



THE  
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# LONG MAY YOU RUN ... AND LIFT

BY HILARY ACHAUER

What makes people stick with CrossFit year after year? Long-term CrossFit athletes talk about what keeps them interested and motivated after seven, 10 or even 19 years of CrossFit.

In a recent [Businessweek](#) article, Yuri Feito said CrossFit is peerless in encouraging people to keep working out. Feito teaches exercise science at Kennesaw State University and studies CrossFit.

Statistics from the fitness industry show traditional gyms generally have a retention rate of about 50 percent every year. Chris Cooper, owner of CrossFit Catalyst in Sault Ste. Marie, Canada, and author of “Two-Brain Business: Grow Your Gym,” said his affiliate maintains an 87 percent retention rate year over year. He also said retention rates for athletes who join through personal training are “higher than ever” at 95 percent.

“CrossFit has a stickiness to it, an addictiveness. It becomes part of people’s lives and changes who they are from the inside out,” said Ben Bergeron, owner of CrossFit New England. “Just about everyone wants to get fitter and look and feel better.”

These factors—and others—have produced a number of athletes who have been doing CrossFit for over a decade, including Michele Mootz, 45. A Level 2 trainer and member of CrossFit’s Seminar Staff, Mootz has been doing CrossFit for 10 years.

“My husband drove by the original gym in Santa Cruz (California) and came home and told me we needed to check this place out. ... Been with it ever since,” Mootz said.

“I have remained with CrossFit for so long because there are so many things to achieve. I love the pursuit of goals, and with CrossFit, as soon as one is achieved, there is a new one to conquer,” Mootz said.

The community is another reason Mootz has stuck with the program for a decade.

“The friends I have made have become an extension of my family in many ways—it is simply amazing,” she said.

Thomas Crubaugh started CrossFit in 1995; he was one of CrossFit Founder and CEO Greg Glassman’s original clients. He has not done CrossFit continuously since then, but he keeps coming back.

“At 58, I am not regularly getting PRs in anything the way I was doing even when I was 50 and learning new skills,” Crubaugh said.

“I partly stick with it because I know that if I ever stop, I won’t be able to get back up to my current level again without a lot of pain and disappointment (about) all I have lost,” he said.

Year 1 of CrossFit is not the same as Year 10. Here, long-term CrossFit athletes pass along the lessons they’ve learned, explain how CrossFit has changed for them over the years and share what they wish they knew when they started. Much has been made of CrossFit supposedly being an ultra-intense, hardcore program, and it’s been suggested that something “so extreme” is not sustainable. But talking to athletes who have been doing CrossFit for eight to 10 years helps explain how CrossFit works in the long term and encourages lifelong fitness.

## Dropout Prevention

People start a new exercise program full of good intentions, but after six months, many lose their motivation and stop working out.

According to a 2011 *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* report titled “[Attrition and Adherence Rates of Sustained vs. Intermittent Interventions](#),” “Numerous reports cite the statistic that 50% of people who start an exercise program will drop out within 6 months.” Some of the reasons people report for not exercising are motivation, time, access to facilities or equipment, and lack of energy or a workout partner.

Cooper said year-over-year retention in a global gym is around 43 percent in Canada.

“That’s including contracts that auto renew and doesn’t count how often people actually attend. When we started using CrossFit, our numbers went to 83 percent without using contracts,” Cooper said.

Jon Gilson, chairman and founder of Again Faster, provides guidance and tactical advice to CrossFit affiliates. Gilson has found the retention rate for CrossFit gyms is similar to traditional gyms during the first two months, but the retention rate rises for members who make it through those first two months.

If CrossFit is particularly good at getting people to stick with an exercise program, as Feito suggested in *Businessweek*, what is it about the method of training that breeds such compliance?

Fifty-two-year-old Janice Kusaba has been doing CrossFit for eight years, since 2006. She competed in the 2008 CrossFit Games at The Ranch in Aromas, California. Back then—before the Open, before the StubHub Center—if you had US\$50 for the entry fee, you could participate in the Games.

