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The Need for Speed

CrossFit Games athlete Valerie Voboril and powerlifter Laura Phelps Sweatt explain how they use intensity to limit their time in the gym.

By Hilary Achauer

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Will Duncan/CrossFit Journal

On a Friday afternoon in early October, Valerie Voboril—a five-time CrossFit Games competitor with four top-five finishes—worked out with the sounds of “Dora the Explorer” drifting into her backyard gym from the living room.

Her 3-year-old daughter, Vin, repeated Spanish words to the TV while Voboril and her training partner, Marc Rizzo, finished the conditioning section of their workout. Other than “Dora,” the only sounds were Voboril’s feet making contact with the plyo box and the medicine ball hitting the floor after she completed her reps.

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Tai Randall/CrossFit Journal

Five-time CrossFit Games competitor Valerie Voboril utilizes a well-equipped backyard gym to get the most out of her training sessions.

Voboril doesn't play music when she trains. It's not because the sound bothers the neighbors.

"It's one more thing I have to set up," Voboril said.

Setting up music takes time, and Voboril's hour of training is a model of efficiency and focus. Voboril has a lot going on in her life—other than being one of the top CrossFit athletes in the world. She's a mother, a wife and a full-time fourth-grade teacher. She doesn't have hours to spend at the gym, so she's learned how to get the most out of her training sessions.

Most CrossFit athletes don't aspire to compete in the Games, but many people struggle to balance work, family life and fitness. Similarly, strength sessions can eat up hours, but there are time-efficient ways to get beastly strong, according to Laura Phelps Sweatt, a world-record-holding powerlifter and staff member for the CrossFit Powerlifting Trainer Course. It's all about efficiency and intensity.

Short, intense sessions are not the only way to train, and some people love to spend long hours in the gym. However, many CrossFit athletes only have an hour to spare. Here's how to make that hour count.

Sippy Cups and Squats

Voboril was done with her day of teaching. It was 4 p.m., and she was home with Vin, with exactly one hour to work out before going to the beach with her family.

To avoid wasting time in the car, especially in traffic-clogged Los Angeles, California, Voboril trains in her backyard gym. A Rogue rig takes up the back section of the yard, with Voboril's name placard from a Southern California Regional decorating the back fence—two other placards form one of the lifting platforms. A climbing rope and rings hang from the rig, but everything else is carefully organized in the storage shed next to the rig, which houses barbells, medicine balls, bumper plates, plyo boxes and even a rower.

Voboril started with a quick warm-up—some strict chest-to-bar pull-ups, a few air squats and some stretches with a PVC pipe. The warm-up took 10 minutes. Rizzo—Voboril's friend, coach, training partner and former roommate—arrived while she was finishing her warm-up, and then the two of them started on the first part of the workout, programmed for Voboril by C.J. Martin of CrossFit Invictus.

Voboril ... never rested more than 90 seconds between sets, even when she had to run into the house to get a sippy cup of water for Vin.

"Warming up is getting everything out of the shed," Rizzo said.

Over 10 sets, Voboril and Rizzo built to a heavy weight for a complex of a power clean, a front squat and a squat clean. Voboril propped up an iPad displaying a timer, making sure she never rested more than 90 seconds between sets, even when she had to run into the house to get a sippy cup of water for Vin. Voboril always times her rest periods.

"Sometimes I shorten whatever rests (Martin) gives me, which makes the time go faster, if I feel good," she said. "When you're tired, the time goes really fast. By the end, if you're maintaining that rest, it doesn't feel like a rest at all."

Toward the end of Voboril's sets, Vin wandered over and sat on her mother's barbell. It was almost time for Voboril to pick up the barbell, and Vin didn't move. Voboril spoke gently to Vin, giving the 3-year-old choices.

"Would you like to go in the shed or on the trampoline? It's Mommy's turn."

Vin looked up at her mom.

"You can go over there," Voboril pointed to the middle of the rig, "or swing your own kettlebell." She picked up a child-sized plastic kettlebell, but Vin didn't move.

The rest period was over, and Vin looked at her mother. Finally, she got up and wandered off to the trampoline, and Voboril completed a power clean, a front squat and a squat clean.



Shaun Cleary/CrossFit Journal

Voboril, like many CrossFit athletes, only has an hour to dedicate to training, so it's important to make it count.

After the final set of the complex, Voboril and Rizzo started on the next task: 6 sets of 3 front squats. Vin settled in the living room to watch "Dora the Explorer."

