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Olympic Weightlifting Renaissance

USA Weightlifting has seen increases in its number of athletes and coaches over the past four years. Longtime USAW members say the reason is CrossFit. Andréa Maria Cecil reports.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

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All images: Staff/CrossFit Journal

In four years, the number of USA Weightlifting athletes has grown 30 percent. Meanwhile, the number of USAW coaches has catapulted by 139 percent in the same time period.

"There's a situation for weightlifting now that has never existed in the 20 years that I've been in the sport, and that is due to the CrossFit explosion," said Ursula Garza Papandrea, a senior international USAW coach and technical director of the organization's board of directors.

"CrossFit is definitely, definitely popularizing Olympic weightlifting. And that is something that is huge for us. It's making it something that's relatable to more people. ... The CrossFit community has been able to bring in way more people than weightlifting ever could."

More people than ever before are now familiar with a snatch and clean and jerk, and that's attributable to more than 5,000 CrossFit affiliates worldwide, said Kendrick Farris, the only U.S. man to qualify for this year's Olympics in London. He competed in the 84-kg class.

"I think it's brought a lot of awareness ... of what we're doing," he said. "I think a lot of people know what Olympic lifting is all about now."



Coach Mike Burgener has been instrumental in bridging the gap between CrossFit and Olympic weightlifting with his fantastic coaching and infectious enthusiasm.

Fewer are the instances when someone confuses bodybuilding with weightlifting, Farris added.

"I don't get that question as much anymore," he said.

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—Ursula Garza Papandrea

Before going to his second Olympics in 2008 in Beijing, Chad Vaughn spent some time training at CrossFit Plano in Texas. His coach, Richard Flemming, was teaching weightlifting classes at the box. It was there that Vaughn experienced something new.

"For the first time in my life, there were people that were watching me train," he said.

Vaughn felt welcomed.

"It was a community that I wanted to be a part of," he said. "I've not met a CrossFitter yet ... that I haven't had more in common with than most of the people in our own sport."

CrossFitters are willing to work hard and are eager to learn, Vaughn noted.

"Just how they pay attention to all the little things—anything that will make them better. They study (them), they put them into play. It's those qualities—that CrossFit personality."

Vaughn added: "I really found a home."

Emerging From Obscurity

In 2004, Mike Burgener was a full-time teacher who was also instructing USAW certifications. That year he got a call from Greg Glassman, CrossFit's Founder and CEO.

At the time, Glassman was interested in getting a handful of CrossFit trainers USAW certified, Burgener said.

"Next thing you know, he called me to ask me if I would come with him to go to Golden, Colo.," the 66-year-old recalled. "A few weeks later he asked me to be part of his team."

Burgener started doing a handful of CrossFit Olympic Weightlifting Trainer courses a year. Four years later, that number grew to 14 courses a year, so the former Marine retired from his day job.

“CrossFit has been the best thing that has ever happened to weightlifting.”

—Mike Burgener

“I didn’t think I’d ever retire from teaching,” Burgener said.

In 2009, CrossFit Seminar Staff taught 40 Olympic Weightlifting Trainer courses. In 2010, instructors led more than 50 courses.

“This thing started and just—God almighty—took off,” Burgener said. “CrossFit has been the best thing that has ever happened to weightlifting.”

In addition to growing the number of coaches and athletes, CrossFit also has created other positive developments in Olympic weightlifting, said longtime members of the community.

Equipment for the sport has become more affordable, there are more places for athletes to learn the lifts, and it has made “snatch” and “clean and jerk” household words.

“What I think is very important (is CrossFit has) introduced the sport to a larger segment of the population. I think down the road it’s going to be important because you’ve got CrossFitters that are going to become parents of kids that want to become weightlifters,” said Bob Takano, an Olympic weightlifting coach of nearly 40 years and a 2007 inductee into the USA Weightlifting Hall of Fame.

“How it’s going to play out, we still have to wait a few more years to find out. Right now, there’s a lot of favorable interest in weightlifting, and that’s because of CrossFit.”

Historically, Olympic weightlifting in the U.S. has not been popular. That tide is beginning to turn.

“We’re sort of obscured and marginalized,” said Papandrea, the first and only woman and Hispanic to reach USAW’s highest coaching level.

Because of CrossFit, weightlifting’s profile will change, she added.

“In time, we won’t be so marginalized,” Papandrea said. “Right now, (CrossFit is the) one community that is helping us grow.”

These days, it’s common for USAW coaches to teach small, one-day weightlifting seminars.

“Fifteen years ago, there wouldn’t have been an interest for that,” Papandrea emphasized. “We teach seminars truly for people just to enhance their knowledge and to become great weightlifting coaches, and there are people interested in that now—that tells me everything.”

The CrossFit/USAW Open

When the 2010 CrossFit/USAW Open in Colorado Springs, Colo., was announced, there was much excitement throughout the CrossFit community.

The same could not be said for the entire weightlifting community. It was 2009 when USAW higher-ups first heard of CrossFit. At the time, “there was no real movement to try to meet CrossFit halfway” or to discuss the benefit of a partnership, Papandrea said. When the USAW board decided to forge ahead with the CrossFit/USAW event the next year, there were rumblings.

Increasing Numbers Total USAW athletes (as of June 8):

2008: 3,383
2009: 3,753
2010: 3,791
2011: 4,174
2012: 4,410

Total USAW coaches (as of June 19):

2008: 1,855
2009: 2,114
2010: 2,481
2011: 3,531
2012: 4,440

Source: USA Weightlifting



Kendrick Farris, the only male U.S. lifter to compete in the London Olympics, was a guest commentator at the CrossFit/USAW Open in 2010 in Colorado.

