuss,” Froning said, explaining he felt dizzy during the run. He added, “I haven’t been runnin’ enough.”

It wasn’t until after he had won his fourth title two days later that he revealed he had been sick earlier in the week with headaches and stomach pains.

Later on Friday, Froning was up against Sprint Sled 1 and Sprint Sled 2, both requiring male athletes to push a stealth-bomber-shaped Rogue Fitness sled 100 yards. Froning finished the events in 15th and 27th, respectively.

When he completed the latter, he shook his head.

That night, though, he made easy work of the 21-15-9 Complex, winning the event by about 10 seconds over Josh Bridges. But was it too late?

“The CrossFit Games has a way of showing you that your training sucks,” Froning said as he sat in the tunnel to watch the final heat—the top men—attack the same complex.

“I’m just trying to enjoy it,” he added.

There he sat, with his right forearm on the back of a plastic folding chair, eating a red apple in front of a flat-screen TV while volunteers milled about. It was quiet except for the occasional clang of equipment being moved. He appeared relaxed—the usual Froning.

Now for the tough questions: What if you don’t win? Then would you come back next year?

He shook his head.

“My decision is final,” he said with a tone of absoluteness. “I’ve told Hillary (my wife) it’s over competing as a CrossFit Games individual. . . . I have a beautiful baby girl who needs a dad.”

Froning focused his attention back to the screen, watching as the final heat made its way through deadlifts, cleans, snatches and ever-more-difficult versions of pull-ups.

“I’m not used to being in that third heat,” he said.

Typically Froning doesn’t set the pace. Usually he comes from behind to win. This time, things were different. He led his heat early and never relinquished.

“I needed to. Luckily, I had James (Hobart) go in an earlier heat, and he said, ‘Step on the gas harder than you need to.’”

Froning’s time: 4:16.63. And so he sat, watching, waiting. He had to know.

As the clock ticked past 4:16 and he saw Bridges finish at 4:26.03, he assuredly said, “Got it.”

He stood up, gave a confident nod and a half wink, and walked away.

“This Is What It Looks Like for Rich to Lose”

Saturday was a new day. It began with Jason Khalipa in first place overall.

And the day’s first event was the much-strategized Muscle-Up Biathlon. Athletes were required to do unbroken sets of 18, 15 and 12 muscle-ups lest they be cast out on the 200-m penalty run.

Froning failed a handful of muscle-ups. He finished at 13:07.44. The winner, rookie Cody Anderson, did all muscle-up sets unbroken for a time of 10:43.46. The champ finished the event 13th overall.

Next up was a simpler task: the Sprint Carry. Pick up heavy objects, run as fast as you can with them to the finish line. For men, the loads were 100, 120 and 150 lb. each. Big guys such as Nate Schrader and Tommy Hackenbruck found their sweet spots. Froning, however, found a 15th-place finish.

But when Dave Castro, Director of the Games and of Training, unveiled the Clean Speed Ladder, fans knew it was an event made for Froning. He can lift heavy and with solid technique. When the event started, however, the 245-lb. barbell knocked him back a bit and he almost lost it. In the semifinal round, he took a second to look around at the competition before cleaning 310 lb. That second cost him the final heat. Instead, he sat on the tennis-stadium floor and watched as the top men tried to outlift each other for time. His face remained so stoic he seemed angry.

Later that day, he noted his mistake.

“Instead of watching everybody else, I need to take more chances.”

The Froning most had known as unwaveringly confident, the one who always played his own game, seemed rattled during the event.

It was a sharp contrast to the man who had maintained his pace at the announcement of Open Workout 14.5 in San Francisco, calmly closing the gap between him and all four competitors on the floor.

Meanwhile, CrossFit Inc. Founder and CEO Greg Glassman looked on and thought, “This is what it looks like for Rich to lose.”

The day held one more opportunity: Push Pull. It promised increasing numbers of strict handstand push-ups—with a growing deficit—and a 50-foot sled pull with growing weight.



Tai Randall/CrossFit Journal



Staff/CrossFit Journal

During Sprint Sled 2 (top) and Triple-3, Froning looked worn out and sluggish. He turned things around by winning four of the next eight events.



Ruby Wolff/CrossFit Journal

Froning finished the event second overall—roughly 2 seconds behind Bridges.

He ended the day in first place overall.

“I’m blessed to be where I’m at because I feel like I don’t deserve it,” he said as he walked through the tunnel toward the athlete tent, seeming equal parts relieved and pleasantly surprised.

Froning went on: “It’s been a crappy week. The things that usually go my way haven’t gone my way. . . . Everything’s been up and down.”

When asked about the final day of competition, he said he felt good. Only one event was known at that point: Midline March.

“We’ll see.”

Calm Under Pressure

On Sunday—typically a training day for him—Froning had something to prove.

With a win in Midline March, it seemed he had finally flipped the switch. But unknown events remained.

“We’ll find out, I guess,” he said with a smile that seemed to predict mischief. “It’ll be fun.”

Castro first revealed Thick ‘N Quick—4 rope climbs and 3 overhead squats at 245 lb. for the men. The event was capped at 4 minutes. Froning finished it in 1:40.3 to take first overall. Afterward, 135-lb. barbells were rolled onto the floor and a two-minute clock was set.

With one minute remaining, Castro announced the closing challenge.

“Your final event for the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games is Grace, 30 clean and jerks for time,” he started.

And then, with 30 seconds remaining, Castro kept talking.

“This is the CrossFit Games. You’re not gonna end on Grace. You’re gonna end on Double Grace.”

Froning nodded. He was ready to play his game.

When the beep signaled the start, he casually approached the bar and went to work. With textbook form, he moved through the reps, looking tired but not winded. After rep No. 40, he even stopped to tighten up the right side of his barbell. Khalipa was hot on his trail, looking spent.

With 5 reps remaining, his judge’s hand went up: 56, 57, 58, 59. He jerked the barbell for the final time, letting it fall behind him, and calmly walked across the finish line. Time: 5:05.6. Khalipa: 5:08.8.

“It’s the sweetest one yet,” Froning said afterward in the tunnel as he put on his champion’s T-shirt with a video camera inches from his face. He was happy, smiling.

“I never really got discouraged.”

Only a few feet away stood a crowd several people deep of fellow competitors—men and women—as well as staff and volunteers, all eagerly awaiting his approach.

Throughout his poorer performances during the previous days, he kept telling himself, “If it’s not meant to be, then it’s not meant to be, and it’s someone else’s time.”

It wasn’t. ■

About the Author

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

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Beyond \$20 an Hour

Creative affiliate owners find ways to compensate coaches in hopes of creating true fitness professionals.

By Emily Beers

August 2014



Courtesy of Jeremy Jones

Most people open gyms because CrossFit changed their lives and they want to use CrossFit to change the lives of others. CrossFit Founder and CEO Greg Glassman often talks about the pursuit of excellence—of virtuosity—as being the foundation of CrossFit.