During the rest between her last few sets, Voboril went into the shed and got out a plyo box, then a medicine ball. She put away extra plates in the rest period before her last set, and by the time she had finished her final set of front squats, the workout space was ready for the conditioning part of her workout: 7 rounds of 15 wall-ball shots, 10 toes-to-bars and 10 burpee box jumps every minute on the minute.

Voboril was about halfway through her workout when Vin came into the backyard and asked for a frozen yogurt. Voboril finished her burpee box jumps and ran into the house, grabbing a frozen Go-Gurt and handed it to Vin before picking up a medicine ball and starting in on the 15 wall-ball shots, which Martin told her must be unbroken every round.

Her sprint into the house cut into Voboril's rest time and only gave her a few seconds to recover before the minute was over, but that didn't appear to slow her down. The ball moved up and down just as quickly and smoothly as in the first few rounds.

Vin ate her yogurt and watched her mother finish the last round. Finally, with the last burpee box jump, 7 rounds were done. Instead of indulging in a post-workout flop on the ground, Voboril immediately began putting the equipment back in the shed, even though she was covered in sweat and gasping for air.

She and Rizzo put everything away, fitting it all carefully in the shed and closing the doors. Voboril was still breathing hard as she walked away from the outdoor gym space.

It was 5 p.m., and Voboril was done.



Alicia Anthony/CrossFit Journal

Voboril stood atop the podium at the 2014 SoCal Regional, flanked by Rebecca Voigt (left) in second and Lauren Fisher in third.

Moderated Intensity

While Voboril increases the volume of her training in preparation for the CrossFit Games Open and the SoCal Regional, she limits her training to an hour or less about five days a week at this time of year. Sometimes she trains for 30 to 45 minutes at lunchtime. Her school is only 2 miles away, and two days a week she has a lunch period back-to-back with a prep period, so she has time to work out, cool off and eat.

Voboril said she's learned from these shorter sessions that longer is not necessarily better. She said the short, intense training sessions leave her shaking and quivering.

"So much can be gotten out of (those shorter sessions), and you're done," Voboril said.

Voboril is particularly adept at setting a pace and not slowing down until the work is done or the time ends. She showcased that skill in her Friday-afternoon workout. Voboril often fools people during competitions because she never appears to be moving quickly, but when others start to slow down, she just keeps moving. In her 7-round workout, the form on her wall-ball shots, toes-to-bars and burpee box jumps never changed. Her seventh round was about as fast as the first.

If someone is looking to fit in effective training sessions in a short amount of time, Voboril recommends three days a week of 30 minutes of hard conditioning and then an hour of lifting one or two days a week.

"I feel like lifting takes a little more time, and you don't want to rush it," Voboril said.

"Even (after) a 20-minute hard conditioning session ... you feel good, you got something done, but you didn't spend forever doing it," she said.

Voboril said working out at a home gym allows her to be single-minded about finishing her training session. She's also found other benefits of working out at home.

"The times I do make it into the gym for funsies, it's like, 'He deadlifted 295 lb. for 5. You can outdo him if you do 300 lb.' So what do I do? I do it. And I'm sore for a week," she said.

"I prefer to work out at home. I don't talk as much, so I can get my training done in a short amount of time, and I don't start one-upping," she said.

With a full-time job and a family, Voboril has more on her plate than many of her competitors. Many high-level



Alicia Anthony/CrossFit Journal

Despite doing less daily volume than many of her peers, Voboril has been on the CrossFit Games podium regularly since 2010.

CrossFit athletes own affiliates or work as coaches, which gives them a more flexible schedule and access to a gym during down time between classes. Over the years, Voboril has learned how to use her extra responsibilities to her advantage.

"I think it's forced me to be a little bit more present. It's almost when I have too much free time I can worry about too much," she said.

Voboril's approach also helps her prevent burnout.

During the CrossFit offseason, Voboril picks one or two days to go all-out. On those days, she deliberately pushes herself to the edge. For her other workouts during the week, she said she works hard but doesn't test her limits.

"It's supposed to be fun," Voboril said of her training.

"I don't want to burn out," she said, as Vin brought over a painting of red loops on butcher paper.

"It's beautiful," she told Vin, smiling at her daughter.

Courtesy of Laura Phelps Sweatt



Professional powerlifter Laura Phelps Sweatt uses a stopwatch to make her lifting sessions more efficient.

