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Fit to Teach

Staff at Cannon School set an example for their students as CrossFit is set to become part of the elementary curriculum in 2015.

By Brittney Saline

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Courtesy of Amber Herlocker

At 16 years old, Meredith Davis (then Wittman) was strong.

A ballerina of 12 years, Davis used her thick, sinewy thighs to propel herself nimbly across the floor as music swelled. Her back muscles rippling as she extended in a graceful arch, she looked to her instructors for approval.

“Your legs look like tree trunks,” Davis quoted her teacher. “You should stretch them out a bit because we don’t want to look like that.”

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The callous remark was the prelude to a 10-year battle with distorted body image and eating disorders. But when CrossFit taught Davis to love PRs more than pants size, she ended the war and took up a cause. The dancer-turned-science-teacher would use CrossFit to forge an army of fit educators—the role models she never had.

“It’s important as an educator to set a positive example,” she said. “Your body is meant to do things. It’s not just meant to hold clothing or to look a certain way.”

Finding Purpose

When Davis, now 29, was still in diapers, she danced her way down the halls to her mother’s music boxes. After being enrolled in ballet at age 4, she danced competitively from 11 to 17, sacrificing outings with friends, sleepovers and summer camp to study her art.

“I loved the discipline required,” she said. “I loved the fact that you could express almost any emotion with movement, the fact that your body does things you didn’t think it could before.”

But on the stage, aesthetics were more important than function. At 16 years old, Davis cut her intake to just 800 calories a day

and whittled her 5-foot-2 frame down to 85 lb. in an attempt to destroy the muscle her teachers found unsightly.

For the first time in her life, people ogled her muscular legs with admiration, not disgust.

“That’s when I started getting the solo pieces,” she said.

After a year of surviving on a spoonful of yogurt and a few clementines per day, Davis started losing her hair. When her doctor warned her she might never have children, she decided the spotlight wasn’t worth it.

“But I didn’t know how to gain weight in a healthy way, so I ate like crap and I ballooned up,” Davis said, recounting her rapid 60-lb. weight gain.



Courtesy of Gary Roberts

After Meredith Davis had a chance meeting with Greg Glassman, 18 teachers and administrators from Cannon School took a 12-week course at CrossFit Vitality.



No longer ashamed of her strength, Davis uses CrossFit to forge an army of healthy role models in her school.

Too self-conscious to face the studio mirrors, she quit dancing competitively when she began college.

"I was a mess," she said. "I didn't know what to do with myself if I wasn't dancing, because that was all I had known."

Davis continued to struggle with poor body image throughout college and into her first few years of teaching, doing penance on the elliptical machine for every candy-coated slip-up.

When her Globo Gym membership expired in the summer of 2012, she took to the track outside the school where she taught. Remembering workout suggestions she had read in a popular fitness magazine, she spent a hot August afternoon doing 400-m sandbag-sprint repeats in the sun.

"It sounded fun and I wanted to sweat," she said.

Her antics attracted the attention of a curious passerby.

"He came over and said, 'Do you do CrossFit?'" Davis recounted. "I asked him what CrossFit was, and he said, 'You're doing it.'"

After a brief Internet search, Davis found herself on the neon-green AstroTurf at CrossFit Vitality. And for the first time in her life, people ogled her muscular legs with admiration, not disgust.

"My mentality totally shifted," she said. "I could eat food again and realize it's good for me because it's going to make me stronger. And to get this rush of killing a workout makes you feel so positive, like you can conquer anything."

Five months after starting CrossFit, Davis began coaching at CrossFit Vitality. But still she saw her 16-year-old self reflected in the eyes of her teenage students, many of whom were girls struggling with the same poor body image Davis had fought.

"I didn't know what was my purpose because I wasn't dancing," she said. "Now I thought my purpose in life might be to help someone else ... and the only way to do that is to be a role model, because there's no class for self-confidence."

A Window of Opportunity

On Feb. 28, 2013, Davis' vision became a reality.

It was the morning after the live announcement of Open Workout 13.1 at CrossFit Vitality, where the world watched CrossFit Games athletes Dan Bailey and Scott Panchik take on the 17-minute couplet of burpees and snatches.

Stepping into Starbucks for her morning coffee, she recognized the man sitting at the table to her left. It was Greg Glassman, Founder and CEO of CrossFit Inc.

"I introduced myself and said, 'I just wanted to tell you that this has changed my life,'" Davis said.

But Glassman did more than listen when Davis told him of her dream to bring CrossFit into Cannon School, an independent school in North Carolina serving students from junior kindergarten through 12th grade. He offered to fly her to Northern California to visit Saratoga High School, where students do CrossFit as their regular physical-education curriculum.

"I just started crying on the spot," Davis remembered.

At Saratoga High School, home to CrossFit Sawmill, CrossFit is mandatory for all students not participating in team sports or marching band. CrossFit classes are taught by Level 1 trainers who are also classroom teachers or coaches for team sports.

"It was neat to see so many kids involved and to hear that test scores had improved after the advent of the curriculum," Davis said.

As she observed the young co-eds doing cleans side by side, she saw CrossFit's potential to transform her own students' lives.

"In the gym, everyone's egos get checked, and the popular guy could be out-lifted by a smaller girl," she said. "It diminishes a lot of that high-school banter that screws people up."