Providing health is the priority, but achieving some degree of wealth is also important to entrepreneurs. Trainers must buy homes, raise families, travel, save for retirement and so on, and they need to be rewarded for their expertise and their passion for fitness.

1 of 11

Anyone who does CrossFit and has been coached by a knowledgeable trainer knows strength-and-conditioning coaches are similar to massage therapists, occupational therapists, nurses, chiropractors and others in the wider health-care industry: They provide a professional service.

Affiliate owners recognize this, and many believe it's their responsibility to find creative ways to compensate their trainers as professionals in order to deliver results to clients, retain employees, encourage long-term development and create strong businesses.

Brian Strump, Max Lewin, Jeremy Jones, Ben Bergeron, Darren Ellis and David Paradiso are all affiliate owners interested in turning their CrossFit coaches into true professionals who earn wages that reflect their expertise.

Challenge, Opportunity and a Professional Wage

Strump is the owner of CrossFit Steele Creek in Charlotte, North Carolina.

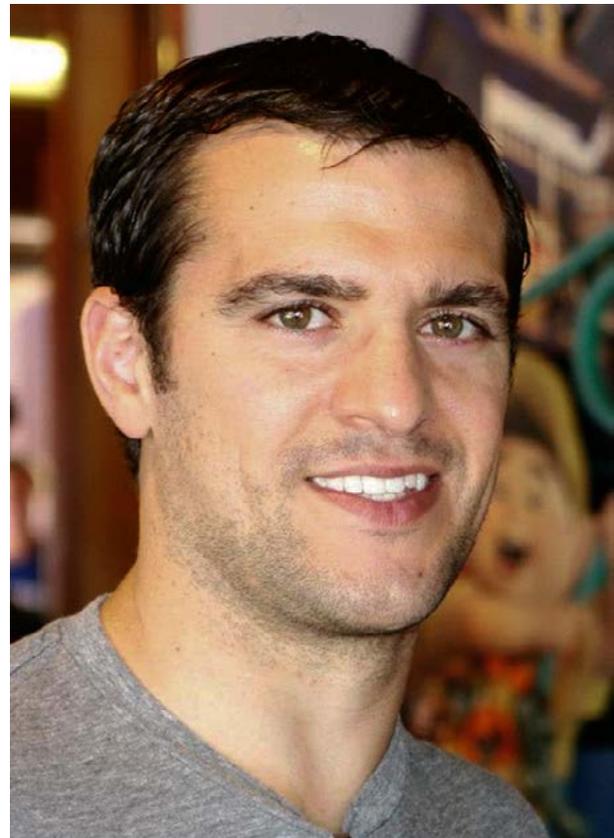
With 11 full- and part-time coaches (including himself) and 215 members at his box, Strump knew he needed to find a way to compensate his coaches for their knowledge and technical proficiency.

“Besides the financial part, the trainer is now driven to learn more about whatever it is he’s going to be teaching.”

—Brian Strump

Once his coaches complete the CrossFit Level 1 Trainer Course and have been groomed in his system, they are compensated US\$20 to \$25 per class. But Strump knew he could offer more than just an hourly wage to his full-time coaches. He wanted to find a way to encourage his trainers to use their specialized knowledge and earn more, increasing revenue for the gym as well.

In November 2013, Strump introduced a new system that rewards his coaches based on revenue they generate in any specialty program they create. The idea is to help his



Courtesy of Brian Strump

Brian Strump of CrossFit Steele Creek.

full-time coaches—those who want to pursue coaching as a professional career—earn more.

It's simple: If a coach begins a specialty program—an Olympic-weightlifting class, a barbell club, a gymnastics class, etc.—the coach receives 44 percent, or four-ninths, of the revenue generated from the program.

Since November 2013, one of his coaches began a CrossFit Kids program, another launched a kettlebell course, while a third hosted a 10-week Wendler strength class. Next up are Olympic-weightlifting and gymnastics programs.

So far, the system has been a win for the coaches, the gym and the clients.

“It incentivizes coaches, yes. And usually we’ll come up with the idea from hearing a member say, ‘I wish we spent more time doing kettlebells,’” Strump explained.

Ultimately, the specialty programs are also a way to give members a chance to work on their weaknesses or aspects of CrossFit they especially enjoy.



Courtesy of Brian Strump

Strump pays his coaches \$20-\$25 an hour but offers them a chance to make 44 percent of the revenue from specialty programs.

The CrossFit Kids program has been the most successful so far. Not only has it given his coach a chance to be an independent entrepreneur, but it also means Strump doesn't have to micromanage the program. This is helping Strump's coaches understand the value of generating their own business: One more kid in the CrossFit Kids program means more money in the coach's pocket, Strump explained.

"And I'm just the check writer," said Strump, whose CrossFit Kids coach earns \$66 an hour for her program, much more than she earns for coaching regular group classes.

Strump also believes incentivizing his coaches based on revenue encourages them to produce a better product as they take ownership of their work.

"Besides the financial part, the trainer is now driven to learn more about whatever it is he's going to be teaching," Strump said, highlighting how the program encourages professional development and high standards.

On top of owning and running his box, Strump is also a chiropractor whose practice is located within his affiliate. As an entrepreneur at heart, he believes a challenge is one

of the best things he can give to his coaches.

"They need to be constantly challenged, and these specialty programs provide both opportunities and challenges," Strump said.

Strump said retaining coaches is one of the most important things for his business as it stems from loyalty and appreciation. So far he's doing well: Five out of 10 coaches have been with him since he opened his doors in March 2010.

"They see and appreciate the growth. They kind of appreciate everything that's gone into it," Strump said.

Like Strump, Max Lewin—owner of CrossFit East Bay in Oakland, California—has a goal of coach retention. He believes retention is at least partially linked to earning a professional wage. He considers a professional wage to be \$75,000 a year for 37.5 hours a week, and he referred to the famous 2010 study from [Princeton University](#) that states a \$75,000 salary is the magic number for happiness and life satisfaction.

In terms of getting his coaches to the \$75,000 level, Lewin is also paying his coaches 44 percent of the revenue from

any program they create. On top of this, coaches earn 70 percent of the revenue generated from any personal-training clients they have, and they get paid by the hour for coaching group classes.

Lewin's system allows those who want to become full-time professionals to do just that. As at Strump's gym, there will always be room for the part-time coach with another full-time job—the guy who simply loves being a part of the community and coaching a couple of classes every week for \$25 a class. But for coaches who are looking for a professional career, Lewin believes turning them into partial entrepreneurs of sorts will help them reach the \$75,000 goal.

Although he's happy with how things are going since introducing the structure, Lewin has more revenue-generating plans. He's launching a program for his clients that will involve a personal-training session with video analysis and a month of homework.