Kusaba started CrossFit at CrossFit Marina in Huntington Beach, California. A friend had joined the affiliate and was seeing results, so Kusaba decided to try it.



Courtesy of Janice Kusaba

Janice Kusaba (above) has been doing CrossFit since 2006, and she finished 85th at the 2008 CrossFit Games in Aromas, California.

Michele Mootz (left) has been doing CrossFit for a decade and is a member of CrossFit’s Level 1 Seminar Staff.



Alicia Anthony/CrossFit Journal



Courtesy of Quinn Myers

Quinn Myers (middle) is a 26-year-old who already has seven years of CrossFit under his belt.

Kimberly Hathcock (below) said the support of her CrossFit Marina classmates keeps her coming back to train.



Courtesy of Kimberly Hathcock

"I had been seeing a personal trainer, getting minimal results, trying to keep my weight down," Kusaba said. "Fitness-wise, I was in decent shape, but when I joined CrossFit, I realized I needed to improve."

Kusaba has been doing CrossFit almost continuously for the last eight years, although she did take a break after knee and back injuries—she rolled her ankle, and then tweaked her knee, which led to back issues.

In her time off from CrossFit, Kusaba gained weight, but since returning in April 2014 she's lost 30 lb.

"I don't (lift) as much weight as I did in the beginning," Kusaba said, "but I know that I don't always have to lift heavy weights to get a beneficial workout."

She added: "Compared to most 52-year-olds, I'm in pretty good shape. I'm OK with whatever I do."

So what's kept Kusaba coming back, even after time off?

"The staff and the people," she said. "Our oldest member is in her 80s. Her daughter goes (to CrossFit Marina), and her grandson has been coming. Several generations come here."

It's not just the people, though.

"There are so many ways you could modify a workout and still get results," Kusaba said. "I like the variety. It's never the same. Olympic lifting is fun. I never did that at 24 Hour Fitness."

Kimberly Hathcock is also a member of CrossFit Marina. Like Kusaba, she's 52. Hathcock started CrossFit in 2007.

"I loved it from the beginning," Hathcock said. "It was exactly—without knowing it existed—what I was looking for."

The support from her fellow athletes is an important part of what keeps Hathcock coming back.

"I've taken up yoga over the last few years, and it's wonderful and a good complement to CrossFit, but you know, you go in there and you're trying to do some of the more advanced poses, and I'm looking at the person next to me, kind of smiling, 'Isn't this fun? We can't do this but we're trying,' and there's no reaction. There's no 'we're in this together,'" Hathcock said.

"It's just a different experience when you have people cheering you on and you know they really care," she said.

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Quinn Myers, 26, has been doing CrossFit since he was 19 and a sophomore at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. One Saturday morning in November 2007, he was in the university's fitness center doing biceps curls, bored out of his mind. He saw two guys in the back of the gym doing push-ups, pull-ups and sit-ups.

"They were just killing this workout, going harder than I've ever seen anybody go," Myers said. He was fascinated and had to know what they were doing.

"Are you guys training for the Olympics?" he asked them after they were done.

No Olympics, just CrossFit. The men were Navy SEALs. Myers had never heard of CrossFit, so the men told him to check out CrossFit.com. Myers went to the site, and little by little he learned the movements. He got a friend to commit with him, and for two-and-a-half years they followed CrossFit.com programming.

"If I went a week without doing CrossFit, I started to find I would go crazy," Myers said. "My cognitive ability was way down, I couldn't handle stress, I couldn't handle life. That's one of the main reasons I continue to do it—the physical preparedness. I don't do it to be great at CrossFit. I do it to be good at everything else."

Myers didn't join an affiliate until 2010, when he moved to San Diego, California, and joined CrossFit Pacific Beach. Unlike many CrossFit athletes, Myers said it's not the community that keeps him coming back to CrossFit.

"I loved CrossFit before I had a gym," Myers said. "It was just me and a buddy who would show up every day at 10 a.m."