Talking Isn't Squatting

Phelps Sweatt has a simple tool to make strength sessions more efficient: a stopwatch.

Phelps Sweatt is a professional powerlifter who has broken world records 45 times. She currently holds eight world records in the squat, the bench press and the total, and her deadlift of 560 lb. is No. 2 all time in her weight class, 165 lb. She got involved in CrossFit in 2009, when she started teaching the CrossFit Powerlifting Trainer Course. The biggest mistake CrossFit athletes make, Phelps Sweatt said, is not timing their rest periods during strength sessions.

"We tell CrossFit athletes to put a timer on themselves," she explained.

The system Phelps Sweatt teaches—and follows herself—is the conjugate method, developed by Louie Simmons of Westside Barbell. It's a four-days-a-week system in which the upper body and lower body are trained on separate days. On the two **dynamic-effort days**, athletes do faster

reps at lower weights. On the two **max-effort days**, athletes typically perform variations of the major lifts—seated barbell presses, good mornings, rack deadlifts, etc.—and work to very heavy loads.

On days when the weights are lighter and the reps are higher—dynamic days for those following the conjugate method—Phelps Sweatt said athletes should not rest more than 45 seconds between sets. On heavier days, she said the rest period should be two to five minutes once the athlete gets above about 80 percent of his or her max.

"Obviously, a more conditioned athlete can err on the side of two minutes as opposed to five minutes," Phelps Sweatt said.

"What starts to make people's workouts last longer is not being on a timer and chit-chatting with people between sets and just kind of moseying along," she said.

“What starts to make people’s workouts last longer is not being on a timer and chit-chatting with people between sets.”

—Laura Phelps Sweatt

She said people would be surprised if they timed themselves and found out how much time they were actually taking in between sets. Shortening up the rest periods dramatically can transform the nature of a strength session and drive up the intensity.

“If I put a stopwatch on myself on dynamic-effort days and keep (the rest periods) to 20 to 30 seconds, it’s far more difficult than when I don’t time myself. It’s more of a conditioning workout, so you’re getting the best of both worlds,” Phelps Sweatt said.

In 2013, Phelps Sweatt and her husband, Shane Sweatt, opened a CrossFit affiliate—CrossFit Conjugate—next to their personal-training gym.

A year later, their team took second at the CrossFit Games.

“After doing the (powerlifting) seminars every month, I started getting familiar with CrossFit and started seeing how Westside conjugate system is perfect for CrossFit. It’s right up (a CrossFit athlete’s) alley,” she said. Phelps Sweatt said powerlifting is constantly varied, just like CrossFit.

She thinks following the conjugate method is a great way for CrossFit athletes to improve and break through plateaus without spending hours under the bar.

“We attack all weaknesses, and 80 percent of the training is assistance work and accessory movements, and 20 percent is classic barbell lifts,” Phelps Sweatt said.

For her, strength work is the most important aspect of CrossFit.

“Strength will carry you a far way, rather than just doing long met-cons all the time,” she said.

“If you had to pick, if you had this limited amount of time, my heavy emphasis would be on strength,” she said.

Phelps Sweatt thinks CrossFit athletes would benefit from spending time on accessory work.

“If you literally have no time, accessory work will take you farther than you think, because you are addressing weaknesses. People who can’t get a muscle-up, well, we do a lot of tricep work and upper-back work. If you’ve got something that just won’t progress, focus on the accessory work and make that your priority,” Phelps Sweatt said.

“What’s nice about our system,” she said, “is it doesn’t take long. It takes maybe 45 minutes.”

(For more info about the conjugate method, read the CrossFit Journal article [“The Westside Conjugate System”](#) by Louie Simmons.)

Train Smarter, Not Longer

Some athletes—including many CrossFit Games competitors—enjoy spending hours in the gym, and their lifestyles allow it. For athletes with the time and the desire, long training sessions are one way to approach CrossFit. This doesn’t work for everyone.

Many CrossFit athletes have a limited amount of free time in their day. However, less time in the gym doesn’t have to mean reduced fitness. Intensity is one of the key words at CrossFit Level 1 Trainer courses, and attendees are always reminded intensity is the variable most commonly associated with improved fitness.

For Voboril, prioritizing things other than CrossFit has made her happier and healthier, but it hasn’t diminished her performance.

“More is not better for me,” Voboril said. “It really isn’t. For me, my body doesn’t perform better just because I’m doing more work.”



About the Author

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