

VIRTUOSITY GOES VIRAL

Greg Glassman opened the first CrossFit gym in 2001, and on June 20, 2014, Royal Docks CrossFit became the 10,000th affiliate worldwide.

By Emily Beers

Hollis Molloy of CrossFit Santa Cruz remembers the good old CrossFit days, the days when CrossFit Founder and CEO Greg Glassman hosted every single Level 1 Seminar, when the entire group—including Glassman—went for pizza and beer after the course.

Molloy, who started CrossFit at Glassman's original CrossFit gym, was around in the days when the CrossFit Games were just a gathering of friends who liked working out and hanging out together in Dave Castro's parents' backyard. He was around when nobody had heard of CrossFit, when there were only a handful of CrossFit affiliates in the world—each of them eager to spread Glassman's definition of fitness.

Glassman's original gym, opened in 2001 at 2851 Research Park Drive in Santa Cruz, California, grew into 10,000 affiliates around the world, and part of the reason is that the message from the good old days is somehow—miraculously—still intact today.

This fact, at least partially, has to do with the affiliates themselves.

One of the rare beauties of being in a CrossFit gym is it doesn't usually feel as if a business is operating around you. Instead, you can feel the pervasive community, the family that lives inside each box.

"The CrossFit program—the thrust that Coach put on it—is still there," Molloy said. "He used to say, 'People will quit a workout program, but they won't quit a relationship.'"

He added: "Coming in and teaching a pull-up is different than coming in and being a part of something."

That's as true with 10,000 affiliates as it was when there were two.

Exponential Growth

Jeff Martin is a CrossFit pioneer. He's also the co-founder, with wife Mikki Lee Martin, of CrossFit Kids. The 54-year-old, who runs CrossFit Brand X in Ramona, California, discovered CrossFit 11 years ago. When he affiliated in summer of 2004, he proudly became one of the first five CrossFit gyms in the world.

CrossFit Kids came about somewhat accidentally. At the time, Martin was coaching martial arts, and when he tried to bring CrossFit to his martial-arts gym, the teenage kids took to the idea quicker than the adults.

"So that's really how CrossFit Kids started, and we kind of talked to Greg (Glassman) a bit about what we were doing, and in November 2004, Greg said, 'I'd like you to run CrossFit Kids,'" Martin explained.

At the time, there were just 10 affiliates in the world.

"We thought these would be the 10 gyms in the world who would do CrossFit," said Martin, who admitted he had no idea how big CrossFit would get.

"We were talking about where we were going, and we thought this was probably the end of it. We now had 10 affiliates." —Jeff Martin

"I remember sitting around in Golden, Colorado," Martin said of the day CrossFit cracked double digits for affiliates. "We were talking about where we were going, and we thought this was probably the end of it. We now had 10 affiliates."

At the time, the future of the small group was far from clear.

"Where are we going to go from here?" we asked each other," Martin said, laughing at the memory.

While Martin wasn't surprised by CrossFit's growth, he certainly never predicted just how dramatic that growth would be.

While it took five years to grow to 500 affiliates, CrossFit Inc. added about 1,000 every three months in 2013.

And on June 20, 2014, CrossFit hit 10,000 affiliates worldwide.

But for Martin, many of the milestone moments haven't been about the numbers. Instead, he remembers symbolic moments that made him realize just how significant the CrossFit movement was. One of those moments was the first time someone walked into his box and already knew what CrossFit was.

"The battle in the first four or five years was explaining to people what (CrossFit) was and trying to get them to do it," he said.

But as the community grew, more and more people showed up to Martin's box with at least a vague understanding of what they were getting into, eventually reaching the point where almost every single person who steps through his doors now seems to know someone who's already doing CrossFit.

Martin also remembers the days when Globo Gym patrons would stop and stare, partly confused, partly concerned with the flurry of intense activity next to them as someone attempted a CrossFit workout. It wasn't uncommon for a CrossFit athlete to be asked to stop his strange activity, with "too much sweat" sometimes cited as the reason.



