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Mud in Your Eye

Mud runs, obstacle-course races and novelty endurance events are growing in popularity, and some CrossFit gyms now cater to participants.

By Chris Cooper

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Courtesy of Arianne d'Entremont

Obstacle-course racing gets under your skin. And in your mouth.

This year, hundreds of thousands of racers will shiver and shamble their way through icy mud, receive mild electric shocks and perhaps even risk **infections borne by feces**. Some will be swathed in capes, others will wear Viking helmets and display hard-won abs. Some will complete the course, and some will be unable to overcome all the obstacles. But almost everyone will pose for a finish-line picture, gritty and grinning, and go home happy.

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"It's not the same as CrossFit, but there's an overlap," said Rich Borgatti, owner of Mountain Strength CrossFit. "Lots of new people come in to train for these races, and we tell them CrossFit is the next step."

Borgatti is a frequent competitor in mud runs. He offers obstacle-course training groups to help prepare racers for competition and introduce them to CrossFit.

While some consider obstacle races a cesspool of liquid waste and liability, many CrossFit gym owners and athletes see a clear opportunity. Is there a reason to roll out a welcome mat for muddy feet at CrossFit gyms?

Muddying the Fitness Waters

Obstacles, man-made or otherwise, have always been inherent to the sport of cross-country running, and cross-country runners have been adept on mixed terrain for hundreds of years. Their endurance has always been accompanied by agility, and adding larger obstacles such as cargo nets, walls and monkey bars might create a need for coordination, strength and power.

"Like in fitness, you look first at the task: What needs to be done?" Borgatti said. "You need to get up and over walls, move large loads long distances as quickly as possible. The general overall philosophy is similar to CrossFit."

Common goals aside, an endurance event can't address all 10 components of fitness. The largest gap is the most obvious: Obstacle-course racers, even the elite, aren't traditionally known for their strength and power. Borgatti believes the introduction of CrossFit would round out their fitness.

"Progressive resistance training would definitely help them," he said. "All of these races are on hills. People forget the biggest obstacle in the race is the mountain it's placed on. Incorporating strength training for the racers will make them a lot better."

A poster boy for the obstacle-race set, Hunter McIntyre is ripped, tan and big—far bigger than most high-level racers. At 190 lb., McIntyre regularly lines up against elite endurance athletes weighing 40 lb. less. But strength is a great equalizer, he said.

"At the world championships, we had a double-black-diamond climb. Half a mile up, half a mile down at a 50-degree-incline. We had 70-lb. sandbags to carry," McIntyre said. Far behind until that point, McIntyre made his move.

"I cleared 30 of them on that obstacle because of my strength."

He added: "Some of these guys run a 14-minute 5K. I run a 15:30 5K, but I also have a 300-lb. back squat and a 2:45 Fran."

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Obstacle-course racers seeking improvement—or a first-time completion—might benefit from CrossFit. And Borgatti believes CrossFit gyms can also benefit from local races.



Courtesy of Spartan Race

Dylan Davis (left) of CrossFit Bonniebrook tries to introduce mud runners to CrossFit.



Andreame Fraser

Strength and power developed with CrossFit can be an asset when running is broken up with obstacles.

It's all Downhill From Here

Obstacle-course designers serve a market familiar to box owners: recreational athletes seeking a novel workout they can do with friends. In other words, CrossFit might be the best cure for their itch, but they have to try the powder first.

Offering an obstacle-course training group as an introduction to CrossFit is catching on in some gyms, with athletes going both ways—the racers use CrossFit to prepare, and CrossFit athletes like the opportunity to test themselves. Some competitions, such as Spartan Race, have branded themselves as a “test of fitness,” which is right up a CrossFit athlete’s alley, and others are simply participatory challenges.

Tough Mudder, which had 750,000 participants in 2013 according to [The Wall Street Journal](#), begins every race with a chant: “I understand that the Tough Mudder is not a race but a challenge. I put teamwork and camaraderie before my course time.”

Clock or no clock, the event bills itself as “probably the toughest event on the planet.”

