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Competitive Conundrum

How much focus should affiliates place on CrossFit as a sport vs. CrossFit as a training method? Several box owners explain their approaches.

By **Andréa Maria Cecil**

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Andrea Savard

Consider this: The CrossFit methodology existed for 33 years before the inaugural CrossFit Games.

Yet, Ben Bergeron has noticed a trend of late.

“A majority of the affiliates are programming for their athletes like they’re going to compete in the sport. They haven’t recognized the difference between the sport of CrossFit and training with CrossFit,” said the coach to multi-year CrossFit Games athletes Chris Spealler, Michele Letendre and Becca Voigt.

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Michael Briam/CrossFit Journal

While many affiliates are programming for elite athletes, CrossFit Level 1 Seminar Staff members say that can be a mistake.

Bergeron's gym, CrossFit New England in Massachusetts, has been an affiliate since 2007, and today he is a member of CrossFit's Level 1 Seminar Staff.

"If you're a soccer dad or a soccer mom just trying to be fitter, you don't need a 500-lb. deadlift. If there's a big group of athletes in your gym ... that can deadlift 550, you're probably not programming well."

Elite-level competition does not define CrossFit, emphasized CrossFit HQ's Pat Sherwood, a former member of the Level 1 Seminar Staff who plans to open an affiliate in San Jose, California. Therefore, it's folly for affiliates to focus on elite-level competition as the end goal, he continued. Most athletes who walk through the door are simply trying to become better at everyday activities—better at life, Sherwood said.

"As long as you're living your fucking life, you're doing fucking CrossFit."

Rally the Troops

In Utah, CrossFit Park City would be empty if the box focused on elite competition.

"We wouldn't have anyone. We'd be in big trouble," owner and seven-time Games athlete Spealler said with a laugh.

He went on: "Our demographic is not one that really supports that. It's a really small group of people who are interested in competing, but most of that is for fun."

A couple of CrossFit Park City athletes are now hoping to qualify for the CrossFit Games regionals, but that's the exception, not the rule, said Spealler, who is a member of the Level 1 Seminar Staff and an instructor for the CrossFit Competitor's Course.

"That stuff happens, but it's over time."

And while the affiliate does host competitions, they're not intended for glory.

"(They're) really there for us to build the community," he explained.

More than 2,000 miles east—at CrossFit South Brooklyn—competitions and competitors alike unify members.

"The thing about the competitive people in your gym is, No. 1, it's a really small subset. ... But at the same time, you want to encourage those people because they rally the whole gym. Those people can be an inspiration to everybody else," said David Osorio, who opened the New York affiliate in 2007.

"Ultimately you have to come down to, 'What does the average member need?'"

He added: "The vast majority of people who we are working with—90, 95 percent—are doing (CrossFit) to be a little bit healthier. They don't know who Rich Froning is."

Same goes south of North America, where Reebok CrossFit PTY in Panama has a handful of in-box competitions throughout the year. The reward: beer.

"Ultimately you have to come down to, 'What does the average member need?'"

—David Osorio

"We do think competition has its value in terms of community building, keeping friends," said coach Thomas Patton. The gym—owned by his wife and Level 1 Seminar Staff member Adriana Roquer—has been an affiliate since 2010.

But elite competition wasn't the couple's intent when it opened CrossFit PTY.



Ali Sumson

*Competitions can create community and inspire many,
but affiliate owners should always take stock of the needs of their membership as a whole.*

"We set out to open a gym focusing 100 percent on kids, older adults, people who had given up on fitness," Patton explained. "We don't feed on being competitive—it's just part of our personality. We set out to teach human movement, proper function and that was it."

When the CrossFit Games Open began, the affiliate used it as a community event, he said. Because of it, some members started competing.

"It was never our main intention."

The Competitor Balance

When it comes to competitor programming, it's a delicate balance for affiliate owners to ensure it does not define their gym.

At CrossFit Roots in Boulder, Colorado, Nicole Christensen developed the program over the course of three years.

It started as one competitor class. Then it expanded to two, eventually grew to three and finally became a bona fide time investment.

"It's helping them get better at CrossFit in a way that's interesting to them. But it's definitely not the focus of our gym in the sense that the focus of our gym is to take care of all of our athletes," said Christensen, a Seminar Staff member and Certified CrossFit Coach (CF-L4) who opened her affiliate in 2009.