Hollis Molly (right) trained at the original CrossFit gym and now runs CrossFit Santa Cruz. He's also a member of CrossFit's Level 1 Seminar Staff.



At one point, Greg Glassman (right) led every Level 1 Seminar.



Jeff Martin (right) runs CrossFit Brand X, one of the first five affiliates.

But somewhere along the way, everything changed.

“We’re in a position now where we have a Globo Gym in our small town, and they’ve turned the whole upper wing of their building into a place dedicated to functional fitness. They’re trying to emulate what we’re doing,” Martin said. “That’s how pervasive what Greg (Glassman) has done has become—that the Globo Gym is trying to copy us.”

Indeed, Glassman had originally been kicked out of traditional gyms that didn’t appreciate his methods. After opening his own facility, his ideas eventually found their way back into corporate gyms that were forced to recognize them.

“That was a pretty significant moment—when I saw the Globo Gym move equipment out and put a rope up,” Martin said.

PVC ... and Beyond

Like Martin, Molloy was completely unaware of the significance of the CrossFit movement gaining momentum around him.

“When I showed up (to CrossFit Santa Cruz), the first people I met were Greg (Glassman), Nicole Carroll, Tony Budding, Annie Sakamoto and Greg Amundson,” Molloy said, naming many of the athletes originally seen in grainy videos on CrossFit.com. He didn’t realize at the time these people were mainstays of a community that was quickly growing online.

“And then people would come in from all over the world and be like, ‘Oh my God, that’s Greg Amundson.’ And I’d be like, ‘Yeah, I know. That’s Greg. He works out at 10 a.m.’” Molloy said.

Things in Santa Cruz are obviously different now. The gym on Research Park Drive is gone, and Glassman isn’t jingling keys at 5 a.m. every day before teaching people how to squat. But Molloy said that as much as things have changed, the important things remain.

“I don’t think CrossFit has lost anything. I don’t miss the old days, except for the fact that it was transformative of my life,” he said. “I could never do a pull-up, could never climb a rope (before CrossFit), so being able to start being an athlete was really profound for me.”

Nutrition was also part of the learning curve, just as it is now for many.

“A bagel and cream cheese isn’t the best option for breakfast?” Molloy laughed, remembering his early days learning about the importance of diet.

These kinds of personal-growth moments—just like the ones Molloy experienced when he started CrossFit—are still going on today at 9,999 other affiliates around the world.

“Coach Glassman said if you can’t deadlift your own body weight, you’re sick. And I have people come in and can’t squat at all, can’t make it down to the medicine ball and stand back up again unassisted,” Molloy said.

Molloy learned from Glassman it is his responsibility to help these people to change their lives. And this is what he keeps doing today, day after day.

Over the years, Molloy has also learned transforming lives can start with something small. This concept has always been one of the messages taught at the Level 1 Trainer Course.

“Go home, get a broomstick and teach a neighbor how to deadlift,” Level 1 Seminar Staff members tell attendees.

It’s a simple but powerful message that has a lot to do with the spread of CrossFit.

Triple Digits

One of the foundations to the CrossFit affiliate is, of course, the CrossFit Level 1 Trainer Course.

Matt Munson—who was the owner of CrossFit Champions in Texas for seven years before he sold it to a client last year—earned a Level 1 certificate in the day when Glassman led the charge at every seminar. At those early seminars, attendees had the chance to really get to know Glassman as a coach and as a man.

“It was smaller and tighter then. You could ask Coach (Glassman) questions,” said Munson, who affiliated when there were but 100 CrossFit gyms in the world.

“We’d finish a (seminar) and I’d email Nicole Carroll, and there’d be a response within 20 minutes,” he added. Carroll is now CrossFit Director of Certification and Training.

That’s the only thing Munson thinks is sad about the massive growth of CrossFit—that some of the new affiliate owners will never get to experience what it was like being directly involved with Glassman.

