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Functional Fighting

While some Brazilian jiu-jitsu athletes don't see the link between CrossFit and martial arts, others say general physical preparedness can help athletes win on the mat.

By Hilary Achauer

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Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

Garth Taylor started doing Brazilian jiu-jitsu in 1994, and by 1998 he was winning national-level championships. But Taylor wanted more. What he really wanted was a world title.

Taylor's coach, Claudio Franca, told him if he wanted to win a world championship, he didn't need more time on the mat. He needed to be a better athlete.

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Franca knew just the person who could help. He had been working with a personal trainer at Spa Fitness in Santa Cruz, California, who was combining Olympic weightlifting, gymnastics and high-intensity training and producing impressive results. The trainer's name was Greg Glassman, and he was teaching CrossFit.

The next year, in 1999, Taylor competed in Brazil and became a world champion as a purple belt. It was his first of three world titles.

Brandon Cunningham won the International Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu Pan American Championships in the ultra-heavyweight division in 2011 and 2014. Both times he won, he used CrossFit as his principle mode of training.

"Those workouts that I'd grind through and push, those would be the fight so to speak. Then the technical piece of jiu-jitsu I would just drill," Cunningham said.

Not everyone is so sure CrossFit is an asset on the mat.

"The CrossFit people need to get the fuck out of there (the gym) and get on the mat, and do some real competition ... the CrossFit guys, believe me, they would have to pay their

dues. It would take them a long time to adapt to jiu-jitsu or wrestling," said Steve Maxwell on the April 28, 2014, episode of "The Joe Rogan Experience" podcast. Maxwell is a fitness coach and Brazilian jiu-jitsu instructor, and he was the first American to earn a black belt from Relson Gracie.

"Work is very specific to the particular sport. A high-level swimmer is going to be exhausted in minutes on the mat ... there's no substitute for doing the actual activity," Maxwell said.

More recently, jiu-jitsu black belt and judo Olympian Travis Stevens wrote an editorial for Men's Fitness about why he will never do CrossFit. It's clear from his comments that he has never actually tried CrossFit, but he points out the same thing as Maxwell: Different sports require different abilities.

No serious jiu-jitsu athlete would completely replace jiu-jitsu training with CrossFit. But CrossFit isn't supposed to replace time on the mat, or any sport-specific training for that matter. CrossFit gives athletes general physical preparedness, and several top martial artists say gains through CrossFit transfer particularly well to Brazilian jiu-jitsu, crediting CrossFit training with helping them win at the national and world level.



Courtesy of Brandon Cunningham

CrossFit affiliate owner Brandon Cunningham (left) has won the Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu Pan American Championship twice, and he's won the Firefighter Combat Challenge three times.



Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

CrossFit HQ in Scotts Valley, California, has a judo room in which Garth Taylor teaches classes.

Where It Began

Brazilian jiu-jitsu's roots go back to judo, which was created in Japan by Jigoro Kano in 1882. His style, which he called "kodokan judo," differed from other martial arts at the time because of its emphasis on "randori," or free sparring practice, rather than "kata," a prearranged sequence of attack and defense. In 1886, Kano's new style was put to the test in a tournament hosted by the Tokyo Police. Kodokan judo fighters won 13 of the 15 matches and tied the other two. The results were clear: The training was effective.

Judo was the dominant style of martial arts in Japan for many years, until the turn of the 19th century, when Mataemon Tanabe began using an obscure system of classical jiu-jitsu, the fusen ryu. This style emphasized ground fighting; kodokan judo techniques were almost all composed of standing throws. When kudokan judo went up against fusen fyu, the fusen ryu competitors took the fight to the ground and won.

Kano began incorporating ground grappling into kodokan judo, using the techniques of fusen ryu. It was during this

time that Mitsuyo Maeda (also known as Esai Maeda Koma) began his training. Maeda learned the classical styles of jiu-jitsu, then trained in kodokan judo. He was undefeated in judo tournaments in Japan and spent the early 1900s fighting around the world. He never lost. Some say Maeda won 1,000 fights, while others say it was closer to 2,000. After retiring, Maeda settled in Brazil and opened a jiu-jitsu studio. One of his students was Carlos Gracie.

After studying with Maeda for several years, Gracie opened his own academy in 1925. His academy became well known for the "Gracie Challenge," in which all challengers from any martial-arts background were welcome to fight the Gracies in a no-holds-barred match. The Gracie fighters almost always won.

