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Lessons From the Level 1

Teacher Eric LeMay takes the CrossFit Level 1 Certificate Course and reflects on what he learned.

By Eric LeMay

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Each morning, over the blurry steam of a second cup of coffee, I open my email, braced against the small fires I'll find in my inbox. What didn't get done? What needs to?

The more emails I have, the more quickly I go hunting for the one from CrossFit, the one with the WOD and daily image.

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Kristin LeMay

When he attended a CrossFit Level 1 Certificate Course, Eric LeMay found out why everyone looks so sweaty in the group picture on CrossFit.com.

Sometimes it's eye candy: a cute kid pushing a sled, a firebreather hitting a handstand on a beach in Thailand. Sometimes it's more inspiring: an athlete kicking ass in a wheelchair, a fallen hero.

Mondays always throw me off. If you get the email, you know that Monday's image is always a composite of a dozen or so group shots from CrossFit seminars held all over the world. About 50 people are in each picture, and their faces are so small you have to squint to see them.

These are the folks who spent the weekend doing a CrossFit course: the Coach's Prep Course, the CrossFit Kids Course and the Level 1 Certificate Course, CrossFit's biggest draw. The Level 1 introduces you to CrossFit's methodology and foundational movements. It's the one to take if you're interested in coaching, opening a box or just want to add depth to your training.

All those faces used to make me cranky.

It's Monday. Give me a pig-tailed toddler with toy dumbbells or a tastefully athletic nude. Monday is not a day for fuzzy group photos.

But after months of looking at those group shots, I became curious about the faces in them. As a teacher, I'm fascinated by how and why people learn. What motivates us? What challenges and changes us? To my mind, CrossFit indeed challenges us and changes us. It isn't just a training program; it's also a highly effective teaching and learning program.

So I began to wonder what all these athletes—Monday after Monday—took away from two days of immersing themselves in CrossFit.

Then, one weekend, I did it: I became one of those faces.

Theory and Practice

One thing I learned about all those group photos with big, cheesy smiles: they're in the aftershock of a workout. Those faces aren't cheerful so much as dazed.

Just before our group shot, we did a smoker of thrusters and burpees. The rep scheme might have been 15-12-9—I can't quite recall.

We'd reached the end of the first day. We'd been ticking along, taking in the lectures and practicing our technique, but then that familiar pre-WOD mix of dread, excitement and adrenaline descended upon us.

"It's gonna get weird in here," flowmaster (head trainer) Joe Westerlin said just before we started.

Then the cheering started up, the clock ticked down, and it was on: a bunch of athletes who'd been relative strangers throughout the day were sweating and spitting and screaming.

A minute afterward, we were all cracking beers and talking about the workout. The community-building formula CrossFit Founder and CEO Greg Glassman has touted so many times—"agony coupled with laughter," a quote from Capt. Michael Perry—had done its trick again. We felt like a



Colleen Baz

At the Level 1, those who suffer and learn together become fast friends.

group. On a snowy day in January, people had come to Columbus, Ohio, from across the Midwest, and there we were, kicking back at the epicenter of rigs and racks and steel: Rogue HQ. Things had gone from weird to warm.

All the trainers shared that contagious glow of folks who love their jobs.

I ended up chatting with another of the Level 1 Seminar Staff trainers, Donovan DeGrie, who'd come up from Hendersonville, Tenn. He's one of those athletes chiseled out of steel and light. When I found out he travels across the country almost every weekend for CrossFit courses, I felt tired for him.

"Man, that must be exhausting," I said.

"Naw," said DeGrie, shaking his head with a wide smile. He explained meeting new people and sharing his love of CrossFit doesn't wear him down. It revs him up.

He was easy to believe. All the trainers shared that contagious glow of folks who love their jobs. I felt that energy from the first.

A lot of us came in worried about the test that concludes the seminar. It'd been decades since I'd filled in those little bubbles with a No. 2 pencil, and I figured that, as a teacher, it'd be my luck to bomb the test.