Christensen went on: "I am a firm believer—from an affiliate-owner standpoint—that my goal is to help people do CrossFit however ... that lets them (best) enjoy CrossFit."

More than 18 hours across the Pacific Ocean in Australia, CrossFit Brisbane went through a similar evolution with its competitor program.

"We were an affiliate well before the CrossFit Games, so our focus has always been teaching people to 'not suck at life' by training for a broad and inclusive fitness," explained Matt Swift, whose gym has been an affiliate since 2006, "but then when the Games became so popular, we had more and more people throwing themselves at competition."

To cater to them, CrossFit Brisbane started biasing its programming toward competition demands.

"But then that didn't work for the people not interested in competition," said Swift, a Level 1 Seminar Staff member, via email.

During the next five years, the affiliate tried multiple approaches—including naming a designated competition



Brian Sullivan

"Whether you're coaching competitors or coaching people who (just want to be fit), the coaching is the same."
—Nicole Christensen, owner of CrossFit Roots

squad—until it settled on its current model in which athletes opt in for extra work that is integrated into the daily workout.

Today, CrossFit Brisbane considers the competitors program a "subset" of the overall program, Swift said.

"The majority of our clients are what I would call 'health and fitness' CrossFitters," he explained. "The primary motivation for their training is to improve their life by improving their health and fitness. For these athletes, doing the standard program is enough to prepare them for recreational competition. ... We make sure that the level of competition remains fun and appropriate for their skills and fitness level!"

Like Bergeron, Christensen sees some affiliates preoccupied with developing a competitor program to the point where their primary concern becomes elite athletes.

"I think there's a lot of pressure on newer affiliates and affiliates in general to offer a competitors program, and that



ErikSchmaedeke

The beauty of competition is sometimes best displayed in the people who support the competitors.

somehow that validates them as a legitimate affiliate. But what they forget is whether you're coaching competitors or coaching people who (just want to be fit), the coaching is the same," she said.

"A lot of people lose sight of that and think they're gonna gain more members ... with coaching that's focused on competitors."

When he opens his affiliate, Sherwood said that won't happen.

"I also don't want competitors to ... influence the general population (as to) what you need to do to get fit."

—Pat Sherwood

"Anything which in any way, shape or form degrades the experience of the average client, I will squash," he said.

Sherwood added: "I don't want the competitors group to make the average person feel inadequate, inferior or whatever. I also don't want competitors to then influence the general population (as to) what you need to do to get fit."

A Matter of Interpretation

With the Games' ever-increasing popularity, the onus is on trainers to ensure athletes are getting the best CrossFit experience, Spealler said.

"Owners and coaches have a big responsibility," he explained. "They need to program for the community and not for the Games athletes."

But the worldwide competition's ubiquity sometimes presents a conundrum.

"The Games are really sexy, and they're very viewer friendly, and you have these people who look incredible," Osorio said. "We do have people who come in and say, 'Hey, I saw this on ESPN and I want to do that.'"



Aaron Wyché

At its core, CrossFit is about health and fitness. Competition simply provides a place for certain athletes to test that fitness against each other.

On the other hand, some people are intimidated, falsely believing Games competitors are representative of the typical CrossFit athlete.

“The Games are phenomenal,” Osorio continued. “How people perceive the intention of ... the Games ... (is a conversation) you have at your gym. The gym culture comes first, and that’ll express however people perceive the Games.”

It boils down to what kind of community affiliate owners want to create and the type of culture they want to nurture, Spealler said.

“That is what sustains a gym and that is what sustains a community—that level of care.”

He went on: “People have to make the decision to have that culture. They have to decide.”

Trainers and coaches must help members understand CrossFit is simply about making better people by showing examples of regular folks with monumental triumphs.

“Affiliate owners need to take the time to find that stuff, make the time to learn about that stuff and expose their box to that stuff, and not just, ‘Rich Froning winning for the fourth time,’” Spealler said.

Scott Panchik, a three-time Games competitor who opened CrossFit Mentality in Ohio last year, has a simple philosophy.

“At the end of the day it’s a fitness program. It’s something that is going to improve your health,” he said.

And his goal as an affiliate owner is to attract people who share the same passion: fitness.

“If they have goals ... competition is just going to naturally come. We don’t need an emphasis on that—just on great coaching.”



About the Author

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