Over time, the Gracies developed their own version of jiu-jitsu, calling it Brazilian jiu-jitsu. Brazilian jiu-jitsu emphasizes fighting strategy, which allows a smaller or weaker opponent to defend against a larger attacker. Using leverage, Brazilian jiu-jitsu practitioners developed methods of fighting while the defender is on his back, a position weaker fighters often encounter.

Members of the Gracie family immigrated to the United States in the late 1980s, and Brazilian jiu-jitsu became well known in the mid-1990s when Royce Gracie won a series of victories in the newly created Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) competitions.

It was around this time, in 1998, that Glassman moved his personal-training business out of Spa Fitness and into Franca's Brazilian jiu-jitsu studio.

"Glassman had a CrossFit area off to the side. The mats were off to the other side," Taylor said.

"He would train us," Taylor said about Glassman. "B.J. Penn, all the guys who fought in UFC and went on to win world championships in jiu-jitsu, he would train us all, and he'd do some workouts where he'd incorporate a round of grappling in the workouts."

Penn certainly found some common ground between CrossFit and fighting: He's responsible for the name Fight Gone Bad. Penn used the phrase to describe the harsh effects of the three- or five-round CrossFit workout Glassman designed to mimic the rigors of a UFC match.

Taylor said Glassman exposed him to ideas about Olympic weightlifting, high-intensity training and gymnastics movements.

"I got to be with Greg during that development stuff and watch this happen and directly, directly benefit from it," Taylor said.

A year after starting CrossFit, in 1999, Taylor won his weight class at the world championships and took third in the open division of the world championships in Brazil as a purple belt.

"When I won, a lot of what I won on was my fitness," Taylor said. "I was able to just go. I could go, go, go. I could push the pace at such a level that I was able to break some of the guys I was fighting," he said.

"Over the next three years I was really, really competitive," Taylor said. "Using CrossFit and jiu-jitsu together, I placed in the worlds three times ... I took a silver in the worlds as a black belt. That was probably my best achievement, the black-belt silver in 2001.

"From 1999 to 2001, I was working directly with Greg, and those were my achievements. My jiu-jitsu got better. I also evolved as an athlete, and I credit that to CrossFit."

The Mental Edge

Brandon Cunningham started CrossFit in 2006 as a way to train for the Firefighter Combat Challenge, an international fitness competition for firefighters. Cunningham won his first Firefighter Combat Challenge world championship in 2006, and around that time he took his first jiu-jitsu class.

"I came to the conclusion that all the stuff I was doing in the gym was a ridiculous waste of time or so time consuming because of all the things I wanted to do—try to grapple, compete in (the firefighter challenge), whatever."

Cunningham wanted to push boundaries, to go harder and faster.

A friend of Cunningham's told him about CrossFit, and he eventually found CrossFit Atlanta.

"Went up there and just got destroyed. It was a humbling experience—I was a world champion. That summer I went and got my L1 in Charlotte. Coach Glassman was there. From then on, I kept going with it and have always used it as my foundation for fitness and also my own preparation for competition," he said.

Cunningham, 33, won the Firefighter Combat Challenge three times as an individual (with multiple tandem and relay titles) and then decided to focus on jiu-jitsu. In 2011,

he won the ultra-heavyweight division of the Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu Pan American Championship, and he placed first in the same class again in 2014.

Cunningham didn't compete in 2012—that's the year he opened his affiliate, CrossFit Good Vibes in Grovetown, Georgia. In 2013, Cunningham took silver at the Pan Am Championships. Looking back, he realized 2011 and 2014—the years he won—had something in common.

"This year's training was very identical to 2011, the last time I won. In 2011 I was actually training at another gym, an MMA gym, a local one in town. It wasn't that great in preparing for high-level competition. I often trained by myself. What I did is I used my CrossFit workouts as my primary competition, so to speak. ... In 2011, it was primarily because I didn't have any training partners."

This year was busy for Cunningham. He teaches wrestling, coaches CrossFit, works as a firefighter and has a wife and a 5-year-old son.



Courtesy of Brandon Cunningham

"I can mentally break a human. I cannot do that to a CrossFit workout. I'll lose every time. Every single time. I don't care how fast I go: I'm going to get beat. Mentally, I think it's a huge thing." —Brandon Cunningham

"Every weekend I'm traveling and coaching, and obviously my students come first," Cunningham said. "Although (I was) getting mat time, pretty much all the time (was) dedicated to the students."

Cunningham's jiu-jitsu coach was in Atlanta, a five-hour round trip. That meant he couldn't get out there and train with the upper-level belts very often. To make up for it, Cunningham would push himself in his CrossFit workouts.

"I would push with (the workouts) as if those were the training partners that I needed, and the technical aspect is easy: I can do that with a dummy, I can do that with some of my students, I can do that with a training partner," he said.

