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## The Greek and the Games

Epictetus never did Karen or Fran, but he definitely would have understood your determination to get through the many tests of the CrossFit Games Open.

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By Jane Drexler

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Cheryl Boatman

*"Let others practice lawsuits, others study problems, others syllogisms; here you practice how to die, how to be enchained, how to be racked, how to be exiled." —Epictetus, **The Discourses***

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*When facing 150 wall-ball shots, calm determination might be the best asset of all.*

The 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games Open is here, and we are about to be tested again.

The Open has always fulfilled its promise to push us to our limits and has called on us to dig deep and overcome pain and frustration. If you need a good example, look no further than Open Workout 13.3.

As many reps as possible in 12 minutes of:

- 150 wall-ball shots
- 90 double-unders
- 30 muscle-ups

The days preceding that workout were riddled with anxiety for me and many others. I remember the dread I felt knowing full well how much 150 wall-ball shots would hurt. I remember my disappointment knowing that I couldn't even get to the "fun stuff"—the skill-based double-unders and muscle-ups—until I finished every single wall-ball rep. And I remember the frustration at realizing we had already suffered through this workout: 13.3 was a repeat of 12.4.

For all of us who had these and similar thoughts, 13.3 screwed with our heads.

I spent the better part of a week trying to wrap my mind around the injustice of it all. My focus was on the "why?"—on the frustration—and not on the task at hand, and my first attempt at 13.3 showed it: I didn't even finish the wall balls before time ran out.

It was only after that first attempt that I understood what 13.3 was really about. The workout's real purpose was to test whether or not you could deal with mental torture—of grueling repetition, of demoralizing muscle burn, and of frustration and despair—and stay calm, focused and self-contained as you worked through the pain.

That was the test of 13.3.

And this unstated test is what makes 13.3 the perfect workout to introduce Epictetus' philosophy of stoicism, and to illustrate how CrossFit's tests of "fitness" are really, at their root, meant to test—and cultivate—a stoic character.

### A Stoic Character

Most people know what it means to describe others as “stoic.” It means they accept their circumstance without emotional protest, without railing at the wind. They remain steadfast and self-contained, even in the face of harsh struggle. We’ve seen people remain stoic: the soldier standing for her 10th hour in the rain, the mother holding her child’s hand in the hospital. To be stoic is to stay calm, focused and strong while the world is crumbling around you.

Stoicism, then, is a philosophy focused on cultivating a self that can react stoically, and its proponents came from all walks of life: a homeless man, a Roman emperor and, our main focus, Epictetus, a former tortured slave.

While Epictetus didn’t write anything down, his student did and collected Epictetus’ works into *The Discourses* (1) as well as into a little book of stoic aphorisms called *The Enchiridion* (2) (literally “little handbook”), which was designed to be carried by soldiers heading into the field.

Interestingly, Vice Adm. James Bond Stockdale famously carried the memory of his copy of *The Enchiridion* into Vietnam nearly 2,000 years later, and it sustained him for seven years as a tortured prisoner of war (3,4,5).

The starting point for Epictetus and other stoics is that nearly every damn thing is out of your control—your success, your circumstance, the person in the car behind you, earthquakes, whether you pay your bills on time, whether you get a promotion, whether you lose a finger, etc. “It’s just not up to you,” says the stoic. What’s going to happen is going to happen. And you can’t control that.

Because many of us live in a culture that is grounded on the concepts of control, autonomy and self-determination, this kind of strong fatalism may be difficult to fathom, let alone agree with. But one need not walk with Epictetus to that strongest articulation of fatalism to understand that, really, what matters to the stoic is simply that we never forget this central characteristic of our lives:

They are fragile.



Maggie Selzer

*“Everything has two handles, one by which it may be borne, one by which it cannot be borne.”—Epictetus*



Everything is fragile. What we have now can be lost in an instant: our jobs, our home, our loved ones, our limbs, our schedules, our plans, our ranking on the leaderboard. Lost in an instant. In our day-to-day lives, we may move through the world as if we can affect such things with our wills, but in the final analysis, that only works until it doesn't anymore—until an accident or unforeseen encounter or Dave Castro's pulling of our weakest movement out of the hopper. We cannot control these things, and that's the stoic's foundational lesson.

The goal, then, is to figure out how to move through this world of fragility—of unknowns and unknowables—with an eye on the one thing we can control: our inner self. We can control how we react. We can control how we feel. We can control our dignity and character. We can protect the integrity of our soul.

For the stoic, the central aim of our life's efforts, then, is to cultivate that inner life—our mental fortitude—so that when we are faced with situations that we cannot control or foresee, we are able to choose our response. What matters—and the more dire and tragic the circumstance, the more it matters—is our ability to respond in ways that keep our soul intact. What matters is that we find an internal compass by which we can navigate when the world seems to be falling apart and we are faced with challenge, disappointment, torture or tragedy.

### CrossFit as Stoicism

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll.  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul.

—William Ernest Henley, *Invictus*

It is no accident that Henley's *Invictus* resonates so profoundly with many CrossFit athletes. There are too many of us who have suffered greatly. There are so many of us who strive to feel strong, capable and whole.

It is not lost on me that I am writing this after my sister lost her deepest love in a falling accident five months ago, and after my friend Susan lost her friend Glen. It is not lost on me that each Hero WOD on CrossFit.com is connected to a host of people who are grieving a fallen warrior, and that each CrossFit athlete battles different demons every day.

