

CROSSFIT BENCHMARK WORKOUTS

MOTOWN SOLO

In a city long at conflict with itself, Jarrod Bell runs the only operating CrossFit affiliate because, he says, it's the right thing to do.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

The 400 m surrounding Detroit's first and only operating CrossFit affiliate is a microcosm of the city's decay.

There are overgrown lots—a couple outlined with rusted chain-link fences forbidding the curious—and abandoned turn-of-the-century Victorian-style brick homes whose vine-covered walls, broken windows, “No Trespassing” signs and unkempt grounds seem suited for a horror film. Beyond that immediate radius are vacant buildings of all heights—some boarded up, others with broken windows, all with graffiti. One 14-story building warns “Zombieland” in thick black letters across the top.

Most wouldn't choose this place as the ideal location for a small business. Or any business. Detroit's cruel tagline, Renaissance City, has mocked its reality for the better part of 60 years.

It's a town characterized by empty parcels of untrimmed grass, burnt shells of homes left vacant and roaming packs of emaciated dogs—coyotes, at one point. The 313-year-old city is proudly known as the birthplace of Henry Ford's first automobile, Motown and techno music. For decades it's struggled with deep-seated racial tension, high crime rates, government corruption, strapped finances and a dwindling population.

Outside its borders, Detroit has been known as Destroyed, Michigan. Murder capital, drug capital, homeless capital, illiteracy capital. The list of labels is endless. And the message has always been clear: Don't go to Detroit. It's a war zone.

In March, Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder declared a financial emergency in the city and appointed an emergency mayor. Four months later, Detroit became the largest municipality in U.S. history to file for bankruptcy. Total sum: \$18.5 billion.

Yet when Jarrod Bell decided to move CrossFit Benchmark Workouts (BMW) out of the trendy suburb of Royal Oak in 2012, he chose Detroit. It was the same year the city recorded 411 homicides—the highest total in almost 20 years.

“At that time, the community centers in Detroit were closing. There was a need, there was a fit, something I could bring to the table,” the 48-year-old said. His box is a Local Club in the Steve's Club National Program, a network of CrossFit services for at-risk and underserved youth.

But things haven't worked out the way he intended.

Bell went from having two coaches in Royal Oak to becoming a one-man show. Thus far, he's worked with “less than a handful” of at-risk youth. Earlier this year, he had to cut two classes out of the schedule so as not to stretch himself too thin. And in early October—after nearly two years on Detroit's historic Cass Corridor—Bell began scrambling to find a new space for CrossFit BMW “before the snow hits” and before his lease ends in November.

All the while, economic-development efforts have gained steam in parts of Detroit. Rent prices are climbing, and it's not unusual for properties to sell

for four times what they did in 2012. Likewise, buying the building his box now occupies—without investors—is out of the question for Bell.

The silver lining is change is finally happening in Detroit's core. Those involved with redevelopment efforts say they are the most aggressive since the 1950s, when the then-booming city was enjoying its final decade as the world's automotive capital.

“The resources are here to have a great, great city,” Warren Buffett said in a November 2013 news conference, reported the Detroit Free Press.

The business magnate, investor and philanthropist spoke at a Goldman Sachs Group Inc. event announcing a program providing up to \$15 million in loans to Detroit small business in an effort to spur economic development. Goldman Sachs said it allocated an additional \$5 million to educate and train entrepreneurs.

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Detroit is going to be a . . . better
United States than without one."
—Warren Buffett

“The potential's huge,” Buffett said at the event.

He added, “The United States with a flourishing Detroit is going to be a . . . better United States than without one.”

The Decision

Detroit is where Bell grew up; his family's there. But, more than anything, he just kept thinking about the long-forgotten people of inner-city Detroit—kids without playgrounds, adults without guidance.

Now, after two years in Detroit, Bell's membership has gone from about 90 at its highest in Royal Oak to 65. During that time, it's been difficult to make ends meet.

Between the 6-a.m. class and the two evening classes Monday through Friday, he takes on a handful of personal-training clients and tends to the particulars of owning a small business. On occasion, he's met with clients at 5 a.m., and somewhere in between all that, he tries to work out himself. For two weeks out of each month, he instructs the box's beginner classes at 7 a.m. and 7:30 p.m. on both Tuesdays and Thursdays and 8 a.m. on Saturdays. Before school started, he was working with eight high-school athletes. In Royal Oak, he worked with at least 15.