Cunningham went into the 2014 Pan Am Championships injured but confident.

"Everything came down to knowing I was conditioned ... trusting my technique and my game plan from what little time I could fit in for myself," he said.

Although he spent more time on the mat in 2013, Cunningham thinks the increased amount of CrossFit led to his victories in 2011 and 2014.

"A lot of it is the mental aspect of it, which you get ... in every workout. I can mentally break a human. I cannot do that to a CrossFit workout. I'll lose every time. Every single time. I don't care how fast I go: I'm going to get beat. Mentally, I think it's a huge thing. I think that's what a lot of people don't understand, or haven't tapped into that potential, the mental game of what CrossFit gives you," Cunningham said.

Crossover Skills

What is it about CrossFit and Brazilian jiu-jitsu that work so well together?

"It's critical for a fighter to be able to explode and recover. The more often you can explode and the faster you can recover, the better your fitness is for fighting," Taylor said.

"I believe (CrossFit's) ... combination of movements, intensity and ability to scale workouts accordingly make it an ideal strength-and-conditioning program for the competitive grappler," he said.

Ray Regno is an owner and trainer of CrossFit Stronghold in San Diego, California. The affiliate offers CrossFit and Brazilian jiu-jitsu instruction.



Courtesy of Garth Taylor

Taylor (left) was an early client of Greg Glassman (center), who at one point taught CrossFit in a Brazilian jiu-jitsu studio.



Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

"I know that from my personal experience it has tremendously benefitted me, and I have my students do it. My athletes, on my comp team, are all doing a version of CrossFit." —Garth Taylor

Regno said both CrossFit and Brazilian jiu-jitsu rely on using the body's leverage to generate power.

"(CrossFit) transfers directly to jiu-jitsu because you learn how your body moves ... knowing your own limitations and joint limitations will help you understand other people's limitations," Regno said. "If it's uncomfortable for me to get in this position, it would be uncomfortable for them. That's the thing with jiu-jitsu. It's so technical it's like a chess game."

Regno said improved mobility is the biggest benefit for Brazilian jiu-jitsu competitors who try CrossFit.

"If their mobility was better they wouldn't have to tap out so soon. A lot of the joint manipulation you see in jiu-jitsu plays on the (stiffness) of the joint, but if you are working on that joint mobility, if you are working on overall flexibility, you have a lot more wiggle room to get out," Regno said.

Taylor teaches three days a week at the CrossFit Inc. Headquarters in Scotts Valley, California, and he said he noticed a difference teaching Brazilian jiu-jitsu to advanced CrossFit athletes.

"They have everything they need to be good grapplers. They are bull strong, they move quickly, they have good

endurance, and they get the concept of exploding. They take coaching really well, they are used to being in a class environment, and they learn complex movements easily," Taylor said.

The only CrossFit habit that gets in the way of Brazilian jiu-jitsu is the intensity CrossFit athletes bring to the mat.

"They are ready to run through the wall," Taylor said.

"They make mistakes and run headlong into traps," he said.

"A wrestling match is not a WOD. You don't get a better score for finishing fast, for finishing first. They gotta learn some play. But my experience coaching elite CrossFitters and having them grapple, it's completely clear to me that this is beneficial. I have no idea why anybody would say it's not."

While he believes CrossFit and jiu-jitsu are complementary, Taylor said competitive athletes should be careful not to overtrain when combining the two.

"There certainly is a balance," Taylor said. "With the intensity of CrossFit, and with the demands of the sport of jiu-jitsu, you can definitely overtrain. You can definitely become where your performances on the mat are going to be diminished."

Functional Fighting ... (continued)

The key, as with any sport, is to balance CrossFit training for general physical preparedness with the demands of sport-specific training or competition.

As someone who has a foot in both worlds, Cunningham said he frequently sees Brazilian jiu-jitsu athletes bashing CrossFit.

"The classic meme is 'I don't do CrossFit, I play a real sport,'" Cunningham said.

"People are just uneducated. That's the biggest thing," he said. "You don't do CrossFit to get better at jiu-jitsu; you do CrossFit to be a better athlete, which translates to being able to perform better. That's the focus—human performance—and no matter what arena that is, that's going to make you better," he said.

Laura Hart, who owns CrossFit Indulto in Sandy Springs, Georgia, has been doing CrossFit for four years and Brazilian jiu-jitsu for about six. She said community is very important in jiu-jitsu, just like with CrossFit.

"Both of them are 'individual team sports,' (and they are both) all about community and team and the people you surround yourself with, but it's still just you out there. It

really impacts your whole situation if you can't surround yourself with people you are comfortable with," Hart said.