Armed with fresh inspiration, knowledge and Glassman's support, Davis returned to North Carolina eager to change lives with CrossFit. Though the administration would not bring CrossFit into the classroom just yet, it would send a coalition of teachers out to test the waters. And so in November 2013, Davis piloted a 12-week program immersing 18 members of the faculty and administration at Cannon School in CrossFit. The group trained three days per week at CrossFit Vitality.

"It will impact people positively more than it will negatively," Davis said. "I believe that with my whole heart."

Building Role Models

Just after 4 p.m. on a crisp November Monday, CrossFit Vitality coach Steve Pinkerton stood before 18 hesitant Cannon School teachers and administrators, demonstrating the air squat.

"I don't care how many inches we lose, I don't care what our bodies look like in three months," he said. "All I care is that we feel better."

The circle stared back at him with crossed arms and dubious expressions.

"They all looked like students on the first day of school," Davis said. "They were all very self-conscious."

With the new athletes' ages ranging from mid-20s to mid-60s and athletic backgrounds varying from former college athlete to those who had never run a mile, Pinkerton started slowly.



Courtesy of Amy Holland

Spanish teacher Michelle Zelaya had never lifted weights but can now clean and jerk 130 lb.

"We worked on a lot of mobility and stretching and spent the majority of the first two weeks learning how to squat correctly," he said. "My goal from the very beginning was simple: I wanted them to feel better."

For 36-year-old Michelle Zelaya, the goal was just to keep coming. A Spanish teacher for grades nine to 12, the educator of 13 years and mother of two wasn't used to taking time away from her students to focus on herself.

"I have to be available to each of them, and each of them has many different needs and wants and demands," Zelaya said.

But she knew that in order to best serve her students, she had to start taking care of herself.

"I have to have the energy and stamina to be able to give them what they need," she said. "I knew I needed something, but I didn't know what that something was until this opportunity came along."

Over 12 weeks, Pinkerton turned the educators into athletes.

After a 10-minute warm-up, the class would perform 15 to 20 minutes of skill work focusing on midline stability and the fundamentals of movements such as the squat,

deadlift and press. Then they would finish with a 10- to 12-minute workout, occasionally done in teams to build skills in trust and communication.

By the second week, the once-apprehensive educators were joking about burpees and celebrating each other's milestones.

"I think the biggest limitation was mentally being able to prepare for the workouts," Pinkerton said. "It was out of the ordinary routine, and I could tell in the beginning quite a few of them weren't overly excited to be at the box getting ready to train."

But by the second week, the once-apprehensive educators were joking about burpees and celebrating each other's



Courtesy of Steve Pinkerton

Videographer Gary Roberts (second from left) poses with educators from Cannon School.

milestones. After 12 weeks, athletes who could barely squat to parallel were performing full thrusters with an empty barbell.

Zelaya, who had never lifted weights before CrossFit, can now clean and jerk 130 lb., and she performed her first 5 unbroken push-ups before the final class.

"It was proof to me that if I stuck with something long enough and I was persistent, I was gonna get it," she said.

Angela Pennington, administrator and executive assistant to the head of Cannon School, ran her first mile on the last day of class, just before her 40th birthday. A car accident a decade ago and years of restorative surgery had left her grateful just to walk, and she had never imagined she would run again.

"I didn't think I was going to be able to do any of it," she said. "Now I run with my dog."

Pennington said she hopes her accomplishment will serve as an example to the students who recognized her best in a wheelchair or on crutches.

"I want them to know that you could have something bad happen to you, but that you can come back from that," Pennington said. "You can be thoughtful, you can be deliberate, and you can make small milestones, and one day those milestones are going to take you to a place you can't even believe."

According to Zelaya, the time carved out of her schedule to do CrossFit paid returns in her profession.

"As I went through the program, I started getting more energy, and I felt I was more impactful in the classroom," she said. "CrossFit teaches you to think on your feet and make decisions quickly and communicate effectively, and (it) gave me the energy and stamina to do more and perform better."

While the educators practiced CrossFit in the box, Davis taught it in the classroom, incorporating CrossFit videos into her anatomy-and-physiology curriculum and demonstrating movements in the weight room next door. The connection between her message and the teachers' transformations was not lost on the students, Davis said.



Courtesy of Gary Roberts

While the educators were apprehensive at first, they started to gain momentum by the second week of the program.



Courtesy of Amber Herlocker

CrossFit Vitality owner Steve Pinkerton started slowly with the group and gradually ramped things up as their skill and strength improved.

"The students saw our teachers gaining more muscle, and all of the sudden they're connecting with them better," she said. "It breaks down that stereotype that not everyone can be strong."

Twelve weeks after that first November workout, more than half the program's participants remained. The pounds that had melted from their bodies appeared on their barbells, and several have made CrossFit a permanent part of their lives.

"It's been a paradigm shift for me," Zelaya said. "It's no longer a workout to me; it's a lifestyle."

For Zelaya, that means she now strives to teach more than just Spanish in the classroom.

"I want my students to see me as a positive female figure, a working mom who's fit and who takes time to take care of herself," Zelaya said. "I want this next generation to make exercise a part of their lifestyle."

She added: "I want to be the one who sets this example for them."

While the school has yet to sanction CrossFit as physical education for its high-school students, Davis said CrossFit will be integrated into the elementary-school curriculum in 2015. In the meantime, the students have mentors who embody the example of a sound mind and fit body.

"I just hope that girls will have an interest in becoming strong," Davis said.

She added: "Strong is healthy, and wanting to be skinny isn't always a healthy outlook."



About the Author

Brittney Saline contributes to the CrossFit Journal and CrossFit Games website.