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High on CrossFit

Richard Hidalgo of Peru has made it his mission to climb the 14 highest mountains on the planet, and he's using CrossFit to prepare. Jaime Arashiro reports.

By Jaime Arashiro

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All images: Courtesy of Richard Hidalgo

The world of high-altitude mountaineering poses challenges: cracks, seracs, frigid temperatures, storms, avalanches and mountain sickness, not to mention the risk of developing cerebral or pulmonary edema.

On our planet, 14 mountains are higher than 8,000 meters (26,247 ft.) above sea level. They're known as the 14 "eight-thousanders," and all of them are located in the Himalayan and Karakorum mountain ranges in Asia.

1 of 4

Richard Hidalgo, a 45-year-old mountain climber from Peru, wants to crown all 14 peaks, and he's choosing to attempt the daunting climbs without supplemental oxygen.

The challenges of high-altitude mountaineering are often unknown and unknowable, so Hidalgo has chosen CrossFit as his training method.

Finding CrossFit

Since 2006, Hidalgo has made seven expeditions to the Himalayas and has held four summits already: Shisha Pangma (26,289 feet) in 2006, Cho Oyu (26,096 feet) in 2007, Manaslu (26,750 feet) in 2011, and most recently Annapurna I (26,545 feet) earlier this year.



After getting serious about CrossFit, Hidalgo found his stamina improved considerably during his climbs.

Hidalgo has received awards from his country's Congress and from the Lima Municipal Government for his mountaineering achievements. Several Peruvian magazines have featured Hidalgo, and in July 2012 he was chosen as one of "Seven Successful Peruvians" by *Poder* (which translates to "power") magazine in a special edition to commemorate National Day, the country's independence celebration on July 28.

He embraces a way of climbing called "alpine style." It can be described as fast and light and doesn't include the use of supplemental oxygen or high-altitude porters. The style also forsakes the fixed ropes and stocked camps of the expedition (or siege) style of mountaineering.

"I want to do it my best way, in the best style, with the best ethics," Hidalgo said of why he chooses to climb in a self-sufficient manner.

Reinhold Messner, the first man to ascend the 14 eight-thousanders, calls this style "renunciation alpinism." Ultimately, what he means is that this minimalist way of climbing is ethical as it helps maintain the unassailable nature of the mountain. Hidalgo will use less technology and gadgets, and he focuses more on developing his own skills and physical capabilities—much like what goes on in a CrossFit box.

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That's why I continued
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— Richard Hidalgo

Hidalgo started dabbling in CrossFit in 2008, but it was a sporadic practice that had him doing occasional body-weight workouts like Cindy, Chelsea or Tabata This. After years of training at traditional gyms, Hidalgo, a sponsored athlete in Peru, was more accustomed to conventional methods of training.

In December 2010, Hidalgo, who lives in the city of Huaraz and works as a high-altitude mountain guide for part of the year, had become somewhat familiar with some of the CrossFit lifts, but he could hardly front-squat a barbell loaded with just 55 lb. This was due to his lack of flexibility and slight postural kyphosis, which had been aggravated by carrying backpacks working as a guide.

It was not until recently that Hidalgo became truly immersed in CrossFit. He started training regularly in 2011 at CrossFit Peru before his expedition to Manaslu, a summit he reached in a record time of 15 hours.

"I felt very strong. That's why I continued towards the top without stopping," he said of how he chose not to rest at Camp 4.

Preparation to Take on Annapurna

During the last quarter of 2011, Hidalgo began preparing to ascend Annapurna I, the eight-thousander with the highest death rate. Of those who attempt Annapurna I, 38 percent never come back.

At the beginning of 2012, Hidalgo undertook a 10-week training program. On Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, he did a workout of the day. He took Mondays and Fridays off and used the weekends to train his skills in the mountains and achieve acclimatization, a vital factor at higher altitudes. Some weeks he skipped a rest day and did CrossFit instead.

After successfully topping out on Annapurna I, Hidalgo reviewed recent performances and confirmed that there was a noticeable difference from his pre-CrossFit expeditions.

His weekend climbs were above 16,000 ft. and averaged four hours each. Sometimes he did a second workout immediately after a mountaineering-specific training day.



Danger lurks at every turn in these high-altitude climbs, and Hidalgo found CrossFit gave him the physical and mental confidence necessary to proceed.

After successfully topping out on Annapurna I, Hidalgo reviewed recent performances and confirmed that there was a noticeable difference from his pre-CrossFit expeditions. Both at Manaslu in 2011 and at Annapurna in April 2012, he ascended at a higher pace than ever before. He credits CrossFit with helping him reach these summits.

"CrossFit gave me a very high level of fitness. It gave me a lot of trust Confidence when climbing comes in your physical condition," Hidalgo said of how CrossFit helped his mental and physical games.

Last April, there were avalanches at Annapurna, between camps two and three. A climber perished in one of them, forcing half the remaining climbers at or above the base camp to refrain from attempting to summit. Only eight decided to carry on: a Hungarian, a Swiss, two Czechs, two Spaniards, one Iranian and Hidalgo. Of the latter climbers, two of them couldn't peak, and of the six who successfully reached the summit, four came down with frostbitten hands and feet.

Hidalgo admits he experienced some inconvenience: he had a strong pain in both feet while descending from the summit because of the -30 C temperature. He had similar symptoms on other Himalayans, but he recovered quickly this time, which he attributes to his training.

One of the other challenges he faced was carrying equipment. It's no small feat bearing the burden of a tent, a sleeping bag, food, a stove and cooking tools, cooking fuel, water, rope, climbing clamps, a change of clothes, personal hygiene products, first-aid kit, ice axes and more for thousands of feet at altitude. But because of Hidalgo's improved fitness, he found carrying his 66-lb. backpack much easier than on previous climbs.

Not only did he endure the many burdens, but Hidalgo also relished in what his body was able to do. At one of his mountain training outings, he confessed that he is enjoying feeling like he is "becoming more powerful than ever."

Next Stop: Everest

Hidalgo's biggest challenge awaits him in March 2013: Everest, the world's highest mountain (29,029 feet). He has failed two Everest summit attempts in the past, and during one attempt, he had to stop just 1,640 feet from the top.

"When I arrived at Camp 4, the snow condition was very bad, and I couldn't stay any longer up there. I stayed in that altitude for 36 hours without oxygen and then finally decided to come back," he remembered of his last Everest attempt.



Kettlebell swings are never easy, but imagine doing them at altitude.

The reason Hidalgo chose to come back so close to reaching the summit was because he always puts safety first.

"Life is first. The mountain will be there all the time, and I can go back anytime," he said.

Anytime for Hidalgo means this spring, and he's hopeful for a different outcome.

"I think that I know my body much better now, and I know what kind of training I need to do to get the summit on Everest," he said.

When he does attempt Everest in March, a group of CrossFitters will escort him to the Everest base camp on a 15-day trek, where they will perform workouts at heights ranging from 9,800 to 17,300 feet. Some of them are already following CrossFit programming at high elevations, while others will begin their high-elevation training 10 weeks before the expedition.

Although Hidalgo is used to climbing solo, he is now counting on a community to help arrive at the highest place in the world. Literally.



About the Author

Jaime Arashiro is an anthropologist and the owner of CrossFit Peru, which he opened in 2008. He holds CrossFit Level 1 and CrossFit Endurance certificates. A recreational climber, Arashiro enjoys exploring the benefits of both high-altitude climbing and CrossFit and is currently working on a research project about the impact of implementing CrossFit training at altitude for non-climbers.