Detroit is still characterized by tens of thousands of buildings like these—empty and unkempt with graffiti warning visitors.



The Spirit of Detroit monument is one of the city's most iconic landmarks. Its likeness appears on most municipal logos.

He's tired often. That's when he hangs out at the back of his 4,800-square-foot gym. From there, he can see the entire class.

"I'm also taking a break," he said with a quick laugh.

The 14-mile relocation was difficult for many of his athletes to swallow in 2012, especially because it would require them to go to Detroit. Only a handful of athletes stuck with him. Many others said Detroit was just too dangerous.

Wendy Becker was one of those who followed. But it was after much handwringing.

"I didn't know if I could come to the city," said the 46-year-old, who began training with Bell in February 2010. "I was scared of it."

She continued: "At one point, I said, 'I'm not going.'"

But a greater fear gripped her: fear for her health. Becker lost 70 lb. in the first year of training under Bell.

"I'm truly scared if I don't do CrossFit, I won't live much longer," said Becker, who tried to become a contestant on "The Biggest Loser."

Tamara Cook also followed Bell to Detroit.

The 48-year-old joined CrossFit BMW in 2011. Having worked in the city for years, she didn't share the others' concerns. Still, Cook said she was bummed that the group broke up.

"People who left still aren't back. But it turned out OK because it's just a different group of people."

The Neighborhood

CrossFit BMW athletes gather either before the sun rises or as it's setting at their box among few other businesses along the Cass Corridor.

The 6-year-old affiliate sits at 3124 Cass Ave., roughly 2 miles northwest of the GM Renaissance Center, the iconic cylindrical glass skyscrapers also known as General Motors world headquarters. The seven shiny buildings—including a hotel with a rooftop restaurant—total more than 5.5 million square feet and sit on the Detroit River overlooking Windsor, Canada. The buildings house more than two dozen businesses.

CrossFit BMW, meanwhile, is surrounded by blight and only a handful of other enterprises, including J & L Foreign Auto Centre next door and Canine to Five Dog Daycare at the end of the next block.

In the 1960s, the Cass Corridor was Detroit's Chinatown. But as the city continued to decline, "That name was synonymous with 'danger,' a red-light

district," said Bell as he sternly and pensively examined the thoroughfare from the garage-door entrance to his box.

These days, the corridor is said to be next on the gentrification list, driving up rent and property values.

For the time being, it's a place where multiple ambulances whizz past over the course of the day, their wailing making thought impossible. Myriad people walk by, too—some of them homeless, others simply donning the eccentricity found in a big city. Each time, Bell extends an arm in their direction, shows his palm and says, "All right," answering an unspoken question.

Sometimes they keep walking. Other times they have something to say.

"You go, girl," loudly encouraged a 20-something man in a driving cap, track jacket and jeans who was making his way past female athletes taking the 400-m lap around the box. As the ladies neared the second half of the run, he shouted, "Damn, you made it around the block already?"

This is typical at CrossFit BMW. And Becker likes that.

"I love getting cheers when I run by," she said, smiling. "It's cool."

Ashes to Ashes

If your last visit to Detroit was 20 years ago, it looks different. And the same. It depends on what part of town you're in, what building you're looking at.

"Detroit is really a tale of two cities. There are two very different realities in Detroit," said George Galster, Clarence Hilberry Professor of Urban Affairs in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at Wayne State University in Detroit.

Downtown and in the Midtown neighborhood, redevelopment efforts have gained traction in the past five years. The city now has a bona fide downtown with restaurants, coffee shops, bars and a smattering of retail. Midtown saw a Whole Foods open in 2011 and has hosted the local art-and-light festival DLectricity since fall 2012. Bustling Woodward Avenue—also known as Michigan 1, the country's first so-called superhighway—has been temporarily reduced to one lane in each direction for construction of a rail line that will cover 3.3 miles, beginning at the waterfront. The project, known as M-1 Rail, is a public-private partnership.

Downtown and Midtown have seen substantial improvements in residential investment, as well as in the income and education of its residents, Galster noted.

"That part of the city, indeed, has changed dramatically," he said. "Then there's the other tale of the city, which is poorer, blacker (with) abandoned and dilapidated housing."

