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Coach, Counselor or Both?

CrossFit trainers find they're building athletes and relationships at the same time.

By Brittney Saline

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It was a rare warm November evening in Fort Wayne, Indiana, when Maureen Randall quit the workout.

Beats were dropping from the speakers at CrossFit Praus, but for once, the self-described class jokester wasn't dancing. The date marked 22 years since the night she was raped. She had been just 14 years old.

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Usually, she spent the anniversary locked indoors. Tonight, she tried to squat.

Silently, she wrapped her thumbs around the barbell in a snatch grip. She pulled. The bar floated up and she caught it above her head. But as she set her feet to sink into a deep overhead squat, her mind went dark, flashing back to the night of the assault.

The bar crashed to the floor.

"I broke," Randall recalled.

Affiliate owner Amanda Burge watched as Randall discarded her barbell and sat down outside the open garage door.

"I knew at the end of that WOD I needed to block out the rest of the box and focus on her," Burge said. "I knew she must be battling with something pretty rough to have quit."

After the clock had gone dark, Randall still sat, her head buried in her hands. Burge had a choice: Walk away, or dive in.

She dove.

"She and I had a long conversation, and we bonded there," Randall said. "It's amazing what sore muscles and emotion can do."

In that spontaneous heart-to-heart, Randall confided more to Burge than she had to anyone else, recounting the assault and revealing the bulimia she had battled ever since.

"She needed to get that load off her chest, and I was just there to allow her to do that," Burge said.

The conversation was the beginning of a mentorship between coach and athlete that extends beyond class to texts, phone calls and post-workout discussions about how Randall can use CrossFit to help overcome her past.

"Any time I need her, she's there—no questions asked," Randall said. "A lot of people coach and then they leave. With Amanda, that's not how it is."

As CrossFit coaches around the globe teach athletes to redefine themselves in the gym, they often become teachers of more than movement. As athletes struggle with everything from poor mobility to poor self-image,



Anne Duncan

Amanda Burge (left) has found that sometimes athletes need an ear as much as they need a lifting cue.

coaches are faced daily with the challenge of walking the line between coach and counselor.

For Burge, it's a no-brainer.

"We're not just puppet masters who program hellacious WODs," she said. "We're people, and we want them to know we're here for them. They trust us with their lives during a WOD, so why would they not trust us with their lives outside of CrossFit?"

Fitness: More than Physical?

The connection between physical training and psychological development has been recognized since the early days of CrossFit.

Coach Greg Amundson—the "Original Firebreather"—was one of the first pupils of CrossFit Founder and CEO Greg Glassman. Founder of the CrossFit Goal Setting Course, Amundson often quotes his mentor when working with athletes who are eager to learn the secret to a faster Fran time.

"The greatest adaptation to CrossFit takes place between the ears," Amundson said. "That's from Greg Glassman."

According to Amundson, the mind and body are intrinsically connected. Every choice to go back to the barbell or hang onto the pull-up rig for one more rep will shape athletes' attitudes.

"What you're doing is you're seeing the glass as half full," he said. "When that principle is felt in the gym, it's understood in the life of the athlete."

Coaches, Amundson said, are called upon to help athletes recognize this connection.

"What I've found is that I am in demand not because someone wants to learn the points of performance in the squat but because they want to learn the relevance of the squat in their life," he said. "What the trainer has to be prepared for is those moments when what the athlete really needs is life coaching, not physical-fitness coaching."

Still, not all are prepared to take on such a role. That's the difference, Amundson said, between a trainer and a coach.

"To refer to someone as a coach is like referring to someone in the martial-arts world as 'sensei'—a master, a sage," he said. "If the goal of the trainer is to become a coach . . . then very quickly they will notice that people are more interested in help outside the gym than help inside the gym."

He continued: "The coach might not have the answer, but chances are they know who does. It's about having the

professionalism to know they're not a doctor but to give this person what they can best: compassion, love and a referral."

Joe Stewart agreed.

"I think as a leader in a CrossFit box, you are assuming the position and responsibility to help people with building better health and fitness," said the owner of CrossFit Caro in Caro, Michigan. "And health is physical, emotional and spiritual, not just triglycerides and how much you can squat."

A former social worker and emergency-services specialist, Stewart said that coaching a client's mental and emotional health can be as simple as "getting to know your people."