“They’ll never get to experience going to a seminar, meeting Coach, and having a pizza and beer after with him,” Munson said. “At the time we didn’t understand how cool that was.”

That said, Glassman remains accessible despite the demands on his time as head of a large fitness company. At CrossFit Tour stops, the CrossFit Games and other events, Glassman spends hours reconnecting with old friends and making new ones. He speaks articulately yet casually and without pretension. And he takes the time to speak to anyone who wants to talk to him.

There he was at the CrossFit Games Open 14.5 live announcement in San Francisco, California. In the crowd. In plain street clothes. Cheering. Along with the community he built.

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When Munson started his box, it was filled with homemade equipment.

"When we started, there were three places in the U.S.A. to buy bumpers," Munson said.

"We built our first boxes based off an article we read in the 'CrossFit Journal.' We built 16-, 20- and 24-inch boxes in my garage. They lasted for years," said Munson, whose first pull-up station was a homemade rig made of four-by-fours and plumbing pipe.

Kettlebells and medicine balls were also more difficult and expensive to come by. Munson's athletes used dumbbells for the first couple of years, and his first medicine balls weren't the durable ones affiliates have today.

"They were made from a variety of different leather, and they'd start splitting at the seams, and sawdust and sand would fall into everyone's eyes," Munson said. "They lasted a while because we duct-taped them back together."

Today, the CrossFit equipment industry is light years ahead of where it was even five or six years ago.

First of all, there's Rogue and Again Faster, who supply equipment to CrossFit affiliates all over the world.

"And even if you don't count Rogue, there are at least a dozen other high-quality manufacturers," Munson said. "Now, anyone can get high-quality gear and equipment to train with at a very affordable price. You can buy quality bars for under \$200."

In the 2002 "CrossFit Journal" article "The Garage Gym," Glassman collected a host of suppliers to help people "build a world-class strength



and conditioning facility in your garage." In September 2013, the "CrossFit Journal" article "The Ripple Effect," explained how the growth of CrossFit had created instant markets for equipment suppliers such as Rogue and Again Faster, and any CrossFit affiliate owner will confirm sourcing gear is a simple task today.

This ease is something Munson doesn't take lightly because he remembers the days when bumper plates were rare and it was easier to find a leg-extension machine than a GHD. After all, it wasn't that long ago.

Spreading the Word

Leonarda Schotness took the Level 1 Trainer Course in May 2014.

It was an incredibly valuable weekend for her.

"The biggest things I learned at my Level 1 were that CrossFit really is about community and passion and acceptance and knowledge," she said, the weekend still fresh in her mind.

What helped Schotness realize this was the way her Level 1 coaches expressed themselves.

"The knowledge and intensity (the coaches) taught with was amazing, and you could tell they loved that they did and were so passionate about the sport," said Schotness, who had been involved in CrossFit for eight months prior to completing the Level 1.

She added: "Learning the backbone to CrossFit and everything behind the scenes, as opposed to just doing the WODs, has given me a whole new passion and drive to want to be as involved in the CrossFit community as possible."

Schotness' recent Level 1 experience doesn't sound so different from the way Munson, Martin and Molloy described their experiences.

"The concepts and theories that Coach (Glassman) set up are still what the seminars are all about," Molloy said. On top of this, the "Level 1 Training Guide" still contains Glassman's original "CrossFit Journal" articles.

There have, however, been some small changes over the years, like moving from a three-day course to a two-day course, as well as the addition of a written test. CrossFit is also planning to expand its training and education offerings in the near future.

But Molloy believes the most important thing taught at the course is Glassman's message, which gets deeply rooted in the people whose lives are touched by CrossFit. The coaches who run the course today fall under that category.

“I think that if you go through the Level 1 experience and you participate in an affiliate, it’s unavoidable that you’re going to get that sense of community. Because it’s so palpable,” said Molloy, who is part of the Level 1 Seminar Staff.

Evidence of this is the fact that people all over the world, week after week, continue to pay for information they could get for free.