"The reason it stuck with me through college is not only the structure—three days on, one day off is perfect—but I liked having a mission ... it's very clear what you are going to do and what you are not going to do," he said.

## The Evolution of CrossFit and Its Athletes

The size and scope of CrossFit have changed dramatically since the early days, but the sense of discovery, of trying new things in the pursuit of health and fitness, has not.

Crubaugh and Glassman met when they were 10 years old. Crubaugh witnessed the birth and development of CrossFit, and he was part of Glassman's original 6-a.m. class. He became CrossFit's first employee and works for CrossFit Inc. today. He said Glassman was constantly reaching out to athletes from different sports, trying to find out how they trained and what exercises and techniques he could borrow from them.

"We did a lot of experimenting," Crubaugh said.

Glassman found a javelin thrower who had amazing core strength. He discovered she used the glute-ham developer to strengthen her core, so he began using that with his athletes.

"We learned a lot from surfers' fitness programs," Crubaugh said. "For a while, we were all getting in the pool and holding our breath for as long as we could."

Glassman introduced Crubaugh to the rowing machine, and Crubaugh started using it at the gym where he worked. Crubaugh was rowing at the gym one day, and a woman asked him, "So when do you row in the water?" She was part of the Santa Cruz Rowing Club.

"Well, I've never rowed in the water," Crubaugh replied.

The exchange inspired Crubaugh to take his fitness outside the gym. He was an active member of the Santa Cruz Rowing Club for about five years and continues to row in his hometown of Port Townsend, Washington.

At one point, Crubaugh was doing CrossFit five times a week. His job wasn't very demanding, so he had extra time to spend at the gym. Now, Crubaugh does CrossFit about three times a week and goes bike riding or rowing on the others.

"I like doing these other things (like cycling and rowing), and I would probably do them, but I wouldn't do them as well (without CrossFit). I'd probably be bike riding with a less capable group of bike riders," he said.

Crubaugh said he's not competitive in his workouts, except when the CrossFit Games Open comes around.



Courtesy of Thomas Crubaugh

**Thomas Crubaugh has made CrossFit a lifelong endeavor that has expanded to include regular rowing and cycling.**

**The original CrossFit gym in Santa Cruz (right) spawned a global fitness movement.**

"The Open has been a really good thing for me," Crubaugh said. "Each year, well, I want to do better than I did last year. Otherwise I don't have a competitive drive around CrossFit. I'm competitive in cycling—I don't want anyone to get to the top of the hill before me."

Hathcock said she's dialed back her workouts recently—although her version of dialing back is different than that of the average 52-year-old.

"I can do about 80 pull-ups in a workout," Hathcock said. "If (my hands) are going to start to rip, I stop. I've done that. I've done it to where my hands bled and I couldn't move the next day. I don't feel like I have to do that anymore."

Even though Hathcock is not pushing as hard as she used to, she hasn't seen a decline in health. CrossFit Marina recently hosted a bone-density test, and she discovered her bone density was in 98th percentile for a woman her age.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

The other benefit of doing CrossFit for a long time is a more sanguine attitude toward workouts that give many newer CrossFit athletes fits of anxiety.

Hathcock said in the past she would get nervous when she knew a benchmark workout like Fran or Fight Gone Bad was coming up.

“I don’t do that anymore. I don’t get nervous. Sure, I want to do well, but if a PR doesn’t happen, or if I’m feeling bad, I know it’s going to come up again,” Hathcock said.

Mootz, who coaches at CrossFit Santa Cruz Central, said what fascinated her in the beginning with CrossFit was being exposed to things she had never done before, such as Olympic weightlifting and powerlifting.

“What kept me incredibly motivated was the change I saw in my own body really quickly. And it was just such a great community ... it was a big party every day,” she said.

The sense of community has not changed for Mootz, but she said she’s gained awareness that CrossFit is a lifelong journey. There’s always something new to master, new skills to learn.