“Spartan Race is an actual race,” Borgatti said. “It’s timed. You get splits; there’s standardization. They try to hold races at the same venues every time. If you’re an elite racer, you can really benchmark yourself against other elite racers.”

Borgatti continued: “In a Tough Mudder, the obstacles can be bypassed with no penalty. You can just walk right past them and have a nice day hike. If you do that in a Spartan Race, it’s 30 burpees before you move on. There are judges and referees. CrossFit lets me measure my performance the same way.”

Spartan Race also has easier and harder races—the sprint, the beast and the super—featuring longer routes and higher obstacles, which add progression.

Borgatti believes the appeal of mud runs is broad enough to entice not only novice athletes but also the competition minded. Some of his clients at Mountain Strength CrossFit now seek out local races after meeting other new clients who are training for events.

“When we started these clinics, almost none of my clients did these events. Now we’re seeing a third of our gym enter into these OCRs (obstacle-course races). As more people see it as an event to train for, more are going to bring friends and family in to do these clinics,” he said.

He believes the mountainous courses provide an opportunity to test fitness outside the gym environment, and they often appeal to a different sort of athlete.

“These aren’t the same people who are going to compete at regionals, where the weights are heavy and everyone’s getting bigger. These races bring in athletes who are more comfortable with body-weight movements and running. It’s a different mindset,” Borgatti said.

However, some regional—and even CrossFit Games—athletes are keen on mud runs like Spartan Race. In 2013, the [Spartan Head to Head Race Challenge](#) featured popular CrossFitters Tommy Hackenbruck, Christmas Abbott, Jenn Jones, Mary Lampas, Marcus Hendren and Jennifer Smith.

McIntyre, who is on the covers of several obstacle-course magazines, takes the idea a step further.

“I think these (obstacle-course racers) are the truest athletes,” he said. “You’re constantly being challenged by a new movements. Running is a fundamental movement.

He added: "I tell people to get out there and see what they're really made of."

Removing Barriers to Entry

The [Spartan Race website](#) features a "workout of the day" for its racers. Burpees figure prominently, as do box jumps and rope climbs. Adventure racers already speak the language of CrossFit, if a different dialect.

"In the elite heat at the Spartan Race in Philly, I don't think there was anyone who wasn't a CrossFitter," said Dylan Davis, owner of CrossFit Bonniebrook.

"I think it's a very synergistic relationship. It's CrossFit applied to a short-term, specific goal," said Borgatti. "There's not a race every month. You can introduce someone to your gym through a six-week training program before the race and then keep them in CrossFit after that."

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CrossFit WODs, and they love it."**

—Rich Borgatti

The additional revenue from obstacle-course training groups has meant new equipment for Borgatti's CrossFit members.

"They like the extra ropes for climbing, the four-foot wall behind the building. I add the obstacles into our CrossFit WODs, and they love it," he said.

Corporate groups are also being drawn to obstacle courses as team-building experiments. While managers may be drawn to the team-building potential of conquering the mountains, they're also risk averse and would no doubt welcome programs that prepare office workers to drop from a wall without injury.

"The biggest injury risk I see is not how to conquer the obstacles but how to get off," said Borgatti. "Rolled ankles, busted knees—my goal is to help people train to avoid all these injuries that could possibly happen. That was the biggest point to put out there to groups: I'm going to get you through any race safely."

Borgatti has been invited into schools through the Spartan 300 tour. This summer, he'll be teaching the staff and children at a summer camp how to run through trails safely. And he tells them all about CrossFit.

"This all came through teaching obstacle-course racing and CrossFit together," he said.

Davis also uses his platform to encourage mud runners to try CrossFit.