There, on Detroit's outskirts, the population continues to decline, housing continues to be abandoned and blight gets worse.

“Detroit is really a tale of two cities.”
—George Galster

Unlike most cities that grew up, Detroit grew out. All told, it swallowed nearly 140 square miles. Add another 5, and both Boston and Pittsburgh could fit within Motown's boundaries. At its peak, Detroit swelled to nearly 2 million people in 1950. Today its population is roughly 700,000.

“Detroit is really a funny place because there's parts that are clearly thriving,” Galster said.

He added, “I've never seen a city like this—with a vital core and vast, empty territory around it. It's an unprecedented pattern of urban development.”

For some, the beacon of hope is downtown and Midtown, where Sue Mosey has seen the difference just a couple of years can make.

“I couldn't get a (real estate) broker to spend time with me five years ago,” said the executive director of Midtown Detroit Inc., a nonprofit planning and development group focused on that neighborhood.

Now brokers are “smitten” with Detroit, Mosey said. Attitudes about the Motor City, she continued, have “fundamentally changed.”

“If it remains on this trajectory . . . the urban core, in another five years, will be vibrant,” Mosey said.

A native Detroit, Mosey has held her job for nearly 28 years. She's known as “the mayor of Midtown.”

She went on to describe the city's bankruptcy as “a really great freeing exercise,” but she noted there's still “a tremendous amount of abandonment.”

Indeed, there are roughly 80,000 abandoned properties in the city. Many of those parcels are considered a public nuisance with owners owing years of back taxes. Earlier this year, the city began suing some of those owners.

For so long, Detroit was a one-trick pony—its identity tied to the long-failing auto industry. Chrysler, Ford and General Motors all have their headquarters in metro Detroit. And as the Big Three continued to bleed, so, too, did the Motor City.

“There are a special set of circumstances that make Detroit an extreme place,” said Galster, author of “Driving Detroit: The Quest for Respect in the Motor City.”

“One of them is this extreme dependence on one industry that's had a long-term decline in employment. And the second is that we've had an unusually vicious set of conflicts in this city on both racial grounds and I'm going to call it ‘class ground’—I really mean union and (corporations)—over a century.”

Detroit is the only American city the U.S. Army has occupied three times after its own residents set it on fire during the race riots of 1863, 1943 and 1967.

Still, first-term City Councilman Scott Benson describes Detroit as “up and coming.”

“It had some great times, it's fallen on hard times, and now it's digging itself back up again,” he said. “There's a great deal of momentum.”

As a former CrossFit BMW member and former Midtown Detroit Inc. employee, Benson helped usher Bell's business into the city.

The affiliate, he said, fills an “unmet need.”

Benson said he's spoken to Bell about available resources to help in his gym's relocation once CrossFit BMW's lease ends in November at 3124 Cass Ave. He foresees the Cass Corridor being a high-rent district in three years and said other nearby neighborhoods are at “the tip of the spear” in terms of gentrification, offering affordable investment prospects today.

“It is the land of opportunity,” Benson began. “There is so much going on here. There is a huge market, pent-up demand, unmet needs, all kinds of resources for people. We are an international city that is the only U.S. city that's north of Canada. We have an international border. We have so much going on here—international music scene, amenities, museums, architecture you can't find anywhere in the world.”

Yes, the city has its challenges, he said, but so does every big city.

“Warren Buffett is saying, ‘Buy Detroit,’” Benson noted. “That adds a certain cachet to the brand.”

Whether the tale of two Detroits will continue to unfold is anybody's guess, Galster said.

“I think that the forces that are continuing are essentially going to keep that emptying-out process alive and well. So you're going to have this strange pattern of a very vibrant mini city in Midtown/downtown surrounded by kind of a no-man's land.”

Still, the renewed pride and resilient attitude about being from Detroit is palpable in the city and reminiscent of a post-Katrina New Orleans, Louisiana. It's a pride that hasn't existed for decades.



CrossFit BMW owner Jarrod Bell (right) is the sole full-time coach at the box. He teaches three classes a day, with personal-training sessions in between, and he coaches the fundamentals cycles at the beginning of the month.

T-shirts proclaiming “Made in Detroit” and bumper stickers that let you know “Detroit Hustles Harder” are ubiquitous. Ask any resident if it's true what they say about Detroit and you'll get a quick answer.