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“One of my pieces of advice to beginners is it’s a journey. You’ve got to be patient with yourself and make sure you understand the mechanics so the journey isn’t interrupted somewhere along the way,” Mootz said.

Even at 26, Myers said he sometimes scales back his CrossFit workouts depending on how he’s feeling, but he said he’ll never stop doing CrossFit. Myers is a competitive beach-volleyball player, and he said CrossFit is essential for his performance on the sand.

“I do CrossFit ... to feel good, physically, and then it helps a lot with beach volleyball. Without CrossFit, I would be a miserable beach-volleyball player,” Myers said.

## The Road Ahead

What’s to come for athletes who have been doing CrossFit for a decade or more?

Kusaba said she sees CrossFit as a part of her life indefinitely. Her goals are to lose weight, which she knows will help her do more pull-ups, and maybe put a little more weight on the bar.

“Just being healthier, getting in better shape before I’m 60,” Kusaba said of her long-term goals.

Jason Highbarger was a trainer at Spa Fitness in the early ’90s, when Glassman was developing CrossFit. Highbarger said he tries to challenge himself in new ways, but his focus is on being a good coach and building up the membership at his new affiliate, CrossFit Almaden in San Jose, California.

“One of my biggest motivating factors is to mentor other coaches, just like Glassman did for me,” Highbarger said. “I want to coach other coaches, and I want to build a strong community.”

“(Glassman) truly cared about his clients. A lot of coaches were holding a clipboard and taking notes and not really paying attention. Glassman cared about his clients to the point of telling them shit they didn’t really want to hear,” Highbarger said.

Highbarger said he wishes more CrossFit athletes would take the long view with regard to their fitness. He gave the example of Olympic athletes who train to peak once every four years.

“We get a little too caught up in ‘what am I going to do this next month?’ If (you) learn to have the focus and discipline and foresight of an Olympic athlete, what would that bring you as far as your overall fitness and health and well-being?” Highbarger asked.

“Investing in your health is one of the only guaranteed investments in life. With health and fitness, if you invest the time and energy, you are going to see a guaranteed return and results,” he said.

Crubaugh told a story about his neighbor, a CrossFit athlete who is about to turn 60. The neighbor was landscaping his front lawn—getting rid of the turf and replacing it with drought-tolerant



Jason Highbarger (fourth from the left) started out at the original box in Santa Cruz and now owns his own affiliate.

Courtesy of Jason Highbarger

plants. He dug about 70 holes in the process. As neighbors his age walked by, they all warned him he would pay for his efforts.

“You’re going to need the hot tub tonight. It’s going to be the massage table for you,” they told him.

“No, I do this kind of thing every day. It’s not out of the ordinary for me,” the neighbor replied.

He dug the holes and went on with his life, no hot tub needed.

As for Mootz, she said she’s embraced the idea of being a masters athlete.

“On the weekends, I probably get a good handful of participants in the Level 1 and Level 2 seminars who say, ‘God, it’s good to have someone (teaching us) who is not 20.’”

Mootz said it’s important for her represent that demographic, to show people CrossFit isn’t a short-term program.

“You can certainly do (CrossFit) long term—whether that’s coaching or as an athlete—you can really do it as long as you want to,” Mootz said.

Myers’ goals include bench-pressing 300 lb., snatching 225 lb. and cleaning 300 lb., but he keeps his mind on the big picture.

“On a given month, I establish where I am mentally, and what hurts, and either adapt programming or supplement, adding days or taking days off,” Myers said. “I try to use as much judgment as I can.”

## Connect and Engage

When talking to people who have been doing CrossFit for more than five years, people who have woven it so tightly into their lives that stopping would be unthinkable, a few reasons for CrossFit's "stickiness" appear—reasons beyond the addiction of PRs and beginners' gains.

The first is the community. Human beings have a deep need to connect with other humans, but these connections are not forged during occasional dinners out that take months to plan.

According to a New York Times article titled "[Friends of a Certain Age](#)," sociologists since the 1950s have identified three conditions required for making close friends: proximity; repeated, unplanned interactions; and a setting that encourages people to let their guard down and confide in one another.