"Not just their hip mobility, but you understand their character and demeanor," he said. "You can tell when something's on their mind. Sometimes it's just opening the door and saying, 'Hey, I'm available.'"

Stewart always made himself available to Daniel Younk, a 21-year-old intern at his affiliate.

Mourning his mother's death and struggling with unemployment, Younk was depressed. His volatile temper



Mackenzie McHugh

Good coaches realize the connection between the body and mind, and they use it to help athletes improve.

estranged him from others, and just living through the day demanded prodigious effort.

"Before CrossFit, I hated the world and had no faith in people whatsoever," he said. "I could see no goal worth achieving and no dreams worth fulfilling, and there wasn't a damn person worth fighting for or saving."

Dropping from 150 lb. to 125 lb. in a matter of months, Younk ran obsessively, calling it "penance." But when Stewart, an old hockey teammate, convinced him to try CrossFit, he learned exercise could be more than self-flagellation.

His first workout was Helen, 3 rounds for time of a 400-m run, 21 kettlebell swings and 12 pull-ups.

"It was horrible," Younk remembered, laughing. "It completely destroyed me, and it was awesome. I was physically spent and I felt so much better."

Stewart taught Younk to use CrossFit to work out his aggression, assigning slam-ball workouts when he sensed Younk's temper rising. But it wasn't just the workouts that improved Younk's outlook. He said it was conversation with Stewart that had the greatest affect.

"He's completely open to talking to you," Younk said. "He not only gives you an outlet physically, (but) he's there for you. He's got plenty of stuff to do, but he'll sit there and listen to you talk."

Having someone who would listen taught Younk how to speak. Formerly suspicious and quick to anger, he is now more trusting of both friends and strangers.

"Just give a shit. Just care."

—Joe Stewart

"I can have a conversation with someone without thinking how stupid they are or how they are going to use what I say against me later," he said. "Because of CrossFit and because of (Stewart), I'm more open. I don't see the world so pessimistically anymore."

It's not that coaches should try to replace the expertise of a trained counselor or therapist, Stewart said.



Mackenzie McHugh

A former social worker, Joe Stewart (right) pays particular attention to the mental state of his clients.

"If someone is having serious depression or suicidal ideations, they need professional help," he said. "I don't think a trainer should be doing therapy in their gym, but a therapist and a life coach are two entirely different things. It's just having a genuine passion for caring about others. Just give a shit. Just care."

Transparent Coaching

Sometimes mentorship looks more like confession than counseling. Coaches who are forthcoming about their own challenges naturally invite vulnerability in their athletes.

Emma Moberg, owner of CrossFit So ILL in Carbondale, Illinois, struggled with anorexia and compulsive running for 10 years before she discovered CrossFit. So when she noticed 26-year-old Kelli Levek going for long runs before and after the workout each day, Moberg pulled her aside for a conversation.

"I know that this is a recipe for disaster . . . because I used to be the same way," Moberg said. "If talking (about the) hell that I put myself through and the damage I did to my body can help just one person start to think differently about their habits, then it's worth sharing."

After Moberg confessed, Levek followed suit. In high school, she had been hospitalized twice during a two-year period of consuming little more than grapes, cola and coffee and running for several hours each day.

Though professional treatment and therapy nursed her back to stability, aspects of the disease remained, even after becoming a CrossFit athlete just more than two years ago.

"The idea of just working out for a 10-minute workout was really hard because I was used to running for hours," Levek said. "I would run, and then I would go to CrossFit. I wasn't getting stronger, and I was still struggling."

Intimately familiar with Levek's anxiety, Moberg offered an alternative. Any time Levek felt the need to do an extra workout, she could stay after the workout of the day—but only to lift.

For the first time, Levek trusted that she didn't need to punish herself for every calorie she ate. The evidence was before her, in the form of her coach.

"I really looked up to her before because she was so strong and confident," Levek said. "When she told me she had



Courtney Rybicki



Courtney Rybicki

Kelly Barcol (with goatee) offers life coaching at CrossFit Winnersville to help athletes care for all aspects of their health.

been through the same thing, it made me think I could someday be like that.”

Moberg never thought twice about speaking so candidly with her client. For her, being a great coach means being a role model.

“It’s the only way to foster trust,” she said. “If we expect our members to believe in what we’re teaching—that (CrossFit) will help them be better at life—then we need to set an example ourselves.”