“(Don't) listen to the media,” said April Wilcox, a CrossFit BMW member and native of New Hampshire who has lived in the city for nearly three years. “It has such a negative stigma, and it's a pretty amazing city.”

Fellow BMW member and lifelong Detroiter Holly Hughes echoed those sentiments.

“Detroit is not what they make us out to seem,” she said.

Hughes added, “I was born here. I was raised here. I believe we're gonna turn it around.”

The public fascination around a city that birthed so much creativity and has simultaneously been at war with itself is not lost on those involved with reviving it.

“There's a high degree of interest in Detroit from all over the country—folks wanting to see Detroit succeed,” Mosey said. “It's a very iconic city. It's still a huge metro area, and it's full of talented people.”

A Cool Cat

*Ain't no sunshine when she's gone.
It's not warm when she's away.
Ain't no sunshine when she's gone.
And she's always gone too long.
Anytime she goes away.*

Bell unabashedly sang from the SUV's right rear passenger seat. He's known to play classic funk in the box until members complain. With the window down, his short, black wavy hair in the usual ponytail and his rose-colored sunglasses wrapped around his face, he gave Bill Withers a run for his money.

*And I know, I know, I know, I know,
I know, I know, I know, I know, I kn . . .*

Michelle Raphael swerved right, avoiding a collision. Three of her passengers commended the fellow CrossFit BMW member on her vehicular acumen.

Bell, no longer singing, said only one thing.

“Man, messed up my groove.”



Construction crews are part of the Detroit skyline throughout downtown and its Midtown neighborhood. The city's core is becoming vibrant, while the remainder continues to decline.

The former college football player is meticulous and particular. He likes what he likes and is unapologetic for it. He once called it off with a woman because she didn't understand his diet. He's a vegetarian.

"If my diet baffles you, you baffle me," he said with a tempered laugh.

And after one of his late-September classes, he spent the better part of 10 minutes painstakingly moving bumper plates to and from the front and back of the gym so like weights were together. When class ends, his members dutifully wipe down their equipment and put it away without Bell's saying a word.

His coaching style mirrors his personality.

"He has this quiet, commanding presence," Becker explained. "He just has this way of looking at you that lets you know you can do it."

Even when it's Brittany Ford.

The master's student at Central Michigan University started at CrossFit BMW in November 2013. As a Type 2 diabetic weighing roughly 300 lb., Ford arrived with two goals for the year: She didn't want to be medicated,

and she wanted to lose 40 lb. Ford met both with flying colors, losing 100 lb. in less than a year.

Yet, she's not exactly enthusiastic.

Most days, Ford communicates with Bell with a tilted head, a protruded hip and attitude to spare. He calls her "Hollywood" because "she walks in there like she owns the place."

Bell ignores her nonverbal communication.

"I can't do that," she defiantly told him one morning after he asked the tall athlete to squat in front of a rectangular wooden box to prevent her chest from collapsing.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because I'll fall," she retorted.

"Don't fall," Bell calmly replied before continuing the task of coaching the other athletes in the 6-a.m. class.

Rest assured, this isn't fun for Ford. But she keeps coming back because

"it works."

"No matter how many times I roll my eyes, he tells me to keep going," she later said. "Just about every day I say, 'I can't,' and I'm proven wrong."

When it comes to Becker, Bell doesn't accept excuses either.

"He doesn't treat me like the fat girl in the room. He expects me to do everything," she said.

The nickname probably helps.

"He calls me Wonder Woman. That's an honor to me."

Becker wholeheartedly trusts her coach.

"I know that I can run and leap at him, and he'll catch me."

Bell, she said, has a passion for changing lives.

When the two first met at a local gym in which Bell was renting space, he walked up to Becker while she was on the treadmill and asked two questions in succession: "What is your name? When are you going to work out with me?"

"He just looked at me and knew I could do better," Becker said.

And that goes beyond the box.

In late September, Becker walked into the gym with pep in her step. She approached Bell, who was observing athletes as they came in and began warming up.

"I got advanced at work," she proudly said, chin high.

Bell smiled as if he always knew that would happen.

"That's my girl," he said boastfully.