The typical CrossFit class meets all these conditions. The gym is usually in the neighborhood, the same people tend to show up at the same class time over months and years, and it's difficult to have any kind of guard up when you're covered in sweat and chalk, muscles trembling, post workout.

"In the beginning, I stuck with (CrossFit) because of the results I was getting, and it quickly became the results in combination with the community," Mootz said. "I wanted to go every day and see my friends. It was very much a part of our social network for both myself and my husband."

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The second reason people stick with CrossFit is the workouts are far from boring. Boredom kills many a fitness routine when the thought of walking on the treadmill or running through the same circuit at the gym becomes unbearable.

"There are so many creative ways to exercise," Kusaba said. "Who would have thought? You can't get your hands on a huge tire to flip ... unless you do CrossFit or live on a farm or something. All these other things you would not find in a (regular) gym, you would find in a CrossFit gym."

Myers said his CrossFit workout is the one thing in the day he can count on, and it provides all sorts of stimulation.

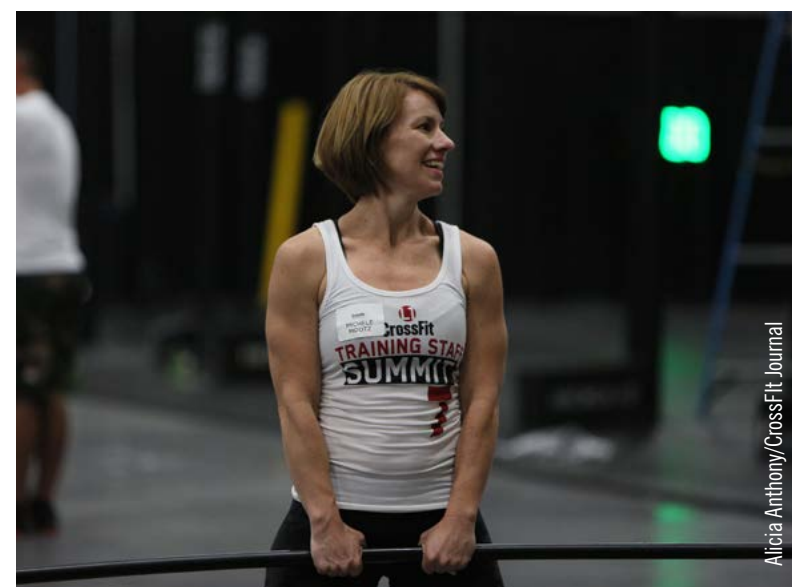
"On any given day, no matter how bad or unproductive my day is, getting in a CrossFit WOD is the only thing in my life that is all-at-the-same-time challenging, hard, scary, nerve-racking, fun, social (and) yields short- and long-term and direct and indirect benefits. It's a daily mini-battle that I know I can win or complete so long as I just show up and engage," Myers said.

Another reason so many people stick with their CrossFit routine is that it's easy to adjust the workout as your fitness needs and goals change. A lot can happen in 10 years. Jobs change, children are born, and—inevitably—we age. But, as Glassman wrote in "[What Is Fitness?](#)" in 2002, "The needs of our grandparents and Olympic athletes differ by degree not kind." CrossFit's scalability ensures the program can be modified for any situation, allowing long-term commitment.

Just because you don't want to lift the weights you used to, or you've decided for whatever reason handstand push-ups are off the table, that doesn't mean you have to stop doing CrossFit. You can still get a killer workout and maintain or improve your health—and perhaps you'll even hit a PR you never saw coming. ■

## About the Author

Hilary Achauer is a freelance writer and editor specializing in health and wellness content. In addition to writing articles, online content, blogs and newsletters, Hilary writes for the CrossFit Journal. To contact her, visit [hilaryachauer.com](http://hilaryachauer.com).



In 2008, Myers was featured on CrossFit.com doing pull-ups in Norway.

Like many others, Mootz (left) came for the fitness and stayed for the friends.

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