"Don't worry about the test," Westerlin assured in his opening talk. "If you're worried about the test, you're not in the moment, and we want you to be with us in the room."

Westerlin figured out how to keep us with him. He threatened to make us do the first workout from the 2012 Open: seven minutes of burpees. We all went wide eyed. The guy next to me started stretching in his chair. Another started quivering.

Westerlin let an anxious beat pass before he let us know he was joking. “You know what’s in the room right now?” he continued. “Emotion.”

Sure enough. Our heart rates were up. We were in the now, and we launched in.

Building Movements

Conversation, beer and tachycardia aren’t the only things you get at the Level 1. The course combines lectures on everything from work capacity to nutrition along with small-group work on CrossFit’s basic movements.

You also do a workout each day. For the first one, you get coached “under intensity.” For the second, you coach another athlete, and your coaching is coached. If you want, you can also take the test at the end of the weekend and try to earn your CrossFit Level 1 Trainer certificate.

The effect is cumulative, not unlike a workout. Run 400 meters—not so intense. Swing a 53-lb. kettlebell for 21 reps or do 12 pull-ups—not so intense. Put all these things together for three rounds, and hello, Helen. You are very much under intensity and will probably walk stiffly the next morning.

The seminar builds in a like way. It’s one thing to study the foundational ideas of CrossFit. It’s another to focus on the minutia of your squat or push-press technique. And still another to go all out in a workout or guide another athlete through that sort of effort. But put all these things together and you see the deeper connections. Macro and micro, theory and practice, it all comes together.

Take the deadlift. Compared to, say, the snatch or the clean, it’s not the most technical lift. Basically, you stand up. So after a lecture on the finer points of the deadlift’s setup, execution and common flaws, I thought we’d gone into deadlift overkill.

And yet, when we broke into small groups, our trainer, Doug Chapman, smiled at us like we’d never picked up a sack of groceries. Chapman’s training style is a mix of military sergeant and Groucho Marx.

“Butt up! Butt back! Bow like a samurai!”

Half his cues were classics from Westside Barbell and the other half were from cheesy movies such as *Austin Powers*, but the barrage kept us focused on the movements and keyed us into the lecture we’d just heard. The links



Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

The Level 1 Certificate Course is broken up into lecture and practical sessions, with a few workouts thrown in for good measure.



Alicia Anthony

In small groups, trainers drill athletes on the finer points of movements including the deadlift, squat, push press and more.

continued into the workout later that day. As I was doing med-ball cleans, I suddenly heard Chapman bellow, “Butt back, Eric!”

“Shit! Butt back!” I thought. And through that cue, I was able to access the technique work we’d done earlier in our group.

Chapman made no secret of the fact that everything in the seminar builds on everything else.

“Progression,” he said, “is the word you’ll keep hearing.”

**Here is a basic definition of fitness.
Here is a basic movement.
Now let’s build from there.**

Day 1 obviously built on Day 2, but all the lectures built on one another, starting with the foundational ideas of CrossFit and ending with how you’d implement them into

your programming if you opened a box.

The practice we did on the basic movements also started simply. Over three breakout sessions, we began with the squat, the press and the deadlift, then we gradually built to the overhead squat, the jerk and the clean. In variation after variation, we always worked through a progression that started off simply.

In fact, quite a few times during the course, the trainers would half-apologize for the simplicity of their instruction, as though they were wasting our time if they weren’t expounding recondite theories from exercise science.

“Simple doesn’t mean easy,” we’d hear.

“Simple doesn’t mean less important,” they’d stress.

What became clear is that CrossFit doesn’t really start with simple. It starts with basic. The difference matters. Simple suggests that something is easy and self-evident, but basic means it’s essential. Whether you’re talking about basic training or basic hygiene, you can’t—at least you shouldn’t—do without the basics.

And as complicated as the science behind CrossFit gets, it’s a program founded on basics. Here is a basic definition of fitness. Here is a basic movement. Now let’s build—let’s progress—from there.