"If a coach has 100 people doing this video analysis, he'll get a nice little revenue boost. And for the client, it's a bit

of personalized attention to work on what they need to work on," Lewin said.

"By the end of 2017, I'd like this to be a million-dollar-a-year-revenue affiliate (with) coaches being full-time professionals making a six-figure salary."

Trying Something New

"There's a well-established line of research called 'social loafing.' It says that the less directly responsible a person is for the group outcome, the less motivated and the less accountable he is to put in as much effort," said Damien Murray, Ph.D., who is doing his postdoctoral research at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

Murray added: "When a person's performance is measurable, tangible and attributable to themselves, their performance is better."

This is essentially the philosophy Jeremy Jones is putting to the test at one of four Northern California CrossFit affiliates he's involved in. The biggest gym is the well-known Diablo CrossFit, which Jones originally opened in his backyard in



Courtesy of Jeremy Jones

Some affiliate owners have found that ambitious coaches flourish when given the opportunity to generate revenue by improving the experience for clients.



Courtesy of Jeremy Jones

Jeremy Jones (in green) is currently experimenting with a new payment structure at one of four affiliates with which he's involved.

2005. Later, he got involved with opening three other affiliates—Benicia CrossFit, Diablo CrossFit Alamo and Diablo CrossFit Pleasanton. All four affiliates are all located along one highway, with about an hour's drive between each.

Among four locations, Jones has 1,200 members and 24 coaches, six of whom are full time. Traditionally, Jones' part-time coaches have been paid hourly—between \$22 and \$30 an hour depending on how long they've been coaching and what certificates and certifications they hold, while a handful of his full-time coaches are on salary. All his full-time coaches have other duties as well, such as administrative or facility roles.

Earlier this year, Jones decided to try a new way to compensate some of his full-time coaches. He started with one box—CrossFit Pleasanton—as a test run.

The compensation model pays coaches entirely based on revenue they generate through membership sales. More specifically, three of his CrossFit Pleasanton coaches are earning 50 percent of the revenue they generate from

sales of introductory sessions. At CrossFit Pleasanton, all new clients must go through introductory personal sessions prior to being released to group classes. Once they join group classes, the coach continues to earn 50 percent of the client's monthly fee.

The idea behind this is three-fold:

First, Jones believes people will work harder and care more about bringing in and retaining clients if they're directly responsible for generating business. A lawyer who wants to become a partner in his law firm has to generate his own clients, and Jones said he thinks coaches need to learn how to generate their own business, as well.

Second, the compensation plan is designed to encourage solid client-coach relations, as well as client performance, because coaches take better care of their clients when they're directly responsible for keeping them around, explained Jones. Coaches are expected to cater to their personal clients' needs by helping them adjust to group classes, consistently monitoring their progress or helping

Courtesy of Jeremy Jones



Coaches with special expertise can often create new programs that appeal to many members.

them set new goals. This ultimately forms a lasting relationship that is the hallmark of great coaches and the foundation of great businesses.

Third, it allows the coach to make more money in the long term: There's no ceiling on a coach's earnings.

And as a bonus to the business, a coach who generates his own business is no longer a labor cost for the gym; instead, the coach becomes a revenue generator—ultimately a win for Jones.

“Being able to have a business where people can make a great living while changing people’s lives is important.”

—Jeremy Jones

When Jones introduced the idea to his coaches, he was worried they would be scared of the word “sales” or simply wouldn’t be able to sell expensive personal training. But this hasn’t been the case.

“Everyone is really enjoying it. We’re not having any problems with people having a hard time selling it,” Jones said. “This makes sure the coaches who are going the extra mile are incentivized. And it ensures they can make a living.”

In fact, the very same month Jones implemented the program, two of his coaches immediately made more money than they had been earning before they were paid this way. And today, just a few months into the project, all three of his full-time CrossFit Pleasanton coaches are earning more than they were before.

But it isn’t all about revenue and sales. The biggest win for CrossFit Pleasanton is that clients are getting higher quality of care in a one-one-one personal-training environment. Jones’ coaches have been selling nine one-on-one introductory sessions for \$490.

“It has to do with the first 20 hours of a person’s CrossFit life. It’s the most important. When someone is first getting

involved in the gym, one bad experience can make them quit," Jones said.

The one-on-one environment is facilitating better service, Jones explained.

"It allows for a more controlled environment to make sure they're getting the best experience possible, and one-on-one training tailors to them," Jones said.

Having his three coaches sell nine personal-training sessions to new members has already increased the gym's revenue by a few thousand dollars a month in the first three months. Moving forward, Jones' plan is to push this system into the other gyms—slowly. And by 2015, all the boxes will be set up this way.

He's doing it slowly for a reason: "We want to show some success (with this system) before we bring it to their gyms," Jones said.

It's also a way to iron out any wrinkles in the system.

"Right now all of our coaches are coaches because they're amazing coaches with great personalities, and we didn't really need people with sales skills, so throwing them into this new system, I want to make sure they're capable first," he added. "It's just like teaching a new movement. I wouldn't make them teach a new movement in class unless they were comfortable."

What's happening at CrossFit Pleasanton should give his other coaches ample reason to believe. Jones believes this system will help him achieve one of his biggest goals: helping his coaches earn a good living.

"It's critical to create professional coaches. There's no future in having a revolving door when it comes to coaches, so being able to have a business where people can make a great living while changing people's lives is important," he said.

People First at CrossFit New England

Ben Bergeron of CrossFit New England is one of the most well-known CrossFit coaches in the world. Bergeron, who has been with CrossFit New England since 2008, didn't get into CrossFit for the money, and considering he charges top athletes just \$175 a month for individual programming, his priorities have always been about creating an excellent product.

It's also important to Bergeron to develop quality coaches who stick around, and he knows if coaches aren't being well compensated, it's unlikely they'll stay for years.

Currently, Bergeron pays his coaches \$30 to \$50 an hour, depending on their skill set. The wide range of compensation provides incentive for coaches to become better and to acquire more education or certifications. Bergeron recognizes the value of good coaches: They're better for clients and better for his business.



Courtesy of Ben Bergeron

At CrossFit New England, coaches are given the opportunity to make 80 percent of the revenue they generate with personal training.

On top of coaching classes, Bergeron's coaches are free to do as much personal training as they like. They can charge whatever they want for personal sessions, although most charge \$100 an hour. Of this \$100, coaches take home 80 percent, while the gym takes the other 20 percent.

"So if they're making \$80 an hour, they can do two or three sessions a day and work just three hours that day and make \$240," Bergeron explained.

Bergeron's full-time coaches have other roles and responsibilities on top of coaching to free Bergeron up, and salaries start between \$30,000 and \$35,000. Any income they receive from personal-training revenue is added to their base salary. Some of Bergeron's full-time trainers coach 25 to 35 hours per week, while others coach 10 to 12 hours but have other duties. It depends on who wants to be on the floor more and who enjoys other aspects of the business, Bergeron explained.

