

# Coach

Maureen O'Hagan examines the dearth of females in the upper ranks of CrossFit coaches.

By Maureen O'Hagan

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CrossFit  
SEMINAR STAFF

Pop quiz: Name three people who coach CrossFit Games athletes.

If you follow the Sport of Fitness at all, you'll have no trouble. Bergeron. Martin. Chapman. Hyland. And so on.

Now for Part 2: Name three top female coaches—that is, women who coach Games athletes.

We posed this question to nearly a dozen longtime CrossFitters, and here's what they came up with:

Eva Claire Synkowski, said two-time Games competitor Annie Sakamoto.

Eva Claire Synkowski, said Hollis Molloy of CrossFit Santa Cruz.

Eva Claire Synkowski, said Ben Bergeron of CrossFit New England.

But beyond "E.C." Synkowski, Bergeron just scratched his head.

"I can't name another female that coaches a Games-level athlete," he said. "Which is really kind of shocking."

To be sure, there are other elite CrossFitters with female head coaches. Six-time Games competitor Christy Adkins, for example, was coached for several years by Melody Feldman of CrossFit MPH along with her current coach, John Main, but Feldman has since moved into more of a support role. But there's no question the roster is strikingly lopsided.

So where are all the female coaches?

After all, there are thousands of successful female affiliate owners. Many of them are just as inspired, knowledgeable and technically proficient as their more well-known male counterparts. There are plenty of women who help run CrossFit Inc., as well, including nearly 30 percent of the Level 1 Seminar Staff.

Yet at best only a small handful of women serve as the official coach to Games athletes.

The question is why?

## Equality From the Beginning

Before we begin to think about an answer, two points are worth noting. One is directly related to CrossFit and the other is more broad.

We'll start with the latter, Title IX, the federal law enacted in 1972 that said, "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving federal financial assistance."

Title IX was about educational opportunity, but today it's thought of as the law that prohibited gender discrimination in sport. After the law took effect, high schools and colleges began fielding female sports teams. Women began getting sports scholarships, which helped them through college. Eventually, there were professional leagues for female athletes.

The proof is in the numbers. Before Title IX, about 16,000 women played intercollegiate sports; today, that number is more than 200,000.

The impact of the law should not be underestimated. Caitly Matter, winner of the 2008 Games, played in the WNBA. Four-time Games veteran Lindsey Smith got a soccer scholarship that never would have been available to people in her grandmother's generation. But beyond legalities, Title IX both fueled and reflected an attitudinal shift about what sport can do for women—and what women can do for sport. Turns out women are a heck of a lot more athletic than they were once perceived. Strong has become the new sexy.

Which brings us to CrossFit. This year, the American athletes who competed in the individual events at the CrossFit Games have lived their entire lives in a post-Title IX world. They don't know a world where women are not considered athletes.

Certainly, CrossFit Founder and CEO Greg Glassman didn't underestimate the capabilities of female athletes when he designed the program. Women perform workouts alongside men at affiliates around the world. In the Games, some of the workouts are identical for men and women. Sometimes, the women beat the men in head-to-head competitions. (Remember Julie Foucher's performance in the grueling swim-bike-run event in the 2012 Games, when she bested all but eight of the men?)

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Sakamoto believes equality has been inherent in the sport.

"I feel like CrossFit has always highly acknowledged its female athletes," she said. From the early days, "I felt we got more attention for what we were doing physically than the males did. At that time, we rarely ever took our shirts off. I really think it was what we were doing athletically that was getting so much attention."

She brings up another good point, as well. Unlike many other big-time sporting events, the prize money is the same for male and female Games competitors.

"CrossFit," Glassman has said, "is as close to leveling the field as we can."

## Rising to the Top

This year, C.J. Martin of CrossFit Invictus coached 11 individual male and female Games competitors. Clearly, he's got something athletes want.

Ask him how he got there and he'll talk about two things: first, an early start with a top athlete who helped build Martin's reputation. And second, he started posting his competition programming online. That had the effect of attracting a wider following and deepening his reputation. Now he does online coaching for 60 athletes in addition to his Games competitors.

Bergeron did the same thing. He coaches three Games athletes, including Chris Spealler, one of his early successes, and puts his competition programming up on a freely accessible blog.

"I think a lot of coaches get well known because of their willingness to promote themselves," Bergeron acknowledged. "You don't see many female coaches out there promoting themselves in this way."



