

A man in a dark t-shirt and shorts is performing a pull-up in a gym. He is silhouetted against a bright doorway in the background. The gym is dark, with several wooden rings hanging from the ceiling. The floor is covered with black mats. There are some equipment items like a white bucket and a wooden block on the floor.

Make Your Own Luck

By Hilary Achauer

Three cups of coffee, six hours of coaching, four hours on the computer and one life-changing encounter: a day in the life of affiliate owner Mark Lin.

Mark Lin was not happy to be in AutoZone.

“After the DMV and a country-music concert, AutoZone is my least-favorite place,” Lin said. He just wanted to get into the parts store, buy the battery for his mini motorcycle—which he uses to chase the members of his gym when he suspects they are sandbagging the 400-m run—and get out.

Lin’s days are long. The owner of CrossFit 858 in San Diego, California, Lin has been running his affiliate since 2011, and although he employs five other coaches, he’s in charge of the gym’s programming, accounting, marketing, social media, legal issues, vendor management and membership. He also coaches two or three classes and acts as assistant coach for a few more throughout the day.

On that day in May, a trip to AutoZone was one of the things on Lin’s massive to-do list. What Lin didn’t know was that the irritating errand would lead to a chance encounter with one of the AutoZone employees—and the interaction would change both lives.

A close look at a day in the life of an affiliate owner is a window into the appeal—and the challenge—of the job. Like most business owners, Lin works long hours and wears many hats.

Unlike many business owners, Lin is witness to life-changing moments, to people discovering a strength they never knew they had, to a community coming together in service.

For Lin, it all starts at 5 a.m.

// Not a Morning Person //

Lin doesn’t use an alarm clock to wake up. Instead, he uses two iPhones and an iPad, all set to different times.

“It’s a confusion tactic,” he said of the multiple alarms. “I have to shock and awe myself awake.”

After waking up, Lin puts on whatever clothes he can find and drinks two cups of coffee with almond milk. At the same time, he checks email, answering questions from members and handling any membership issues. Then he takes a tour of social media, going through his Facebook and Instagram feed to see if anyone has posted on the gym page, and he posts something of his own if he’s inspired.

Around 5:45, Lin leaves for the gym. If he’s running on schedule, he takes his truck.

“In the truck, the drive takes 15 to 17 minutes,” he said. “If I’m running late, I take my black Lexus IS from my old life (as a pharmaceutical sales rep), and I can make it in 10 minutes,” he said.

Before opening a gym, Lin spent 11 years in sales and marketing in the pharmaceutical, biotech and medical-device industry. It’s easy to see why he was good at sales. He’s outgoing, easy to talk to and always ready with an amusing analogy or anecdote. However, he’s not a glad-hander—even when Lin makes a joke, he speaks carefully, choosing his words deliberately.

Lin arrives at CrossFit 858 just in time to coach the 6-a.m. class, which he does three times a week.

“When I open the gym, I always think about something Greg Glassman said. I don’t remember the exact quote, but it was something like, ‘When you roll open the garage doors, remember you have the best fucking job in the world,’” Lin said.

Lin is not a morning person, and it’s a struggle for him to make those early classes. Lin could ask one of his five coaches teach the 6-a.m. slot every day, but he doesn’t.



Like many affiliate owners, Mark Lin divides his time between managing the business, coaching athletes and caring for his family.

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“I realize sometimes people come in for different reasons, but one of the reasons could be the coach or the owner,” he said. “People have preferences on coaches. Some people like me, some people like other coaches. I try to be physically present if I’m not coaching.”

After he’s done teaching the 6-a.m. class, which Lin calls “the 6-a.m. cult,” he teaches the class at 7.

“I’m usually at the gym until about 8:30 a.m., doing admin stuff for those two classes, logging in sales, putting up an Instagram video or picture if (a member) hit a PR or I took a funny photo,” he said.

Then Lin locks up the gym and goes back home. He and his fiancée, Kelsey, have three dogs: two chihuahuas and a mutt. Lin walks the dogs and then makes his breakfast, usually two scrambled eggs, bacon, mushrooms and another cup of coffee.

If he has errands to do, Lin tries to fit those in after breakfast before heading back to the gym. It was in one of these small pockets of down time that Lin went to the AutoZone and met Gerardo “Jerry” Sandoval.

// A Chance Encounter //

For most of Sandoval’s life, his biggest health challenge was his weight. In 2011 he was 31 years old and weighed 400 lb. at 5 foot 9. He knew something had to change, so he went on a liquid diet, losing about 100 lb. in eight months.

Instead of feeling better, the weight loss made Sandoval feel worse. He was fatigued and weak, but the doctors couldn’t find anything wrong with him.

Everyone blamed his poor health on his weight. One day, Sandoval felt so bad he went to the hospital. A blood test revealed an astronomically high white-blood-cell count and a dangerously low count for red blood cells.

“How are you still standing?” a nurse asked Sandoval after she saw the results.

“I’m Mexican. That’s how we do it,” Sandoval remembers saying.