Coaching, Not Coddling

Dennis Lesniak says coaches should not be surprised when clients look to them for help with more than their squat.

“Really, that’s what you signed up for,” said the owner of CrossFit 716 in Buffalo, New York. “You’re in this business to change people’s lives, and you’re going to have to help them overcome physical, mental and psychological boundaries that they didn’t know they’d have to cross.”

More than once, Lesniak has encountered an athlete overcome by tears mid-workout, a reaction he says is natural in the presence of demanding physical stimuli.

“We put up all these walls ... and when you’re physically tired, those walls break down,” he said. “In the heat of the moment, you’re physically exhausted and whatever you’re holding back comes up.”

What the coach does next, Lesniak said, “is different based on the coach’s experience and background ... we make sure they’re OK, and we keep going.”

Still, there is a difference between coaching and coddling, he said. Athletes are expected to meet him halfway and put in the effort he prescribes, whether physical or mental.

“I want to help people, but they have to understand that it’s a lot of work, and we’re not there to hold people’s hands,” he said.

You won’t find Syn Martinez holding any hands.

At CrossFit Harlem in New York City, New York, the workout changes every hour, the rep count rises for each interruption, and the rules prohibit talking during the workout. There’s little time for pep talks.

“My rule for my gym is really get rid of whatever’s frustrating you or ailing you before you get there,” Martinez said. “When you’re here, you’re under my tutelage, you’re gonna listen to me for 45 minutes or an hour, and you’re gonna go home.”

In fact, he’s designed his program to give athletes the tools they need to get fit and get out.

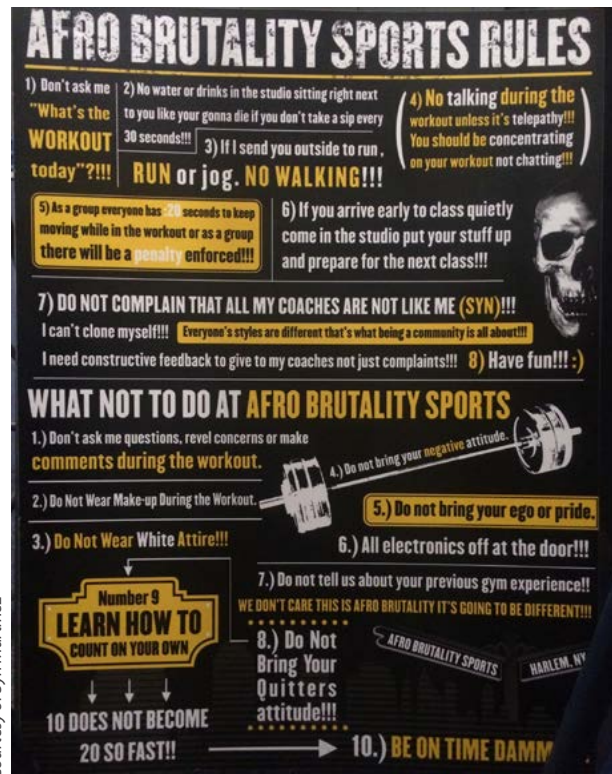
“People come in for a year or two years and they move on,” he said. “I’ve done what I can to try to embrace that. I just don’t believe in people being there for years. You come, get what you can and then move on ... it’s like teaching someone to fish.”

It’s not that Martinez doesn’t believe in helping people deal with their emotions. He just prefers to teach those lessons purely within the context of fitness.

“I preach mental toughness,” he said. “The way you are in the gym is the way you are in life.”

Athletes might come back from a 400-m run to find Martinez has changed the workout from front squats to thrusters. Got a problem with that? Now you’ve doubled the rep count for the whole class.

Meanwhile, Martinez looks on in silence. Martinez is not one to dish out applause and affirmation, so struggling athletes can expect a singular response if they dare doubt themselves.



Courtesy of Syn Martinez

Syn Martinez of CrossFit Harlem encourages his athletes to get fit and get out, and he does it in his own special way.

Courtesy of Greg Bishop



While some coaches choose to focus only on the physical, others work for mental and emotional connections. The right approach is the one that helps the athlete perform at his or her best.

"I say, 'Work harder,'" Martinez said. "You may see me do a high-five or a thumbs-up, but most of the time I'm pushing them to earn my respect."