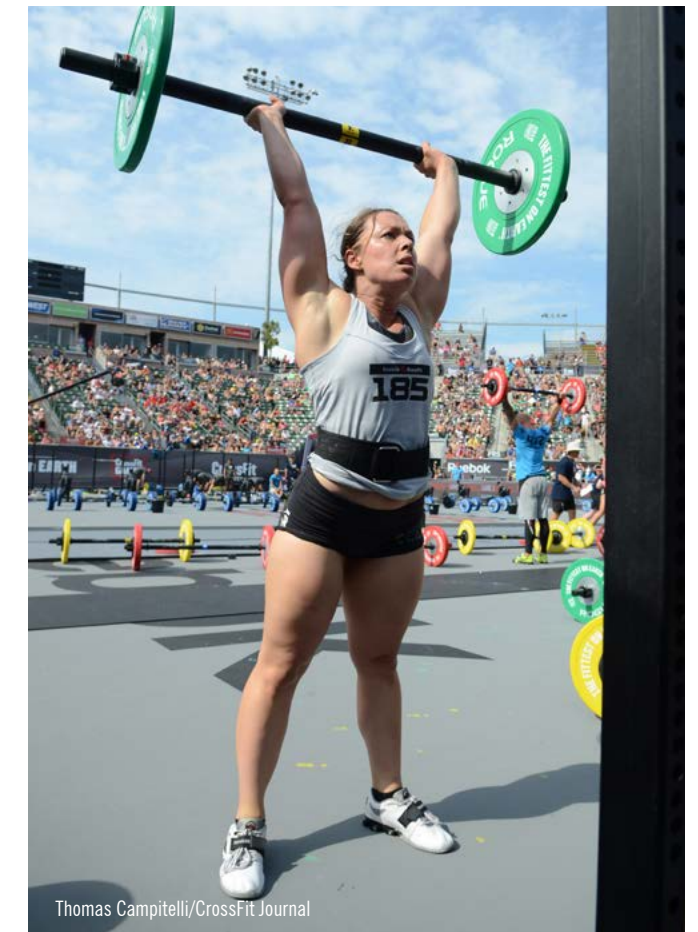
Staff/CrossFit Journal

## Additional Reading

For more on Title IX, read the CrossFit Journal articles "[Women's Wait](#)" and "[A Mandate and an Opportunity](#)" by Andréa Maria Cecil.

"Maybe for some reason females aren't as willing to promote themselves. Maybe they're not as willing to boast about accomplishments."

He has a point. And it's not just about sports. Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's chief operating officer, wrote a bestselling book in 2013 around that premise. It was called "Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead." As she surveyed the corporate world, she noticed women weren't putting themselves in the game the same way as men—literally and figuratively. Sometimes she'd notice they wouldn't even sit at the boardroom table, instead relegating themselves to the perimeter.



Thomas Campitelli/CrossFit Journal

CrossFit Games athlete Nichole DeHart is a top coach who assists C.J. Martin at CrossFit Invictus.



Richwell Correa/CrossFit Journal

Many top female coaches are part of CrossFit's Level 1 Seminar Staff.

"We hold ourselves back in ways both big and small, by lacking self-confidence, by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning in," she wrote. She cites studies bearing out that idea.

"Women need to shift from thinking 'I'm not ready to do that' to thinking 'I want to do that—and I'll learn by doing it,'" she believes.

Synkowski is one woman who made that shift.

## Getting in the Games

A manager for the Certification and Training Department and a member of its Seminar Staff, Synkowski has been involved in the sport for years and is known for her technical proficiency.

"I go to her as a reference all the time," Bergeron said.

In the 2012 and 2013 Games, she coached competitor Austin Malleolo, and she also worked with the veteran Smith in 2013, though the athlete didn't make it past regionals that year.

"Austin said people are always shocked to find out his coach is female," Synkowski said.

She came to the role organically. Malleolo had a coach for programming but initially went to Synkowski for help on his lifting technique.

"It's an area of my weakness and a passion of hers," he said. When his programming coach had to bow out (he was involved in planning the Games events, so there was a conflict of interest), he asked Synkowski to take over.

"I knew her skill set," Malleolo said. "She's among the best in the world."

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**"If Rich Froning had a female coach, I'm sure that coach would have lots of inquiries." —E.C. Synkowski**

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In the beginning, they both recalled, she wasn't sure she was right for the role. To her, programming for someone whose athletic abilities so far surpassed hers would be a challenge.