When class began, Bell was equal parts relaxed and intense. He walked the perimeter and spent minutes at a time explaining to a couple of athletes how to fix an error. It is not unusual for him to pause a member mid-workout because of incorrect form. He's also been known to tell an athlete to reduce the load in the midst of a met-con.

"He (cares) about you as a person, your body," Hughes said. "He would rather see you knock weight off the bar and do it with perfect form."

She paused, gathering her thoughts.

"I can implicitly trust this man because he's proven to me that he cares if I

walk out of this box without hurting myself."

For Wilcox, who repeatedly told her husband CrossFit wasn't for her, Bell made the difference: "Jarrod's the first coach that made me believe I was a real athlete and made me feel like I belong," she said.

Doug Chapman, owner of CrossFit Ann Arbor, Michigan's first CrossFit affiliate, met Bell in 2007.

"He's a pretty sharp coach," said Chapman, a former member of CrossFit's Level 1 Seminar Staff and coach to CrossFit Games athlete Julie Foucher.

"I've heard nothing but good things about him."

Joe DeGain, a current Seminar Staff member and owner of 810 CrossFit in Grand Blanc Township, Michigan, met Bell in 2007. Both men were at a weightlifting clinic Coach Mike Burgener instructed at CrossFit Ann Arbor. At 6 foot 2 and 245 lb. at the time, Bell, who played football at Grambling State University under Eddie Robinson, stood out.

"He has a large physical presence, and he can be perceived as quite intimidating," DeGain said via email. "However, once you talk to him and recognize his humble presence, desire to improve people and thirst for knowledge, he possesses a magnetism that makes you want to be better. He is a professional in our affiliate community."

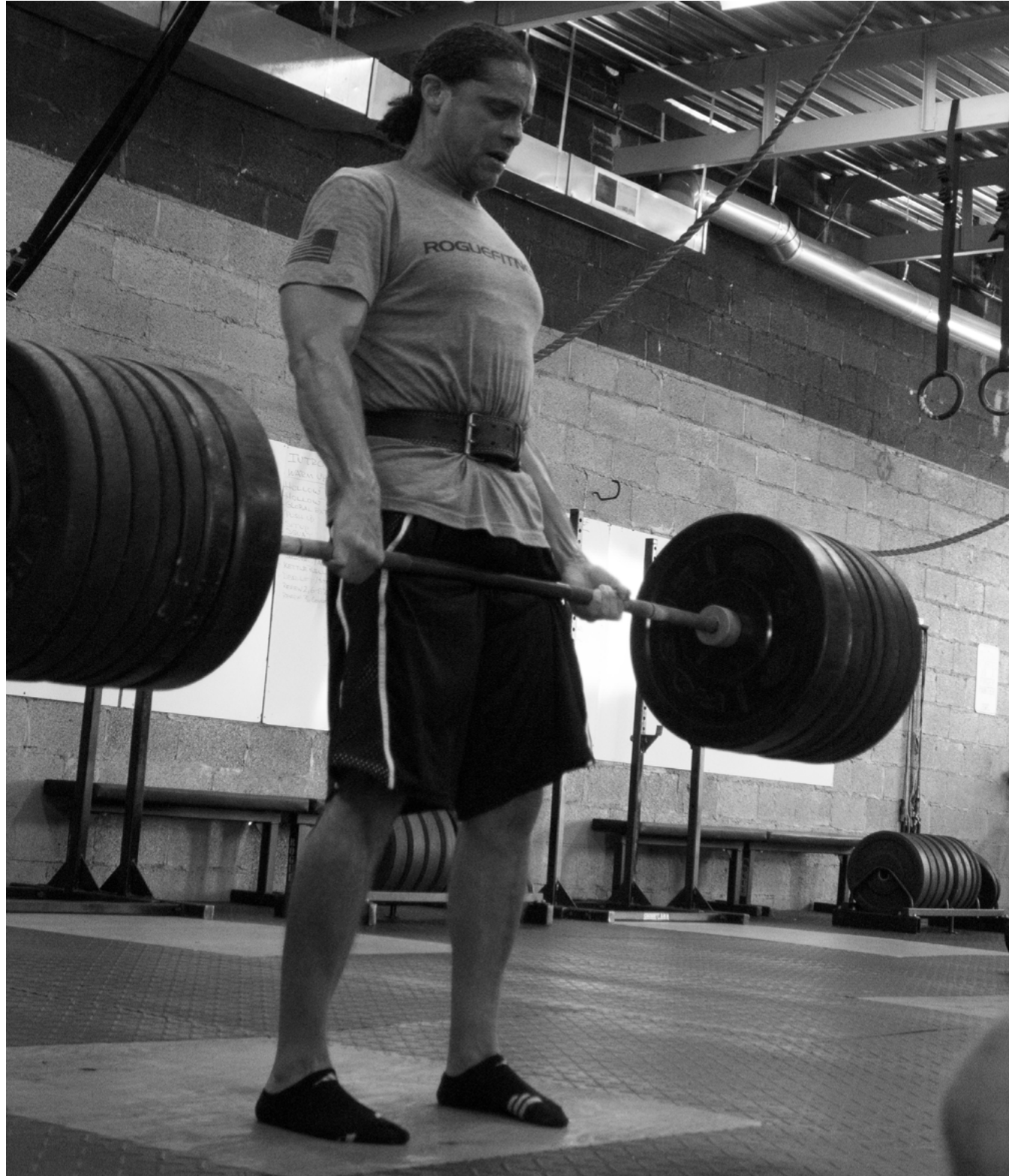
For Chris Sinagoga, Bell is a role model. The 24-year-old owner of CrossFit Athletic Group in Madison Heights, Michigan, met Bell in 2009 when he and a buddy were doing CrossFit.com workouts. After Sinagoga started a fitness club at a local high school, he and his group frequently ended up at CrossFit BMW, where there was better equipment. Eventually, the school put an end to the club, and Sinagoga was left without a place to train. That's when Bell offered his space at no charge.