Martinez recognizes that his athletes sometimes need a hand when dealing with the emotional baggage that comes out in the gym: Like Lesniak, Martinez has seen athletes break down in tears mid-thruster. But apart from a hug and a quick word of advice, he doesn't want them leaning too much on him for support.

"I'm always open to listening to what's going on with people and their problems and issues," he said. "But I try not to get too involved. I try to put the pressure on them to understand what's going on with them ... I don't want to own it and take it home with me."

Still, it's a balance that's hard to find, said Martinez, who has gathered a loyal following of athletes despite his challenging demeanor.

"I became that quarter pounder with cheese that you knew what it was going to taste like," he said. "There's a hidden dependency that I didn't know anything about. I just thought I was a gym owner running classes, and I became more than that."

Coaching Outside the Box

Wherever coaches draw the line, the fact remains that time is limited. Teaching back-to-back classes, managing administrative duties and cleaning chalk—or worse—off the floors can make in-depth one-on-one conversations with athletes rare.

"My rule for my gym is really get rid of whatever's frustrating you or ailing you before you get there."

—Syn Martinez

So when Kelly Barcol opened CrossFit Winnersville in Covington, Kentucky, he added an official life-coaching program to his affiliate's offerings. Other affiliates have done the same thing.

"There's only so much you can do in a group setting," Barcol said. "Sometimes there are things people need to talk about that not everybody needs to know."

A pastor for 11 years before affiliating, Barcol saw an opportunity to integrate his passion for both the soul and the body.

"I had seen a couple (of) times where a new person broke down in tears, not because of a coach yelling at them but just because they weren't succeeding or doing as well as they thought they should," he said. "So that sparked the idea that there's something going on in these people that needs to be brought out, and it's not in the box with the group class."

According to Barcol, life coaching and physical training are mutually beneficial.

"We can help people get strong physically, but we also want them to have a better marriage or finish school," he said. "And we can help people with things outside the gym that will help make what they do inside the gym better."

"We can help people get strong physically, but we also want them to have a better marriage or finish school." —Kelly Barcol

Athletes who are interested in guidance beyond the gym floor meet once or twice a month with Barcol or his wife, Polly. Sessions, which are held either over the phone or at a coffee shop, typically revolve around goals in three areas: the gym, family life and professional life.

First, Barcol begins with a question.

"What's one thing you've wanted to do for a long time?" he said. "From there, we compile a list of all the things you could do to achieve that goal."

It's not about dishing out advice, Barcol said. It's about asking questions.

"We believe that the athlete has everything inside of them that they need to succeed," he said. "But sometimes they just need a coach to pull it out and help them take steps to achieve those goals."

Life coaching has helped CrossFit Winnersville athlete Danielle Roberts to find balance between attending college, working two jobs and training as a Central East Regional hopeful.

"He's holding me accountable," Roberts said. "It's not all on myself. I have someone else there to tell me to get things done, and it helps a lot."

While most of the athletes in Barcol's life-coaching program come to him for help with time management and personal goal setting, sessions occasionally reveal areas in which the athlete could benefit from professional help. In those cases, Barcol is careful not to overstep his professional bounds.

"If it looks like a person is stuck emotionally or psychologically, we (give) a referral rather than be the person who thinks we can help everybody with everything," he said. "And then we follow up."

Connecting the Dots

Two years have passed since the night a tragic memory and a tough workout forged a deeper bond between Randall and Burge.

"She took me under her wing and believed in me, and I blossomed," Randall said.

It wasn't that Burge had all the answers, Randall said. It was that she was willing to listen.

"You don't always want someone to solve your problems," Randall said. "She taught me that it's OK to cry. She'll sit there silently while I cry, and she doesn't feel like she has to fix everything."

Today, Randall is working on paying it forward. A nurse by trade, she aspires to become a CrossFit Level 1 Trainer and to use CrossFit to teach others the self-confidence she learned from Burge.

"Having someone believe in me and tell me it's OK and mentor me was huge," she said. "If I can do something for just one other person, that will make my life complete."

As for Burge, she said it was all part of a day's work.

"I still rest on the fact that (being a) CrossFit coach ... simply gives a way to develop a trusted relationship," she said. "We can teach you how to deadlift and how to pace a WOD, and we can build muscles, but we're doing you a disservice if we don't help you connect the dots."



About the Author

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