Bergeron knows \$30,000 to \$35,000 "isn't a ton of money," but if his coaches are doing personal training on top of their regular hours, Bergeron explained they can make closer to \$50,000 or \$60,000.

Making the Switch

Darren Ellis is the owner of CrossFit New Zealand, the first CrossFit affiliate in New Zealand. Today, the box he opened in 2008 has 180 members.

Ellis used to pay his coaches strictly by the hour, but in December 2013 he switched his full-time employees to a salary, which also includes health insurance and KiwiSaver (a retirement savings plan). His coaches were happy because it provided them with more security, but Ellis admits it was a gamble.

"Oh yeah, I took a risk. Instead of buying a house, I've employed coaches," he laughed.

"The key, of course, is finding enough work sometimes, and not just having it turn into more coaching when you don't have anything else for people to do," Ellis said. "The ideal scenario is finding a situation where coaches can do the minimum amount of coaching (so they don't burn out) and then work on retention and looking after existing clients and bringing in new clients."

While it was a risk for Ellis, it was also a worthwhile investment. He knows his coaches are happier, and it gives him more freedom as the business owner.

"I can call on them for anything now," he said.



Max and Andrea Lewin of CrossFit East Bay.

Courtesy of Doron Serban

And for his coaches, being on salary and earning a decent living means they don't need to rush off and try to do it on their own. Ellis believes many people try to become entrepreneurs in the fitness industry because they think it's the only way they can make a good living.

"It's surprising how many people end up trying to become entrepreneurs. But some people don't want to be. They just want to go from coach to assistant manager to manager and earn a living," Ellis said.

This is the opportunity Ellis wants to provide for his coaches.

That said, Ellis doesn't want to lock them into a salary with a financial ceiling. So on top of their salary, Ellis incentivizes his full-time coaches by rewarding them with a bonus



Courtesy of Doron Serban

At CrossFit East Bay, Max Lewin has set a long-term goal of six-figure salaries for full-time coaches.

based on the gym's monthly revenue. If the gym does well, clients are sticking around and money is coming in, then his coaches are paid one to two percent of the gym's gross monthly revenue. This incentivizes them to care about the health of the company they work for.

Currently, his top full-time coaches make around \$50,000 a year. But he has bigger plans for them.

"I have my goal written down on a little goals board. I want three coaches earning around \$80,000 a year," he said.

Long-Term Approach at Paradiso CrossFit

David Paradiso runs Paradiso CrossFit and Paradiso CrossFit Venice in Southern California, two affiliates with 400 full-time members and 100 part-time members. There are seven full-time coaches, including David and his wife, as well as three part-time coaches, and an additional three coaches who help out from time to time.

Paradiso's entire business has been built on the concept of helping his coaches make a good living. In fact, Paradiso pays himself the same amount he pays his full-time coaches because he sees investing in them as necessary for long-term growth.

Paradiso's priority is security.

"One of the things I am working to change is that our coaches do not have to depend on their private clients to survive," Paradiso said. "I believe this adds additional stress due to the uncertainty and instability and takes away from the coaches working as a team for the good of the community and the gym as a whole."

Instead, Paradiso is providing his coaches with a steady, stable income—including medical benefits and vacation pay—that allows them to save for retirement, all the while ensuring they're working manageable hours.

Currently, Paradiso pays his hourly coaches \$25 to \$30 an hour, and those on salary earn \$4,500 a month. Salaried coaches earn an additional \$1,000 to \$2,000 for any private training they do.

The opportunity to avoid a ceiling on earnings is also important to Paradiso. One of his coaches, James McCoy, also runs and manages the Venice Barbell Club, and another one of his coaches has a full-time personal-training service, from which he keeps 100 percent of his earnings.

"This allows him to keep his prices low and ... us to increase the value of our membership," Paradiso said.

Paradiso also has coaches involved with nutritional services, a program for competitive athletes and a functional-movement-screening service.

“We want to change the status quo for how trainers make a living.”

—David Paradiso

Like Ellis, Paradiso had to take a risk by putting his coaches' pay ahead of his own, but he knows it's what he needs for long-term stability and growth.

“When we sat down and thought about the future, we saw that we would very quickly run into limitations (if we didn't invest in our coaches enough),” he said.

“We want to change the status quo for how trainers make a living. I come from the restaurant industry and have often used the analogy of bartenders vs. managers for our long-term approach,” he said.

He explained bartenders can make several hundred dollars cash a night working just four or five hours, while the manager makes considerably less in the short term.

“The bartender scoffs at the thought of being a manager. There is no way he is going to give up the cash for that deal,” he continued. “But years go by and all of a sudden the bartender is getting a bit older, getting burned out. He hasn't acquired any new skills, and the thought of continuing to bartend and hustle into their 50s becomes a scary thought.”

This is the concept Paradiso is applying to the lifelong fitness coach. He wants to create a place for the 50-year-old fitness coach.

Right now, in Paradiso's experience, most trainers are focused on the short-term “hustling” lifestyle, and they



Courtesy of David Paradiso

Investing long term, David Paradiso (in red) of Paradiso CrossFit pays his coaches the same salary he pays himself.



Courtesy of Brian Strump

The ultimate goal for any affiliate is excellence, which results in fitter clients and financial success for affiliate owners and their trainers.

don't always get involved in the "non-fun, non-coaching" side of the business, Paradiso said. By offering salaried coaches benefits, vacation pay and an opportunity to do more than just coach, he has his coaches' future in mind. The message is simple: "Commit to your profession, and to Paradiso CrossFit, and you will find that it gives back," he said.

Part of this commitment to the profession as a lifelong career involves education and certifications—staying ahead of the curve.

"I believe CrossFit is doing the most important thing, which is changing the cultural attitudes toward the need for strength-and-conditioning training and adding a need for professional trainers," he said.

And on the coaches' end, Paradiso thinks it's important for them to start their education early, go through years of training and apprentice work, and learn more about anatomy, exercise physiology and programming. The resulting knowledge and expertise warrant a professional wage—Paradiso's ultimate goal.

"(In five years), all of my current coaches will be working in some type of management role, (with) a lot of money in the bank and a plan for retirement," he said.

Experiment to Create Excellence

Affiliate owners can find a host of ways to compensate staff members. Hourly rates or trading coaching for a membership are perhaps the simplest, but affiliate owners are always experimenting to find out what works best for their businesses, and many have developed more creative ways to pay staff members.

The overall goal, of course, is to create and retain a strong group of coaches who can improve human movement and produce fitter clients. When that happens, the financial success of the business is almost certain to follow.



About the Author

Emily Beers is a CrossFit Journal staff writer and editor.