Hart found a jiu-jitsu academy supportive of her love of CrossFit and said the athletes in her CrossFit gym are very interested in learning about jiu-jitsu.

She thinks the two disciplines work very well together—her grip strength helps her hold on tight to her opponent's gi, for example.

"My guard in jiu-jitsu is pretty sick," Hart said. "Even if I'm with people who are better than me, it gives me time to think, because I can get my leg in there. Having strong legs, if I need to open my hips hard, or jump to my feet ... it's much easier because of my balance."

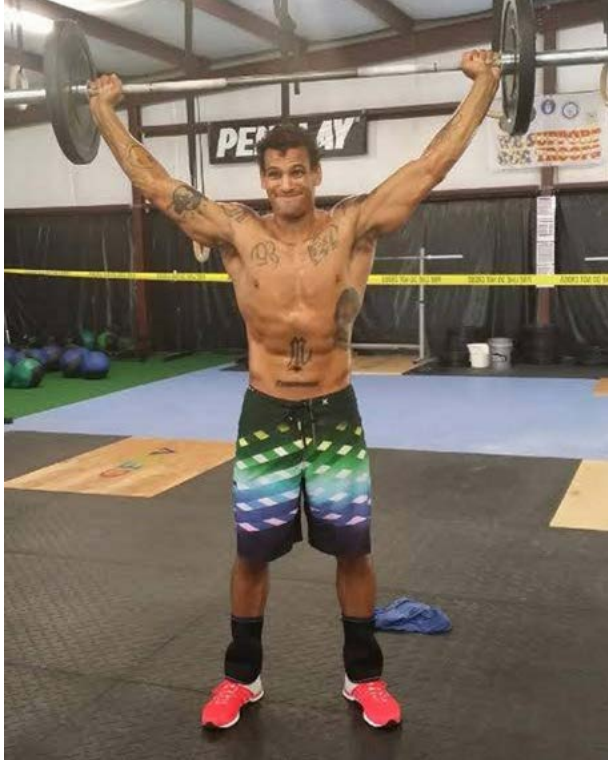
Along the lines of CrossFit's advice to "learn and play new sports," Hart thinks CrossFit athletes could learn something from jiu-jitsu.

"In jiu-jitsu you learn respect," Hart said. "You respect your teammates, you respect your belt, the ground that you walk on. When your teacher speaks, you don't speak. In CrossFit, especially as your gym gets busier, and it starts



Courtesy Laura Hart

Laura Hart owns CrossFit Indulto and said CrossFit gives her advantages on the mat.



Courtesy of Brandon Cunningham

“You don’t do CrossFit to get better at jiu-jitsu; you do CrossFit to be a better athlete, which translates to being able to perform better.” —Brandon Cunningham

to get more mainstream, you start to have people coming who kind of lose the fact that ... people work really hard to be good at CrossFit, and I think that people forget to respect that.

“You can’t just come in and throw the barbell around and be awesome. You have to respect your equipment. You have to respect your space and the person next to you.”

Cool and Healthy

Taylor witnessed the birth of CrossFit and has been doing Brazilian jiu-jitsu for 20 years. He says he’s not sure why so many jiu-jitsu athletes dislike CrossFit.

“CrossFitters talk about funny stuff and wear funny clothes, but let me tell you, jiu-jitsu guys talk about funny stuff and they wear funny clothes,” Taylor said.

“I know that from my personal experience it has tremendously benefitted me, and I have my students do it. My athletes, on my comp team, are all doing a version of CrossFit,” he said.

Taylor said the bottom line is simple. Both Brazilian jiu-jitsu and CrossFit “are both really cool and they are both really healthy, and being involved in either one is going to make your life better, so what’s the problem?” he said.

Although Brazilian jiu-jitsu’s history is longer than CrossFit’s, both sports are hybrids of other disciplines. Brazilian jiu-jitsu is a mix of the most effective elements from judo and jiu-jitsu to create a dominant fighting style, just like CrossFit combines gymnastics, weightlifting and high-intensity training in the pursuit of overall fitness.

As many have discovered, bringing the two together is a powerful combination.



About the Author

Hilary Achauer is an award-winning freelance writer and editor specializing in health and wellness content. In addition to writing articles, online content, blogs and newsletters, Hilary contributes to the CrossFit Journal and the CrossFit Games site. An amateur boxer-turned-CrossFit athlete, Hilary lives in San Diego, California, with her husband and two small children and trains at CrossFit Pacific Beach. To contact her, visit hilaryachauer.com.