He immediately got a blood transfusion, but even after Sandoval stayed in the hospital for a month, the doctors couldn’t determine the cause of his sickness. Eventually, they sent him home and told him they’d call him when they had news. A week later, Sandoval got the call. He had Stage 4 lymphoma with 50-50 chances of living. Out went the diet plans. The new goal was survival.

Sandoval started his year-long chemotherapy treatment right away, during which time his doctors told him he shouldn’t lose weight.

“Ice cream helped a lot,” Sandoval said of the pain, fatigue and nausea of chemo. He gained back the weight he had lost, and then some.

Since 2011, Sandoval has had 10 rounds of radiation in addition to the chemotherapy. Once he finished treatment he weighed 412 lb., and his doctors told him it was time to lose the weight. In fact, they said he had to lose weight before continuing with his cancer treatment.

Sandoval said he wanted to try losing weight on his own, and the doctors gave him six months. Without support or a plan, nothing happened. It was time for the next step: gastric bypass surgery. The surgery was deemed medically necessary, so doctors put Sandoval on the fast track.

When Lin entered AutoZone, Sandoval was almost finished with the classes and counseling required before the surgery. It was time to schedule a date.

Sandoval works in the wholesale department of AutoZone and doesn’t usually enter the retail side. That day, he needed something from the store. Like Lin, Sandoval wanted to get in and out as quickly as possible.

“I didn’t want to deal with customers,” Sandoval said, “but then (Lin) walked in, all smiles. I asked him, ‘How can I help you?’”

As Sandoval rung up Lin’s purchase, the two started talking. Lin noticed the Livestrong tattoo on Sandoval’s forearm and asked what it meant.

Sandoval told Lin his story.

“He told me the doctor wanted him to lose weight before proceeding with more treatments,” Lin said. Sandoval told Lin he was about to have gastric bypass surgery.

Lin knew there was another way.

“I let Jerry know I owned a gym and did CrossFit. He had no idea what CrossFit was. I also told him about a member, Bernard Llave, who survived leukemia,” Lin said.

Lin gave Sandoval the name of an affiliate close to him and left the store. As Lin drove home, he kept thinking about Sandoval’s story. He thought about the cost of joining a CrossFit gym, how unlikely it was that Sandoval would actually show up and how dire his health was. Lin decided this wasn’t something he could pass along.

“I called Jerry back at the store and told him to disregard the referral. I told him that I would offer him a free membership to train at CrossFit 858, and that I opened the box to help people like him,” Lin said.

That night, Sandoval went home and Googled “CrossFit.” What he found on YouTube terrified him.

“There’s no way this fluffy human can do that,” Sandoval said.

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At Lin’s urging, Llave—the leukemia survivor who is a member at CrossFit 858—contacted Sandoval through Facebook. Then, about a week later, Sandoval met Llave at the Team in Training Inspiration Dinner before the Rock ‘n’ Roll Marathon in San Diego. Llave told Sandoval he should try CrossFit. Lin kept calling Sandoval, urging him to come.

Lin knew the CrossFit community would pull together and change Sandoval’s life.

“I’ve seen what it could do,” Lin said. “I know you can’t have enough help, and so I was persistent.”

Finally, Sandoval decided to trust the stranger who was offering him a free membership.

“If he’s reaching out, I thought I should try it,” Sandoval said. He showed up two weeks later.

The first day was the hardest. Sandoval said he almost turned around and went home when he arrived and saw people sweating, lifting barbells overhead and swinging on the pull-up bar. Then Lin saw Sandoval and called him over.



Through a chance encounter at AutoZone, Lin helped Jerry Sandoval get on the path to health.



After a reluctant start, Sandoval has become a fixture in the 6-p.m. class at CrossFit 858.

There was no going back.

“I think I did air squats the first day,” Sandoval said. “I couldn’t move for three days.”

But he kept coming. Partly because Lin was so persistent and partly because of the attitude of the other members.

“I didn’t feel judged by all these fit humans,” Sandoval said. “Everybody was really supportive without knowing me.”

// Beat the Owner //

On the days he doesn’t have errands or meetings, Lin tries to make it back to the gym for the 11-a.m. class for his own workout.

“I’m usually awake enough by then (to work out),” Lin said. He thinks it’s important to mix it up with the members at least once a day.

“When you are a coach or you own a place and you don’t work out with the people, you create a sense of elitism. And I am not an elite athlete,” Lin said with a smile.

Lin said he remembers reading about retired Gen. Tommy Franks of the U.S. Army, who would lead thousands of troops during the day and be the first one to get up and sing karaoke out of tune at night.

“You need to have that balance and sweat next to the people you’re leading,” Lin said. The only problem, he said, is that the members always trying to beat him.

“I’m like, c’mon! I’m almost 36!”

After he watches the noon class, Lin goes home again for lunch, which is usually ground turkey with peppers.

“I’ve been weighing my food. I count my macros. I’ll weigh it out, will know how many grams of protein, fat and carbs I’m eating,” he said.

Lin is done with lunch by about 2:30 p.m. He walks the dogs again and then spends more time on the computer handling administrative tasks, answering phone calls and returning email.