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Mud in Your Eye

Mud runs, obstacle-course races and novelty endurance events are growing in popularity, and some CrossFit gyms now cater to participants.

By Chris Cooper

August 2014



Courtesy of Arianne d'Entremont

Obstacle-course racing gets under your skin. And in your mouth.

This year, hundreds of thousands of racers will shiver and shamble their way through icy mud, receive mild electric shocks and perhaps even risk **infections borne by feces** this year. Some will be swathed in capes, others will wear Viking helmets and display hard-won abs. Some will complete the course, and some will be unable to overcome all the obstacles. But almost everyone will pose for a finish-line picture, gritty and grinning, and go home happy.

1 of 5

"It's not the same as CrossFit, but there's an overlap," said Rich Borgatti, owner of Mountain Strength CrossFit. "Lots of new people come in to train for these races, and we tell them CrossFit is the next step."

Borgatti is a frequent competitor in mud runs. He offers obstacle-course training groups to help prepare racers for competition and introduce them to CrossFit.

While some consider obstacle races a cesspool of liquid waste and liability, many CrossFit gym owners and athletes see a clear opportunity. Is there a reason to roll out a welcome mat for muddy feet at CrossFit gyms?

Muddying the Fitness Waters

Obstacles, man-made or otherwise, have always been inherent to the sport of cross-country running, and cross-country runners have been adept on mixed terrain for hundreds of years. Their endurance has always been accompanied by agility, and adding larger obstacles such as cargo nets, walls and monkey bars might create a need for coordination, strength and power.

"Like in fitness, you look first at the task: What needs to be done?" Borgatti said. "You need to get up and over walls, move large loads long distances as quickly as possible. The general overall philosophy is similar to CrossFit."

Common goals aside, an endurance event can't address all 10 components of fitness. The largest gap is the most obvious: Obstacle-course racers, even the elite, aren't traditionally known for their strength and power. Borgatti believes the introduction of CrossFit would round out their fitness.

"Progressive resistance training would definitely help them," he said. "All of these races are on hills. People forget the biggest obstacle in the race is the mountain it's placed on. Incorporating strength training for the racers will make them a lot better."

A poster boy for the obstacle-race set, Hunter McIntyre is ripped, tan and big—far bigger than most high-level racers. At 190 lb., McIntyre regularly lines up against elite endurance athletes weighing 40 lb. less. But strength is a great equalizer, he said.

"At the world championships, we had a double-black-diamond climb. Half a mile up, half a mile down at a 50-degree-incline. We had 70-lb. sandbags to carry," McIntyre said. Far behind until that point, McIntyre made his move.

"I cleared 30 of them on that obstacle because of my strength."

He added: "Some of these guys run a 14-minute 5K. I run a 15:30 5K, but I also have a 300-lb. back squat and a 2:45 Fran."

**"Some of these guys run a
14-minute 5K. I run a 15:30 5K,
but I also have a 300-lb. back squat
and a 2:45 Fran."**

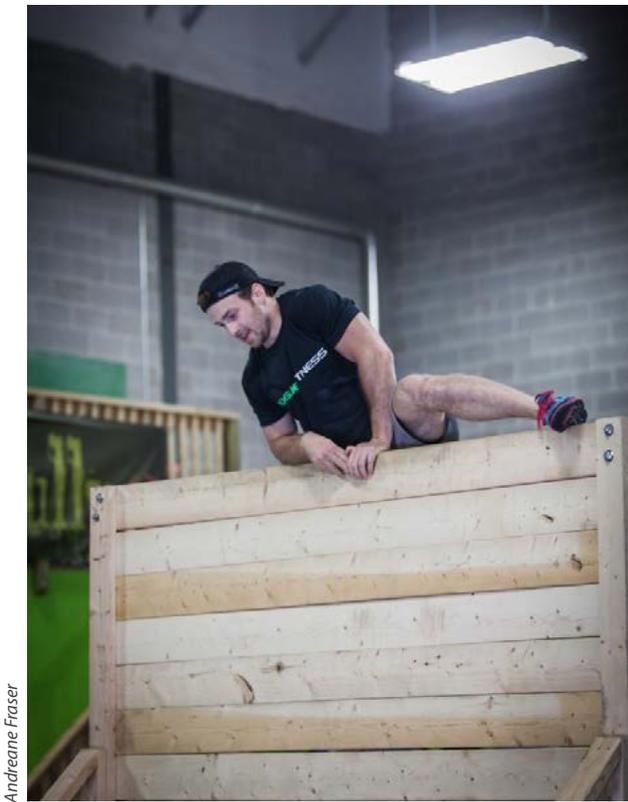
—Hunter McIntyre

Obstacle-course racers seeking improvement—or a first-time completion—might benefit from CrossFit. And Borgatti believes CrossFit gyms can also benefit from local races.



Courtesy of Spartan Race

Dylan Davis (left) of CrossFit Bonniebrook tries to introduce mud runners to CrossFit.



Andreame Fraser

Strength and power developed with CrossFit can be an asset when running is broken up with obstacles.

It's all Downhill From Here

Obstacle-course designers serve a market familiar to box owners: recreational athletes seeking a novel workout they can do with friends. In other words, CrossFit might be the best cure for their itch, but they have to try the powder first.

Offering an obstacle-course training group as an introduction to CrossFit is catching on in some gyms, with athletes going both ways—the racers use CrossFit to prepare, and CrossFit athletes like the opportunity to test themselves. Some competitions, such as Spartan Race, have branded themselves as a “test of fitness,” which is right up a CrossFit athlete’s alley, and others are simply participatory challenges.

Tough Mudder, which had 750,000 participants in 2013 according to [The Wall Street Journal](#), begins every race with a chant: “I understand that the Tough Mudder is not a race but a challenge. I put teamwork and camaraderie before my course time.”

Clock or no clock, the event bills itself as “probably the toughest event on the planet.”

“Spartan Race is an actual race,” Borgatti said. “It’s timed. You get splits; there’s standardization. They try to hold races at the same venues every time. If you’re an elite racer, you can really benchmark yourself against other elite racers.”

Borgatti continued: “In a Tough Mudder, the obstacles can be bypassed with no penalty. You can just walk right past them and have a nice day hike. If you do that in a Spartan Race, it’s 30 burpees before you move on. There are judges and referees. CrossFit lets me measure my performance the same way.”

Spartan Race also has easier and harder races—the sprint, the beast and the super—featuring longer routes and higher obstacles, which add progression.

Borgatti believes the appeal of mud runs is broad enough to entice not only novice athletes but also the competition minded. Some of his clients at Mountain Strength CrossFit now seek out local races after meeting other new clients who are training for events.

“When we started these clinics, almost none of my clients did these events. Now we’re seeing a third of our gym enter into these OCRs (obstacle-course races). As more people see it as an event to train for, more are going to bring friends and family in to do these clinics,” he said.