"He saved our life. For real," Sinagoga said.

These days, the two affiliates pair up for fundraising efforts, and Sinagoga and Bell will sometimes coach at each other's boxes.

"He actually really changed our philosophy because we used to kind of allow a lot more slop in form than we should have back at the high school. Even myself, I'd let my form break down a lot," Sinagoga added. "He opened our eyes. You've got to prioritize form 100 percent and never allow that to deteriorate. Now we pride ourselves on having the best-moving athletes in the state of Michigan. And that comes from Jarrod getting on me."

Plus, Bell's not too terrible to hang out with: "He's so cool—that's the best way I can describe it. He's very, very mellow. Like," Sinagoga stopped to think, then continued, "just very level headed. I guess he's cool. He's a cool cat."



Bell often works out alone in his down time from coaching at CrossFit BMW. A lifelong athlete, the 48-year-old played football at Grambling State University under famed coach Eddie Robinson.

No Regrets

It's true that finances have been tight since Bell moved CrossFit BMW to Detroit. Still, he said he wouldn't have made a different decision.

He knows he needs coaches and specifically someone to lead CrossFit BMW's nonprofit efforts. But, he noted, there's a lot that's going right.

"It's been good because I've been doing what I want to do. Clients are happy, they're getting better, they're sticking (to the program), they're staying."

He added, "If you stick to what works, quantify things, you'll see the best possible outcome, which is going to eventually become better quality, better performance and excellence."

Being a CrossFit affiliate, he said, is "a beautiful opportunity."

And while some might never understand why Bell chose Detroit, Sinagoga explained that the owner of CrossFit BMW is driven by a higher purpose.

"If he decides it's the right move, it's the right move. He's probably not going to get many members . . . because of the perception, but the city needs it."

"Some of these people are homeless, they've been out of a job for a while," Sinagoga added. "There's a lot of inner-city kids that need a location, a CrossFit gym in the city of Detroit. And every gym is going to say that 'we have good form' and 'we coach technique,' but this guy is the godfather of quality movements."

Besides, Bell can handle the Motor City.

"If there's a guy to do it in Detroit, it's Jarrod," Sinagoga said.

"His actions . . . speak to where his priorities are, and his priorities are, 'This is something that needs to be in place right now. Fuck the money. I need to do this.'"

Bell, who doesn't often curse, said he plans to stay in his hometown—no matter what.

"I'm from Detroit, I'm a product of Detroit, I was born in Detroit, I was raised here. . . . There is a change brewing. I want to be a part of that change."

And he'll do what he needs to do to keep coaching.

"I'll be training out of a phone booth, but I'll be here." ■

About the Author

Andréa Maria Cecil is a CrossFit Journal staff writer and editor.