“There were people who were completely against it, and it was unfathomable to me. I couldn’t understand why you would be against something that would help with the profile and popularity of a sport that had a low profile and low popularity,” Papandrea said. “Over the years it had been an exclusive sport in that (it was a) small group and it was almost like it we were keeping it that way on purpose.”

USAW did not concentrate its effort on growth and did a poor job of raising awareness of the sport in high schools, in the media and in the community, she noted.

“And CrossFit has (its) own media, and now we’re part of that. CrossFit also has its own community, and now we’re integrated into that,” Papandrea said. “So all the areas that we weren’t addressing in the past were assisted by CrossFit. If we’re smart, (we’ll) continue working with CrossFit to have something that’s mutually beneficial. I think we’re ingrates ... if we don’t try to reciprocate.”

Weightlifting, Burgener and Vaughn said, could learn something from CrossFit.

“To see at the CrossFit gym or even at the CrossFit Games the worst competitor is still getting the same cheers, the support as the No. 1 competitor—that, to me, I wish

weightlifting would take away from CrossFit,” said Burgener, a former U.S. national coach to the Junior Women’s World Championships. “It’s such a dynamic family. It’s kind of a beautiful thing to see.”

Vaughn agreed.

“Right now, there’s a lot of favorable interest in weightlifting, and that’s because of CrossFit.”

—Bob Takano

“There’s a lot of people from the weightlifting community that say in so many words they don’t like CrossFit and say I’m a sell-out,” explained Vaughn, who is part owner of CrossFit CenTex in Belton, Texas, with his wife, Jodi. Vaughn also has been a contributor to the *CrossFit Journal*.

“That’s an attitude that I don’t think would ever come in the CrossFit community. This is a movement that is getting people moving and getting them off the couch. There is nothing wrong with that.”

“To CrossFit’s credit, that is one of the things that will allow it to sustain itself: competing with integrity.”

**—Rick Adams,
former USAW CEO**

The CrossFit culture is synonymous with fair play and sportsmanship, said Rick Adams, the former USAW CEO who helped to bring the CrossFit/USAW event to fruition.

Adams left USAW in October 2010 to become managing director of the National Governing Body organizational development of the U.S. Olympic Committee.

“When you look at what CrossFit stands for and you look at what Olympic values are, there are some similarities,” he said. “To CrossFit’s credit, that is one of the things that will allow it to sustain itself: competing with integrity.”

Future Growth

The CrossFit/USAW event demonstrated how the two organizations can work together, Adams said.

In the future, “there can be dozens of local and regional CrossFit events that serve as qualifiers of what could become an annual, national event that would incorporate the snatch and clean and jerk,” Adams said. “What you would have is tens of thousands of people across the country understand USA Weightlifting.”

USAW could see significant benefits, he added.

“We have enormous respect for what (CrossFit is) doing and working closely with an Olympic sport,” Adams said. “(It’s) really beneficial to both sides.”



A classic CrossFit scene that’s been repeated at events all over the world: Coach Burgener working with a CrossFit athlete who wants to be a better weightlifter.

The opportunity is now higher than ever for the CrossFit Kids programs to churn out competitive Olympic weightlifters and for the sport to more easily enter high-school athletic programs, longtime USAW coaches and athletes said.

"I know for sure they're growing the sport. They're teaching their kids how to do the movements. I think it's awesome," said Farris, who has a young son. "Hopefully we keep that going every year, and I hope it continues to grow because I think it can be awesome."

Burgener praised Jeff and Mikki Lee Martin, the creators of CrossFit Kids, for teaching children the Olympic lifts.

"Some of these kids are going to become very, very good at it," he said.

"The big picture is CrossFit develops athletes that are so highly in tuned that ... they can compete in CrossFit and also compete in USA Weightlifting. They're going to be at that caliber."

The older the sport of CrossFit becomes, the more youth will become involved and pick up Olympic lifting as their sport, Vaughn said.

"Most will stick with CrossFit," he said jokingly, adding that he finds CrossFit addicting.

"It's just a great challenge and the community draws them in."

CrossFit, the 32-year-old continued, helped him to find his calling.



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—Ursula Garza Papandrea

"I never wanted to be a coach. I had people ask me all the time, 'Why aren't you a coach? Why aren't you training at Gold's Gym or something?' And that just didn't appeal to me at all," he explained. "It never clicked until I got introduced to CrossFit."

Olympic weightlifting used to be an exclusive and elusive sport relegated to coaches' home garages, said Papandrea, a kinesiology professor at Austin Community College.

"Most gyms don't want Olympic weightlifting in them. They really don't want you in there with chalk, dropping weight. We've done a poor job at educating people about Olympic weightlifting and at public relations," she said. "CrossFit laid the foundation for us without us even asking. Greg (Glassman) ... pretty much created this foundation for us. I am completely and eternally grateful because now it helps the sport that I love."



Courtesy of Andréa Maria Cecil

About the Author

*Andréa Maria Cecil is the Regional Community Media Director for the Australia, Europe and North East regions. She was also the North East Regional Media Director for the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games. Cecil has been a freelance writer and editor for the **CrossFit Journal** since 2010 and also writes for the CrossFit Games site. She spent nearly 13 years as a professional journalist, most recently as managing editor of the **Central Penn Business Journal** in Harrisburg, Pa. The 34-year-old is a native of New Orleans who lives in York County, Pa. There, she's been doing CrossFit since 2008 at **CrossFit York**, where she coaches Olympic weightlifting as a USA Weightlifting Level 1 Sports Performance Coach. Additionally, Cecil dedicates four days a week to training the Olympic lifts herself at **McKenna's Gym**.*