He believes the mountainous courses provide an opportunity to test fitness outside the gym environment, and they often appeal to a different sort of athlete.

“These aren’t the same people who are going to compete at regionals, where the weights are heavy and everyone’s getting bigger. These races bring in athletes who are more comfortable with body-weight movements and running. It’s a different mindset,” Borgatti said.

However, some regional—and even CrossFit Games—athletes are keen on mud runs like Spartan Race. In 2013, the [Spartan Head to Head Race Challenge](#) featured popular CrossFitters Tommy Hackenbruck, Christmas Abbott, Jenn Jones, Mary Lampas, Marcus Hendren and Jennifer Smith.

McIntyre, who is on the covers of several obstacle-course magazines, takes the idea a step further.

“I think these (obstacle-course racers) are the truest athletes,” he said. “You’re constantly being challenged by a new movements. Running is a fundamental movement.

He added: "I tell people to get out there and see what they're really made of."

Removing Barriers to Entry

The [Spartan Race website](#) features a "workout of the day" for its racers. Burpees figure prominently, as do box jumps and rope climbs. Adventure racers already speak the language of CrossFit, if a different dialect.

"In the elite heat at the Spartan Race in Philly, I don't think there was anyone who wasn't a CrossFitter," said Dylan Davis, owner of CrossFit Bonniebrook.

"I think it's a very synergistic relationship. It's CrossFit applied to a short-term, specific goal," said Borgatti. "There's not a race every month. You can introduce someone to your gym through a six-week training program before the race and then keep them in CrossFit after that."

**"I add the obstacles into our
CrossFit WODs, and they love it."**

—Rich Borgatti

The additional revenue from obstacle-course training groups has meant new equipment for Borgatti's CrossFit members.

"They like the extra ropes for climbing, the four-foot wall behind the building. I add the obstacles into our CrossFit WODs, and they love it," he said.

Corporate groups are also being drawn to obstacle courses as team-building experiments. While managers may be drawn to the team-building potential of conquering the mountains, they're also risk averse and would no doubt welcome programs that prepare office workers to drop from a wall without injury.

"The biggest injury risk I see is not how to conquer the obstacles but how to get off," said Borgatti. "Rolled ankles, busted knees—my goal is to help people train to avoid all these injuries that could possibly happen. That was the biggest point to put out there to groups: I'm going to get you through any race safely."

Borgatti has been invited into schools through the Spartan 300 tour. This summer, he'll be teaching the staff and children at a summer camp how to run through trails safely. And he tells them all about CrossFit.

"This all came through teaching obstacle-course racing and CrossFit together," he said.

Davis also uses his platform to encourage mud runners to try CrossFit.

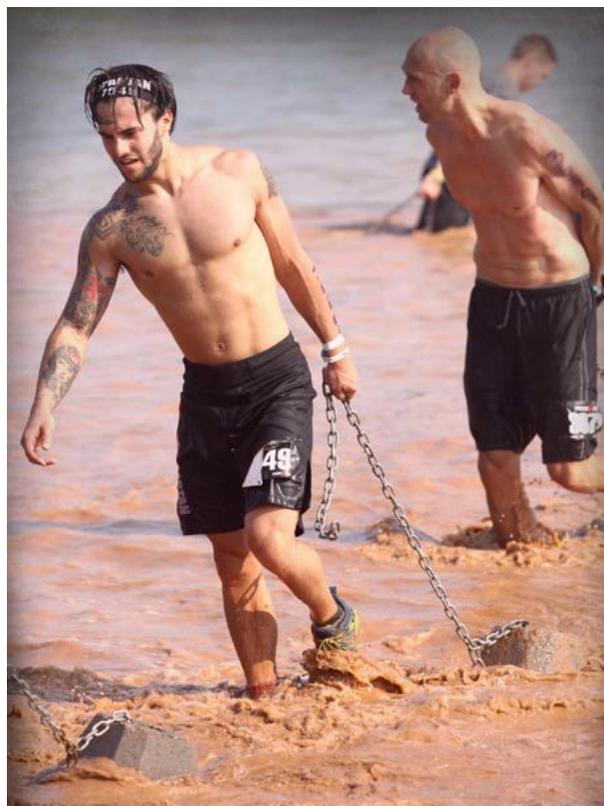
"They're being sold this 1984 bodybuilding baloney," he said. "I tell people to go to the affiliate map and find a gym."

Though not an affiliate owner, McIntyre agrees there's potential—and need—to teach basic movements to obstacle racers.

"You can get a lot of clientele out of the CrossFit Endurance platform," he said. "You need to teach the world that squats, pull-ups and dips are fundamental for any athlete."

Training the Racers

Brian Mackenzie of CrossFit Endurance coached McIntyre for six months last year. He said programming for obstacle racers doesn't vary greatly from programming for a regular CrossFit athlete.



Courtesy of Spartan Race

Sometimes the name "mud run" is only half correct.

"We're seeing a lot of these OCR kids, and they're decent CrossFitters," Mackenzie said. "It's just where their holes are. (McIntyre's) sport-specific work was just the obstacle-type stuff. We're doing CrossFit."

The feeling of triumph when a new skill is mastered is also common to both racers and CrossFit athletes. And Borgatti believes building a broad base is the best tactic in either case.

"You don't want to train for the obstacles specifically," he said. "You want 'obstacle immunity': to be strong and flexible enough to conquer anything placed in front of you."

"You want to be able to face down the unknown and unknowable."

Despite the variety in obstacles, one element remains the same across virtually all races: a long climb up and a quick descent.

"Anyone doing trail-running events, ultras, OCR, the hills up and down are always a part of training. It's never, 'We're just going up.'" Mackenzie said. "It's just as much of a skill to run downhill as it is to run up."

"Right now, running is still arguably the most dangerous sport out there," he continued. "People get injured at these events because they're not running well, not because they're doing something crazy."

He added: "We have a place where they can address their running skill."

Davis was approached by Spartan Race to create a series of videos featuring "core" workouts.

"I'm providing different variations to sit-ups," Davis said. "I'm trying to give them an intro to CrossFit. I showed them butterfly sit-ups and then tricked a couple of thousand people into doing Annie."

Finish Line

Should a CrossFit gym offer to help the future toughest mudders?

Racers who sign up for mud runs and adventure courses seek a challenge and something they can do with their friends. They're essentially looking for the same experience they can find in a CrossFit gym. And their specific needs—work capacity, balance, agility and speed—can best be built across broad time and modal domains with a program that emphasizes general physical preparedness.

Borgatti's strategy of inviting racers to his gym to train and then "graduating" them into his CrossFit classes has meant dozens of new gym members. Preparation for an adventure race will be a new entry point to fitness for thousands, and CrossFit affiliate owners have found they can provide everything the racers need—except maybe antibiotics and tooth whitener.