Alicia Anthony/CrossFit Journal

Annie Sakamoto learned about CrossFit's stance on equality when she trained with Greg Glassman in the early days.

"There was a time I could estimate based on my own performance," she recalled of her earlier days. "But now I can't use myself as any example for any program. I can't do everything Lindsey can do by any stretch, but I'm closer to her than what Austin can do."

That hurdle, she soon realized, applies to any Games coach. None of them can do what their athletes can do.

"As Games athletes get more and more out of reach, it becomes harder for coaches in general," she said.

She focused on her strengths: "knowing about CrossFit, about programming methodology and being able to assess his weaknesses relative to his competitors."

Malleolo said it made no difference to him that his coach was a woman. There's no set "female" coaching style, just like there's no "male" coaching style. He and other competitors are looking for one thing.

"All elite athletes want are results," he said. "Results are results. They're unbiased."

He added: "People want to get coached by people who coach champions."

Noted Synkowski, "If Rich Froning had a female coach, I'm sure that coach would have lots of inquiries."

So, you get to be a coach for Games athletes . . . by successfully coaching Games athletes. In that case, it makes it pretty tough to break into the field.

## A Larger Problem

The lack of elite female coaches isn't solely a CrossFit issue, of course. It's an issue in just about every sport. Less than half of women's NCAA teams, for instance, have female coaches, according to two Brooklyn College professors who have been surveying the field for 25 years. It's true for the Olympics, as well. In 2012, nearly 90 percent of accredited coaches attending the London Games were male, according to the International Council for Coaching Excellence



Alicia Anthony/CrossFit Journal

CrossFit's inclusive nature means a large number of females can be found at Level 1 Seminars, which will eventually produce more top-level female coaches.



Alicia Anthony/CrossFit Journal

We're so used to seeing male coaches, in fact, that it's easy to unconsciously stereotype coaching as a male role. Sakamoto, for one, said that until she was interviewed for this story, it hadn't even registered to her that there was a dearth of female coaches for CrossFit Games athletes.

"That's maybe the sad thing that some of those gender roles are so deeply ingrained," she said. "Even for somebody like me, I view myself as fairly progressive."

Then again, maybe that stereotype is working in another way. Maybe there are more female coaches than we realize—the problem is recognition.

"Nobody is operating in CrossFit in a vacuum," said CrossFit Santa Cruz coach Laurie Galassi. "Maybe it happens to be a male name that gets mentioned (as the coach), but there's often a woman or two there."

Martin realizes that when people think of Invictus, they may think about him. But he has two assistants, including Nichole DeHart. Invictus, he pointed out, "is also Nichole."

It's also true that many Games athletes don't have a single designated "coach." Many seek out an array of specialists for their expertise in a particular subject area. One of them is Diane Fu, of San Francisco CrossFit, who helps athletes hone their Olympic weightlifting.

As a young weightlifter, she sought out female coaches because she felt she could identify more with them and they would understand issues that are uniquely female.

"I was looking for role models," she said. There were a number of female athletes she looked up to, and some of them were exploring the idea of transitioning into coaching. But "when they started branching out more into coaching, they would end up stopping really short. Then they took a big divergence and started an online cookie shop or something."

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"I think you're going to see emerging female coaches." —C.J. Martin

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It seemed to Fu that not a lot of women really wanted to take on the role of coach. She wondered why.

"We have a lot of women in the strength-and-conditioning world that are actively coaching," she said. "But they haven't done anything for themselves to move themselves into a light where they can affect the greater population."

She said making that leap can feel risky.

"I just feel like they don't do anything to move themselves into that fear," Fu said.

That's why Fu created FuBarbell, which offers online Olympic-weightlifting training. For her, being a woman was an advantage.

"If I was a male coming into this sport, there are so many voices (that) I would have had to work harder to have risen to the point I'm at right now," she said.

"The playing field," she added, "is leveling itself out."

Martin agrees.

"I think you're going to see emerging female coaches," he said, noting that CrossFit is a relatively new sport in a world of fitness that is largely male-dominated.

"I'm not sure it's much more than just a matter of time." ■

#### About the Author

*Maureen O'Hagan is a Seattle-based journalist who is the recipient of numerous national writing and reporting awards. Skeptical by nature, she tried CrossFit for a newspaper story in 2009. Now she's hooked.*