“I’m back to the gym by 3 p.m. if I’m doing a second workout,” he said. Lin doesn’t always do two workouts in a day—much of the time he’s a one-and-done kind of guy.

“I’ll usually coach from 4 to 6 p.m., and some days I’ll take the 6-p.m. class or stay and assist.”

Lately, Lin has been making sure he’s around for the 6-p.m. class. That’s when Sandoval shows up.

“With Jerry, I’ll try to be there to coach him, or I will adjust it so my workout will coincide with his,” Lin said.



Sandoval is down 20 lb. after a month of CrossFit. Next up: work on his diet.

After Sandoval came to CrossFit 858 that first time and Lin saw what his capabilities were, he sent an email to all the coaches, letting them know what movements Sandoval could do and giving them scaling ideas. The priority, as always, was safety. But Lin wanted Sandoval to participate as much as he could.

“Some of it was trial and error,” Lin said. “We found out with his body weight, jumping is not good for his joints, so instead of burpees we figured out high knees. Push-ups we modified to the wall.”

Lin also realized he needed to handle the warm-up differently for Sandoval.

“Normally we’d do a 400-m run and then something like 3 rounds of jumping jacks and this or that,” Lin said.

“Well, if we do that, he’s going to take the whole class. So what we’ll do, if he’s there, we send everyone out for a 400, and I’ll kind of point at him and he’ll know that means do a 200.”

Lin doesn’t want Sandoval to feel singled out in any way, so he’s had the coaches adjust the rest of the warm-up. Instead of doing 3 rounds of a warm-up, the coaches have the class do a set of movements for five minutes.

“(The other members) love him,” Lin said. “We’ve never flat-out said what his story was, in terms of ‘he’s got cancer,’ but we’ve hinted at it through social media,” he said. “I think any time we’ve put up pictures or videos of someone of his size trying, you automatically have that feeling: You want

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to root this guy on, but when you find out his story, you want to root them on even more.”

After a month of doing CrossFit three times a week, Sandoval has lost about 20 lb. without addressing his diet. That’s next on Lin’s agenda. Meanwhile, the doctor keeps calling Sandoval about the gastric bypass surgery. Sandoval hasn’t returned his calls.

// Heading Home //

Finally, it’s 7 p.m. On a typical day, Lin spends about six hours coaching, assisting or observing classes and many more handling the administrative side of the business. He’s usually home by 7:30 p.m., hopefully in time to eat dinner with Kelsey.

“After dinner, I catch up with my fiancé and watch TV.” His favorite shows are “The Walking Dead” and “Sons of Anarchy.”

"I try not to open up my computer," Lin said. At Kelsey's request he's been working on not checking his email and phone at night.

Kelsey goes to bed at 9:30, and Lin tries to do the same, but often his mind is still spinning with things he needs to do.

"Usually what happens is I tuck her in and I get back on the computer, do more admin stuff."

Lin shuts off his computer around 11 p.m. His day is done.

// Putting in the Work //

Lin said he feels lucky to live the life he does. The truth is luck had very little to do with Lin's current situation.

When Lin decided he wanted to leave corporate life and open a gym, he didn't immediately quit his job. First, he put in some time as a coach at nearby CrossFit Mission Gorge.

Then he started a free bootcamp class near his house on Tuesday, Friday and Sunday mornings at 6 a.m. After the class finished, Lin got in his car for a 32-mile commute to a job he hated.

Lin didn't charge for his bootcamp but asked two things of the participants.

"All I wanted from anybody who attended was 100 percent effort so they could get results, and if they liked what they saw, keep coming. If they felt the need to give anything, I asked them to buy a kettlebell, buy a medicine ball, bring it to the class, and it became part of the class," he said.

In that way, Lin started to gather equipment for his affiliate.

Lin's first bootcamp had three people. Using Facebook and word of mouth, his biggest class attracted 45 people within four months.

"At that point, people were losing 20 or 30 lb. just from doing (the bootcamp).

They were my billboards, they were my advertising. I asked them to bring a friend or two each time, but I didn't charge anyone."

He opened CrossFit 858 in July 2011, and about 80 percent of his bootcamp participants became members. Lin was cash-flow positive within 10 days.

I met with Lin a few times for this story. After we spent over an hour in a coffee shop one morning, Lin sent me an email at night.

"One of the things I bitched about more than anything in my corporate career is the lack of respect of work/life balance. But as I sit here typing to you at 10:15 p.m., 13 hours after we met and seven hours away from my wake-up alarm, and with my (fiancée) asleep alone in bed, I realize the irony of the situation," he wrote.

It wasn't the long hours of the corporate world that bothered Lin; it was that he was spending all that time on something that meant nothing to him.

The days are long, but for Lin the hours add up to something. Instead of meeting someone like Sandoval and feeling helpless, Lin can reach out and offer him hope, community and a chance at better health.

"I feel the strength in my body," Sandoval said after a month of doing CrossFit three times a week.

And more than that, he feels strength from those around him.

For Lin, it's all in a day's work. //

About the Author

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