About the Author

Chris Cooper is a CrossFit Journal contributor. He owns *CrossFit Catalyst* in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, Canada.



Arianne d'Entremont

Rich Borgatti hosts obstacle-racing classes at Mountain Strength CrossFit, and his members get to play with new toys as a side benefit.

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Pulling for all You're Worth

Want to get better at strict pull-ups? Bill Starr says the secret is simple programming and a lot of dedication.

By Bill Starr

August 2014



All photos: Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

In the CrossFit Journal article [The Arms Race and Olympic Lifting](#), I stated I didn't think Olympic lifters should do specific work on their biceps. I noted that these athletes get plenty of work for their biceps through all the heavy pulling they do regularly: power cleans, power snatches, full cleans and snatches, snatch and clean high pulls, and heavy shrugs. Those heavy pulling movements will strengthen the prime movers of the upper arms: the brachioradialis and brachialis.

Furthermore, when Olympic lifters do any type of curls, it causes the muscles to peak, and that prevents them from being able to rack cleans correctly.

1 of 7

However, one exercise works the biceps very directly yet does not interfere with racking a clean. This is because it does not build bulging biceps but rather strong, elongated muscles. It's a basic exercise that has been a part of strength training since Milo lifted that calf: pull-ups.

Bodybuilders have always used pull-ups to develop a wide spread in their upper backs, and many strength athletes include chins in their routines to help them enhance their pulls. Chins hit the lats like no other exercise.

Pull-ups are also used frequently as a test of arm strength. At high schools and universities, pull-ups were always part of the fitness tests. They are also often used as a prerequisite to qualify an applicant for jobs in fire departments, police forces and many government branches, such as the United States Secret Service. And it goes without saying that every branch of the military has always been high on chins.

With a bit of imagination, you can figure out how to chin on a wide variety of equipment. Over the years, I have done pull-ups on football goal posts by jumping up and grasping the crossbar, and I've done them on the side rails of those

horizontal ladders on playgrounds, the framing above a doorway or garage, and, in a pinch, sturdy tree limbs.

Done correctly, pull-ups can strengthen your entire upper body: arms, shoulders, chest and upper back.

Usually, finding a way to do pull-ups isn't really necessary because most gyms have bars or at least power racks in which chins can be done on the crossbar between the two uprights. Small chinning bars can also be fixed in an open doorway, but the shortcoming is they do not allow the athlete to use a wide grip, and I'm partial to the wide grip in chinning.

Done correctly, pull-ups can strengthen your entire upper body: arms, shoulders, chest and upper back. They are the perfect exercise for anyone who wants stronger biceps but does not want the development to have a negative influence on the rack position for a clean or reduce flexibility in the upper arms.

Pull-Ups for Everyone

Females have always struggled with this exercise, as have young athletes, simply because they haven't developed sufficient strength in their upper bodies. Heavy strength athletes usually shun them because they do so poorly at them, but the truth of the matter is heavyweights can greatly increase the number of chins they can do if they work them hard enough.

You may be skeptical because most likely you have never seen a big man do many pull-ups, so I'll tell you the story about one of my favorite strength athletes, one I trained at the University of Hawaii. Charlie Aui, a native of Oahu, Hawaii, was the starting offensive guard on the football team. Everyone had a nickname at UH, and Charlie was dubbed "The Thing" for a Marvel comic-book character. This was shortened to the pidgin version "Ting." Charlie weighted 255 and loved lifting weights and getting stronger. While I had to prod and encourage many of the members of the football team to train consistently and work hard, the problem I had with Charlie was he would try to do way too much too soon.

When I started the football team on the Big Three—bench press, back squat and power clean—it only took them



Even if a bar isn't available, creative athletes can usually find a way to do pull-ups.



When training for strength, Bill Starr recommends using a pronated grip and limiting lower-body movement as much as possible.

about an hour to go through that basic workout. Everyone made gains rapidly, except for Charlie, which baffled me because he was, indeed, giving every session 100 percent effort. He was working like a demon but not making the real progress of his teammates. Then one evening I walked to the weight room to get some notes from my office and found Charlie working out for the second time that day.

When I asked him what he was doing, he explained that the routine I had him doing just wasn't hard enough so he had been coming in later on and adding in his former program. I sat him down and went over the concept of slowly but steadily building up the total workload over weeks and months and how it cannot be rushed. What he was doing was keeping himself in a constant state of overtraining, and gains do not come to an overworked body.

Once he started doing just what I outlined for him each week, his progress was amazing, and from then on Charlie was sold on my advice about weight training. As his lifts soared, he became my No. 1 fan.

He was an excellent athlete—quick, very coordinated—and he was getting stronger by the day. We didn't have a

great team, mostly because we didn't have a good head coach, but Charlie still got picked up by the San Diego Chargers as a free agent. That was good. What wasn't good was the team had already signed three players to fill the slot Charlie would be trying out for. Those three players had already received bonus money, so the odds of Charlie beating them for a spot on the team were very, very slim.

We discussed his situation, and I told him he needed to be able to do something to attract the attention of the coaches, something no one else could do. He was already in top condition. I had been pushing him on all the lifts as if he were getting ready for the Olympic Trials. I knew that most players heading to summer training camps do not arrive in peak condition and plan on using the camp itself to round into playing shape.

I decided Charlie should use chins to get noticed by the coaches. When I assisted Tommy Suggs at the summer training camp for the Houston Oilers, every player had to do a set of pull-ups before he went through the drills for that session. The most I saw linemen do was 3, so I wanted Charlie to work hard on chinning and run his numbers up high enough that he would stand out big time.

When he started on the program I gave him, the most chins he could do at one time was 2. I told him it didn't matter where he started just so long as he progressed. He did the program three times a week on his non-training days so he could devote all his concentration and energy to chinning.

When he started ... the most chins Charlie could do at one time was 2. I told him it didn't matter where he started just so long as he progressed.

And every time he came in the weight room, he would knock out 1 set of chins as part of his warm-up routine.



Once an athlete can do 15-20 pull-ups, it's time to add some resistance.

The program was remarkably simple, as most good programs are. It consisted of 4 sets of as many as he could do on every set. His goal was to add at least 1 rep to the total at each workout. For example, at his first chinning session of the week, he did these reps: 4, 3, 2, 2. That's a total of 11 reps. At his next chinning session, he had to do at least 12 reps. Where the increase came didn't matter. Usually it was on the first set because he had the most energy then. But on some days, it was the last sets, in which he kicked it in gear to up his total. In a couple of sessions, he just did not have enough juice to make an increase. On those days, I had him add in 1 more set to nudge that total upward.