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“The info we give is all for free on the Internet. The ‘Level 1 Training Guide’ is free online, and you can look at all the exercise demos. But what you don’t get is that transmission of culture,” Molloy said.

“You don’t see the passion we have behind virtuosity and human movement It’s not just a fitness program. It’s a culture we’re trying to put out there,” he said.

Molloy admitted he was skeptical when Glassman first decided to stop running the Level 1 Seminars, but any skepticism he had is gone now.

“I used to think that Coach was the only one who could deliver the message. I used to think he was the reason people came . . . ,” Molloy said. “But

Miranda (Oldroyd), and Todd (Widman) and Boz (Adrian Bozman) are just as good. Coach Glassman could only do so much as one person. And the trainers today are able to keep the message moving forward.”

And at the end of the weekend, the feeling people get when they finish the course is the same feeling Molloy got when Glassman hosted his, and it’s certainly no mistake that completion of the Level 1 Trainer Course is required for affiliation.

“I just want to be a part of what this is,” Molloy said, describing the feeling. “And that feeling, that feeling hasn’t changed.”

CrossFit at 10,000

When 24-year-old David Marshall applied to open a CrossFit affiliate, he had no idea his box would be the 10,000th in the world.

His reaction when he found out: “It was a shock. I thought it was a joke. I thought my email had been spammed by someone,” said Marshall, who will open Royal Docks CrossFit in London, England, in the coming weeks. He said being No. 10,000 is a great honor.

“Everyone I’ve told keeps telling me how lucky I am. It’s such a big thing how quick this sport is growing,” he said.

Marshall discovered CrossFit in 2012 when he was playing professional rugby in Australia. He earned a Level 1 certificate earlier this year and couldn’t be more excited about opening his gym.

“CrossFit in London at the moment is absolutely booming. Lots of gyms are turning people away (because they’re so busy),” he said. “So I did a lot of market research. I spent six months finding the perfect location for my box.”

Marshall is hoping to open his doors within the next eight or nine weeks. He’s almost ready to go, and he proves Munson’s point about the ease of accessing high-quality affordable equipment these days. Marshall has turned to Wolverson, a British company he said is essentially becoming the Rogue of the U.K.

“The CrossFit community, it’s quite an Americanized thing, but it has bled over here in Europe. Surrounding yourself with like-minded people . . . I’m excited to facilitate that and have a bit of an impact,” said Marshall, who works as a strength-and-conditioning coach with teenage rugby players and has plans to bring them to Royal Docks CrossFit the moment it opens.

Currently, Marshall’s focus is to hire the most knowledgeable coaches he can find.

“I’ve been speaking to a guy from Orlando, Florida,” Marshall said, explaining that he’s willing to hire coaches from abroad—anything to get the best coaches.

“I’m looking to bring in Olympic-weightlifting coaches, gymnastics coaches. I think it would be great to have specialists from different areas,” he said. “If I get those things in place, everything else should take care of itself.”

Essentially, Marshall’s goal is virtuosity—a concept Coach Glassman pursued at the very first CrossFit gym. With virtuosity comes pride, and as

Molloy pointed out, pride can be found at all 10,000 affiliates in the world. “Everyone is like, ‘My affiliate is the best.’ Nobody says, ‘Yeah, my affiliate is OK, but I think the one down the street is better.’ Everyone thinks their affiliate is the best. And I think that’s pretty cool.”

Along with this pride comes a sense of community among the 10,000 affiliate owners around the world. Each has followed a dream of bringing fitness to clients and running a successful business, and all have embraced the affiliate system in which they share a name and a purpose but are free to operate as they see fit. The system is specifically designed to encourage freedom and creativity as affiliate owners deliver fitness and work to achieve financial success—the health and wealth Glassman has spoken about.

At the very core of that system are the 10,000 individual affiliate owners who unlock the door every morning in the pursuit of virtuosity.

Video: “The 10,000th Affiliate” by Ross Coughlan.

About the Author

Emily Beers is a “CrossFit Journal” staff writer and editor. She will compete in the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games.