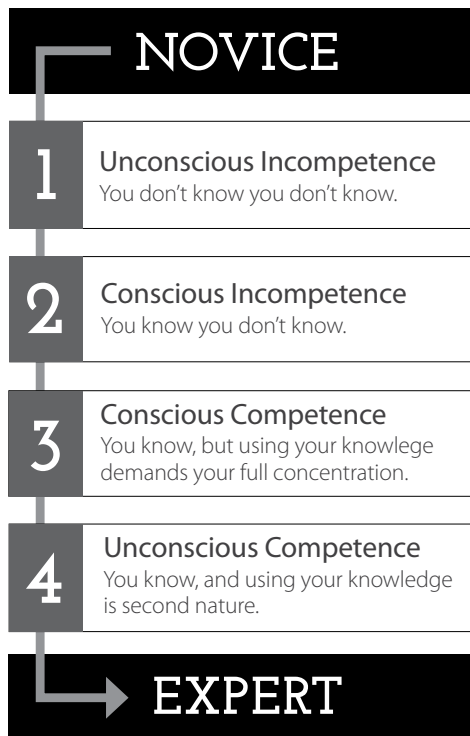
Commitment to Fundamentals

Throughout the course, one particular progression kept popping into my mind, and it’s not one we learned at the seminar. It comes from my work as a teacher, but it helped me see one reason CrossFit is so effective.

The progression is often called the Four Stages of Competence, and it was first described by Noel Burch in the 1970s. Essentially, it’s a model for how people learn a new skill. Here’s the gist: every time you attempt to learn a new skill, whether you’re a toddler learning how to walk or a middle-aged man or woman learning how to deadlift, you have to progress through four stages (see graphic on Page 6).

The progression is fairly simple. And by that I mean it’s basic.

If, for example, I’m a beginner learning the deadlift, I won’t know about engaging my posterior chain or where I should position my feet or hands. I’m ignorant of what the lift requires and I certainly can’t do it correctly. I’m unconsciously incompetent.



The Four Stages of Competence.

But then Chapman comes along and shows me that I'm leaning forward, my butt is too low and my grip is too wide. I try the lift and feel my weight rock forward. I'm still incompetent—Chapman doesn't need to tell me I'm a "dishonorable samurai"—but this time I'm conscious of it. I know I don't know.

So I try again. I focus: butt back, back flat, bar into shins. And this time I do it correctly. Chapman is smiling. I, however, am mentally fried from deadlifting a PVC pipe. I'm competent. I know I can do the lift correctly, but it takes my full concentration—my full conscious effort—to do so.

And I'm still a long way off from the singular focus that an athlete like Elisabeth Akinwale displays when she pulls 425 lb. She's not thinking about every fine point of technique. She's thinking about making the lift. For her, a highly technical skill has become as "natural" as walking is for most of us. She's unconsciously competent—and a total badass.

Those four stages of competency lead from novice to expert. Of course, I've described them much more neatly than they show up in the gym. Usually, when you attempt

to refine a skill, aspects of that skill which you've already mastered go to shit. Your mind overloads as you struggle to incorporate new demands, and even movement patterns you've mastered break down, which sucks, but that's what it takes to improve.

**To move forward, you have to go
back to the basics.**

So you start again. You rebuild the movement better than it was before. To move forward, you have to go back to the basics.

Back at the basics, you're at the very core of CrossFit. Another word for what's basic might be what's common.

That's how Joe DeGain described it in the final lecture of the course. He brought up the ideal of virtuosity. When you're aiming for virtuosity, you're aiming to do "the common uncommonly well," he said, paraphrasing Glassman's words in the *CrossFit Journal* article [Virtuosity](#).

The common uncommonly well—that, to me, captured the heart of the seminar. As we filed out of Rogue's gym for our long drives home, I realized I'd never found the common so inspiring.



About the Author

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