I made sure that he used perfect form on every rep. He would fully extend his arms as he lowered his body down from the bar, and he would hesitate for a brief second at the bottom before pulling himself up to touch the bar with his chin. No recoiling out of the bottom, no kicking or squirming around. Each rep was done in a controlled, smooth motion, both up and down. Once he established his technique, gains came quickly. I also had him alter his grip slightly on each set, starting with as wide a grip as possible on the rather narrow bar that was attached to the wall, then moving his hands in a few inches for each of the following sets. That small change brings some different muscles and attachments into the game and helps gain that additional rep.

Everyone in the weight room knew why Charlie was working so hard on the chins, and they joined him and encouraged him at every session. I made sure he took plenty of time to reset between sets. There was no reason to hurry them. He would just do a single set when he chinned at the training camp. Slowly but steadily, his numbers climbed higher and higher until he was doing 55 reps in 4 sets. When he arrived at the training camp, he was able to do 16 reps on 1 set. And these were clean, picture-perfect reps.

As he and I had hoped, it did catch the attention of the coaches, and all the other players as well. None of them had ever seen someone who weighed over 250 lb. do anywhere near that many chins. Everyone at the camp instantly understood that this Hawaiian was one strong puppy.

And because Charlie had arrived in superb physical condition, he breezed through the two-a-days and had enough left in the tank at the end of the sessions to stand out in the sprints. The offensive coach really wanted to keep Charlie on the team, but there just didn't seem to be any open spots. Then fate stepped in on Charlie's behalf. All three draft choices got injured, leaving Charlie the last man

standing. Much to the amazement of his friends, family and teammates in Hawaii, Charlie made the team and played three years for the Chargers. It's a story with a happy ending, yet it would never have happened if Charlie had decided it was impossible to chin in the mid-teens and didn't put in the time and effort to improve that exercise.

Keep It Simple

I have also helped individuals up the numbers of chins they can do by adding some resistance. I only do this with athletes who are already chinning in the 15-20 range. At a workout, I have them wear ankle weights or hold a 5-lb. dumbbell between their knees. When any form of resistance is added, the chins have to be done very deliberately. That extra weight puts a new form of stress on the elbows, and any rebounding off the bottom is potentially harmful to those delicate joints.

Now I'm going to go to the other end of the strength spectrum and provide some ideas for helping very weak athletes become stronger in pull-ups. For the athlete who

cannot do even a single chin, I do this: I have him, or her, hang from the chinning bar so the arms are completely extended. Then I have the athlete pull up as high as he can. This may only be 2 or 3 inches. Once he gets as high as he is able, I have him hold that position for a three count, then lower himself so his arms are straight once again. Depending on his level of arm strength, I have him do anywhere from 3 to 6 reps in this manner. After a rest, I have him do it again until I see he's out of gas.

At each subsequent chinning session, I get the athlete to pull himself just a bit higher than the time before. Then I do the same thing for the finish of the movement. I have the athlete lock onto the chinning bar with the chin over the bar, then lower the body a few inches before pulling back up to that starting position. He does this over and over until his strength gives out. Finally, I do that same routine for the middle position so all the muscles involved in chinning get some attention.

This is slow going, and many get discouraged and quit before they are ever able to do a full chin-up. But if they stay



Several drills can help an athlete gain the strength to perform pull-ups. On the left, the athlete pulls as high as she can, then holds for a three count before lowering. On the right, she does the same thing from the top down, lowering as far as she can, holding for a three count and then pulling herself back up.

with it, they will find a day eventually comes when they can do a chin-up. Once that barrier has been overcome, the numbers start climbing almost magically.

How about the practice of helping an athlete chin by lifting him through the sticking point? I'm not a proponent of assisting athletes on any lifts. I call it "all-you syndrome." When I hear a spotter shouting "it's all you!" as he helps a lifter finish a bench press, incline or squat, I know it definitely is not all him. In my mind, if someone touches a bar to add assistance to any lift, that lift does not count. Instead of providing assistance, I'd rather the athlete take longer to achieve his goal of doing a chin-up on his own.

What it takes is determination.

What it takes is determination. I had a small female basketball player who decided she was going to do 3 pull-ups before the end of the semester. Every time she came in the weight room, she went straight to the power rack, climbed up and

hung from the crossbar. She would lower her body and try to pull herself back up, over and over, week after week, never quite making it all the way up to the bar. But she persisted, and after she finally made that first chin-up, more came quickly. At the end of the semester, she was able to do 6 reps—twice as many as she set out to do. She was extremely proud of her accomplishment, and rightly so.

Whenever an athlete improves the strength in his upper body and back, he discovers that it carries over to chin-ups. The best exercises to help increase chinning numbers are power cleans, power snatches, clean- and snatch-grip high pulls, and overhead presses. I've known some Olympic lifters who were able to do 15 chins the very first time they tried.

Use the overhand grip. While the underhand grip hits the biceps more directly, you cannot do as many reps, and the overhand grip builds strength in the arms, shoulders and upper back much better than the underhand version.

If the chinning bar is fairly long, do that first set with a grip as wide as you can manage, then move your hands in slightly on the other sets, and finish with your arms vertical.



Starr recommends using a wide grip for your first set and then bringing the hands in for the following sets.

I always used chins as an auxiliary exercise at the end of my workout. But if someone is trying to improve the number of pull-ups he can do, he should give the exercise priority and do it first in the program.

I'll finish with a story of another determined athlete. A field-hockey player who had been doing my strength program that spring came to me for advice on how to improve her chinning ability. She was scheduled to take a fitness test in six weeks to become a firefighter in New York City, New York. There were tons of applicants, only a few spots were open, and the test was tough. She had greatly improved her overall strength in the offseason and wasn't concerned about doing well on the various physical tests. Except for pull-ups. She could do 2, and the minimum requirement was 8.

I gave her the same routine I used with Charlie, and she put every ounce of energy she had into that program. And she got results. Once she built a solid base, the gains came rapidly. She weighed about 150 lb., so it was not a cakewalk by any stretch of the imagination for her to add a half-dozen reps in just six weeks. She did 1 rep over the requirement and was the only female applicant who got accepted to train to become a full-time firefighter.

Adding just 1 rep to your overall total for 4 sets is not at all demanding, yet if you continue to do that for several months, your numbers are going to go up appreciably, and the strength you gain doing pull-ups will have a positive influence on every upper-body exercise in your strength program. Give this program a try, and you will be nicely surprised at the results.



About the Author

Bill Starr coached at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, the 1970 Olympic Weightlifting World Championship in Columbus, Ohio, and the 1975 World Powerlifting Championships in Birmingham, England. He was selected as head coach of the 1969 team that competed in the Tournament of Americas in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, where the United States won the team title, making him the first active lifter to be head coach of an international Olympic weightlifting team. Starr is the author of the books "The Strongest Shall Survive: Strength Training for Football" and "Defying Gravity," which can be found at [The Aasgaard Company Bookstore](#).



Anyone who works hard at pull-ups will see improvement over time.