And it is not lost on me that I am writing of a *fitness program*—about wall-ball shots—in the context of suffering so deep that it calls into question the possibility



Cheryl Boatman

***The CrossFit stoic cultivates mental strength for moments when physical strength fails.***

of writing about anything real ever again. But I also believe there is some truth and meaning in the message I have seen echoed in comments to CrossFit athletes who have suffered great loss or burden:

This is what you have been training for.

CrossFit—even while it looks entirely physical—is built on the recognition that our minds matter more than our bodies.

As we face each challenge, we express our core ambition, strength and doggedness despite our physical limitations. We scale to a lower weight or modify pull-ups with a band. If our heel is injured, we do squats instead of box jumps. If our leg is broken, or our arm amputated, we figure out modifications to get our work done. Because we know what matters in those moments is not the specific movement we are doing but only that we keep moving, that we keep trying, that we keep expressing our willingness to rise to a challenge and push ourselves on.



Julie Miller

***Accepting adversity is often the first step in overcoming it.***

CrossFit, like Epictetus in *The Enchiridion*, recognizes “illness is an impediment of the body, but not of the will ... . Lameness is an impediment to the leg, not of the will. ... Say this to yourself of every accident that befalls you; for you will find it an impediment to something else, not to yourself.”

So, when we say CrossFit prepares us for the unknown and unknowable, it is, of course, true that we are trying to prepare our bodies as best we can to respond effectively in physical situations. But we are also learning how to respond mentally. We are learning how to respond with mental fortitude and grace despite our inability to know what we will face.

What we learn in CrossFit directly mirrors Epictetus’ description in his *Discourses* of what made his school of stoicism different from any other educational pursuit: “Let others practice lawsuits, others study problems, others syllogisms; here you practice how to die, how to be enchained, how to be racked, how to be exiled.”

For Stockdale and other soldiers who carried Epictetus’ little handbook, this was a literal lesson: with these words and practices, you learn how to stand in the face of death or torture while maintaining the integrity of your soul.

Similarly, CrossFit offers that same literal lesson—of perseverance, steadfastness and self-containment—for many soldiers and service professionals who face their own mortal dangers each day. But it also offers to others—the mothers, doctors, construction workers, professors—the same lesson, though perhaps more metaphorically.

Each time I face a workout, especially one like 13.3, I am learning how to be racked—in pain, in disappointment—and to face the limits of my body and the anger those limits cause me. I am forced to acknowledge the limits of my mental strength and the responsibility I bear to target those mental weak spots that cause self-doubt, anger and resentment.

With each excruciating wall-ball shot, I am called on to take to heart Epictetus’ lesson that the only way to make

it through a devastating challenge without internally crumbling is to be present in it, to be focused and to remember the words, “Whatever occasion befalls you ... turn around and look into yourself to see what power you have to make use of it.”

CrossFit Founder and CEO Greg Glassman himself has said, “The greatest adaptation to CrossFit takes place between the ears.”

### “Everything Has Two Handles”

For Epictetus, how we take on the challenges we encounter makes a big difference as to whether we are able to bear them, and it is up to us to choose the approach we can manage.

In *The Enchiridion*, Epictetus said, “Everything has two handles, one by which it may be borne, one by which it cannot be borne. If your brother has done wrong, don’t grasp this by the ‘wrongdoing’ handle—it can’t be borne by that one—but by the ‘brother,’ the ‘brought-up-together’ handle, and thereby you will be able to bear it.”

It might be tempting to imagine that Epictetus is offering a practical guide. After all, CrossFit athletes are well versed in the practice of strategizing how to make workouts bearable. Consider Murph. We are always testing it out: “Can I save a minute if I do 20 rounds of Cindy, or can I get a better time by breaking up the reps another way?” Or consider Open Workout 13.3: “Should I go for max wall-ball reps in the first set or should I pace it out?”

In short, we seek the bearable handle for workouts all the time. We figure out how we will take on our burdens every time we look at the whiteboard. We know there is an angle—a handle—that will make it bearable. “There must be,” we say.

I certainly do not discount the benefit of approaching workouts with strategies, but the stoic lesson helps me to see strategizing as only the smallest part of finding the right “handle.”

The search for the bearable handle is not merely a practical search, not a search for a way to “make it easier.” Rather, the bearable handle is internally sought by recognizing that, though there is no making it easier, there is a way to make it through—not by trying to avoid the difficulty but by accepting that it will hurt, it will be hard and it will take everything in you, including your very soul, to keep going.

Last spring, I began taking this stoic lesson to heart as I approached a second attempt at 13.3. I knew where I must look for the handle on it: I changed nothing but my mindset for my second attempt. I accepted, without trying to find a path of avoidance, that it would be monumentally difficult. And I stopped fighting against myself and the world. I only focused on making my inner self my ally.

As I dropped the medicine ball in exhaustion between each of my sets to 150 reps, I focused on these words my friend Aubrey had given me:

“Take a deep breath, organize yourself, focus, and now ... back to it.”

That’s the stoic lesson.

Welcome to the 2014 Open.



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### About the Author

Jane Drexler is associate professor of philosophy at Salt Lake Community College and holds a CrossFit Level 1 certificate. She’s published essays in several books and professional journals, primarily on political theory and ethics. At 44, her Fran time is an awesomely average 7:00. Her clean-and-jerk max hovers around 135. She scored 153 on 12.4, 134 on 13.3 (Take 1) and 165 on 13.3 (Take 2).