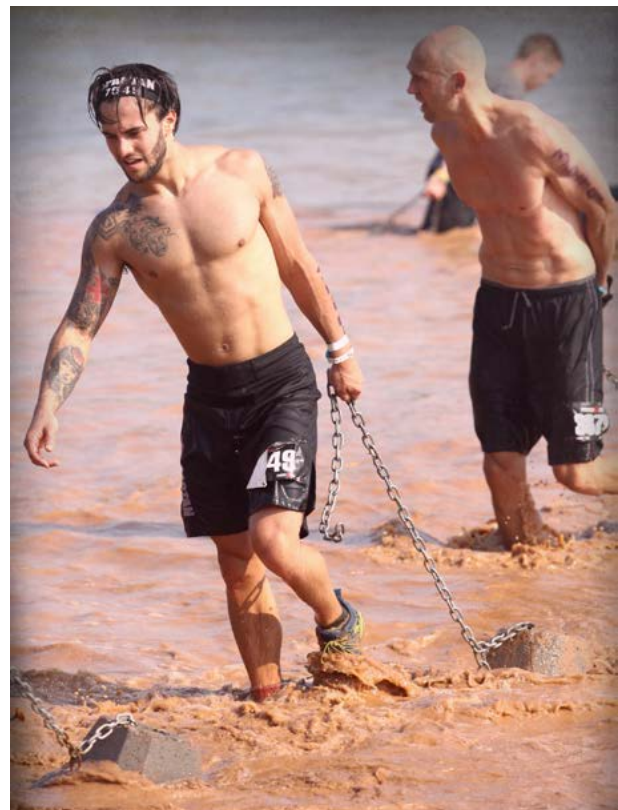
"They're being sold this 1984 bodybuilding baloney," he said. "I tell people to go to the affiliate map and find a gym."

Though not an affiliate owner, McIntyre agrees there's potential—and need—to teach basic movements to obstacle racers.

"You can get a lot of clientele out of the CrossFit Endurance platform," he said. "You need to teach the world that squats, pull-ups and dips are fundamental for any athlete."

Training the Racers

Brian Mackenzie of CrossFit Endurance coached McIntyre for six months last year. He said programming for obstacle racers doesn't vary greatly from programming for a regular CrossFit athlete.



Courtesy of Spartan Race

Sometimes the name "mud run" is only half correct.

"We're seeing a lot of these OCR kids, and they're decent CrossFitters," Mackenzie said. "It's just where their holes are. (McIntyre's) sport-specific work was just the obstacle-type stuff. We're doing CrossFit."

The feeling of triumph when a new skill is mastered is also common to both racers and CrossFit athletes. And Borgatti believes building a broad base is the best tactic in either case.

"You don't want to train for the obstacles specifically," he said. "You want 'obstacle immunity': to be strong and flexible enough to conquer anything placed in front of you."

"You want to be able to face down the unknown and unknowable."

Despite the variety in obstacles, one element remains the same across virtually all races: a long climb up and a quick descent.

"Anyone doing trail-running events, ultras, OCR, the hills up and down are always a part of training. It's never, 'We're just going up.'" Mackenzie said. "It's just as much of a skill to run downhill as it is to run up."

"Right now, running is still arguably the most dangerous sport out there," he continued. "People get injured at these events because they're not running well, not because they're doing something crazy."

He added: "We have a place where they can address their running skill."

Davis was approached by Spartan Race to create a series of videos featuring "core" workouts.

"I'm providing different variations to sit-ups," Davis said. "I'm trying to give them an intro to CrossFit. I showed them butterfly sit-ups and then tricked a couple of thousand people into doing Annie."

Finish Line

Should a CrossFit gym offer to help the future toughest mudders?

Racers who sign up for mud runs and adventure courses seek a challenge and something they can do with their friends. They're essentially looking for the same experience they can find in a CrossFit gym. And their specific needs—work capacity, balance, agility and speed—can best be built across broad time and modal domains with a program that emphasizes general physical preparedness.

Borgatti's strategy of inviting racers to his gym to train and then "graduating" them into his CrossFit classes has meant dozens of new gym members. Preparation for an adventure race will be a new entry point to fitness for thousands, and CrossFit affiliate owners have found they can provide everything the racers need—except maybe antibiotics and tooth whitener.

About the Author

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Arianne d'Entremont

Rich Borgatti hosts obstacle-racing classes at Mountain Strength CrossFit, and his members get to play with new toys as a side benefit.