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Learning for Life

The secret to becoming an expert is always behaving like a student.

By Emily Beers

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Alicia Anthony/CrossFit Journal

John Broz questions himself all the time.

Although Broz has been involved in the sport of Olympic weightlifting for 36 years—he started when he was just 10 years old—he sometimes doesn't feel as qualified as he'd like.

As a young athlete, Broz was mentored by John Schubert, the man who coached Charles Vinci, the last American to win a gold medal in weightlifting at the Olympic Games. Schubert's pupil won gold in both 1956 and 1960 as a bantamweight. Later in his career, Broz lived and trained with Antonio Krastev, the two-time world weightlifting champion who registered the heaviest snatch in an International Weightlifting Federation competition, though the 216-kg record is no longer considered official.

Broz, who owns and coaches at Average Broz's Gymnasium in Las Vegas, Nevada, has been educated by the best of the best in the world, and today he's a world-renowned coach himself. He's coached athletes who have gone on to qualify for national teams, as well as junior and senior world and Pan-American teams. He's an expert in his field—yet he doesn't always feel like an expert because he knows there's always so much more to learn.

"Sometimes I feel under-qualified, even with 36 years of experience under my belt," Broz said. "I never stop learning."

He believes the best coaches are always learning more about their craft.

"A lot of (being a great coach) is about remaining open-minded and accepting new beliefs and opinions, even if it's totally against your beliefs," Broz said. "Critically think, and then you'll find yourself in a different place."

With regard to weightlifting, Broz believes it's more important than ever for coaches to think critically because all resources are not created equal.

"There's more disinformation available now than ever before. I don't think people want to be bad coaches or seek out bad information, but they're listening to the social-media street-cred guy, and they don't know the difference," Broz said.

"Some people are just really good at marketing themselves," he added.

But marketing doesn't make someone an expert. Broz said it's difficult to know what information is good information, and he always encourages his athletes to constantly ask questions.

"The people who question why things are the way they are, they are the people who become excellent coaches," he said.



Emily Beers / CrossFit Journal

Even when you think you know everything, there's always more to learn.

Level 3: Continuing Education

Nicole Carroll is CrossFit Inc.'s Director of Certification and Co-Director of Training.

It goes without saying that Carroll expects CrossFit coaches to constantly seek new knowledge and continually stay up to date in their coaching. Continuing education is partly about becoming the best technical coach you can be, but to Carroll there's something even bigger going on than just the pursuit of technical mastery.

"The goal of continued education is staying relevant in your field and self-improvement. To not seek it out implies you think you know everything or you don't care," Carroll said.

For Carroll, certifications, certificates, diplomas and degrees represent an element of basic competency, and continuing education builds upon that foundation. CrossFit's credentialing program follows this model.

The Level 1 Certificate Course is “the natural first step for a CrossFit coach,” Carroll said.

Although the Level 1 lays a solid foundation for becoming a CrossFit coach, it was never meant to be the end of the coaching journey.

“The goal of continued education is staying relevant in your field and self-improvement.”

—Nicole Carroll

“At the close of the Level 1, we say, ‘This is only the beginning. When you step into the world as a coach, it becomes very evident how much you don’t know,’” Carroll said.

This is part of the reason CrossFit implemented a 55-question written multiple-choice test in 2010.

“We implemented a test to ensure beginning trainers have a basic level of competency in order to go out and learn responsibly,” Carroll said. “Then, if a person does not pursue higher-level credentials, we require them, at a minimum, to come back to the Level 1 every five years.

“Sometimes we get trainers who have been training for years and don’t want to come back to the Level 1. But as an organization, we feel responsible for those who call themselves CrossFit trainers. We want to ensure that they retain a baseline level of competency, knowledge and currency regarding the foundational CrossFit material.”

At minimum, Level 1 trainers should be able to pass the foundational test, she explained.

After the Level 1 Certificate Course, many trainers go on to take the Level 2 Certificate Course (CF-L2). Carroll explained the purpose of this next step: “Trainers get to dig deeper into the practical application of CrossFit’s methodology. They also spend 70 percent of the two days getting individualized feedback on their coaching from some of the best coaches in the CrossFit community. They can take that feedback and use it for further self-improvement.”



Alicia Anthony/CrossFit Journal

Nicole Carroll says the Level 1 Certificate Course is only the beginning of the educational journey for CrossFit trainers.

But beyond the Level 1 and Level 2 certificate courses, Carroll is most excited about CrossFit's newest credentials, the Certified CrossFit Trainer (CCFT/CF-L3) and the Certified CrossFit Coach (CF-L4). The CF-L3 is computer based, and the CF-L4 is a performance test in which candidates are evaluated live as they instruct CrossFit movements.

What makes the CF-L3 credential unique is its continuing-education requirement. After passing the test, those who earn the CF-L3 credential must complete 50 hours of continuing-education units (CEUs) and 900 coaching hours over the course of three years in order to retain it.

"As far as I know, the CCFT is the only fitness certification available that requires a minimum amount of actual coaching hours to maintain," Carroll said.

CEUs can be earned through a broad menu of courses and individualized options. It's up to the coach to decide which topics to focus on. If a course—be it an anatomy seminar, a weightlifting course or even business training—meets CrossFit's standards, it will be added to the official list of CEUs. The CF-L3 is less than a year old, and Carroll expects the list of [Continuing Education Approved Providers](#) to grow quickly, giving more options to those who want to improve their skills. People can also petition CrossFit for CEUs from courses or activities not listed.

"The goal is not to limit people but to encourage them to embrace learning in all areas related to their profession," Carroll said.

Carroll is excited to see how the CF-L3 will contribute to the growth of the professional CrossFit coach.

"We really want to drive more and more trainers through the highest levels of development. It's only good for the community. People don't realize how (many educational opportunities are) available," she said.

Implementing Continuing Education in Your Box

Chandler Walker is the owner of CrossFit StoneAgeFuel in Reno, Nevada, an affiliate he opened just over a year ago. Before he was a gym owner, he built his StoneAgeFuel brand via an educational blog about nutrition. As his blog grew, Walker eventually started to host seminars about nutrition. Before he knew it, the brand he had built turned it into a gym.

With a college background in biochemistry, Walker considers education to be close to his heart, and he's always looking for new ways to educate himself and his coaches.

"If you don't continue your education and continue learning, you're not going to get exposed to new ideas to add onto what you already know and are learning. And if you're at a point where you think you know everything, you've failed as a coach," Walker said.

While it's impossible to become an expert in every field, Walker considers it important to learn as much as possible about various fields of fitness, and being part of the CrossFit Endurance and CrossFit Weightlifting seminar staffs helps him build specific toolsets. He said coaching at CrossFit seminars is as much about his own education as it is about educating others.

"I get to see the way different people develop cues and styles, and I get an idea for how different body types move," Walker said.



Chandler Walker

As an affiliate owner, Chandler Walker expects all of his coaches to continue their education beyond the Level 1 course.



Shaun Cleary/CrossFit Journal

When an experienced coach evaluates and advises another, both parties often learn a great deal and improve their skills.

Walker expects his two coaches and three intern coaches to continue their education after they complete the Level 1 Certificate Course. He also encourages them to take the CrossFit Weightlifting and the CrossFit Gymnastics trainer courses, but he's open to other suggestions as well.

"It doesn't even have to be a CrossFit seminar. It could be the USA Weightlifting (certification)—anything that will improve them as a coach," Walker said.

He recognizes additional courses can be expensive, but he sees them as investments. When one of his coaches takes a seminar and gains new knowledge, the coach is encouraged to use this knowledge to launch a new specialty program at CrossFit StoneAgeFuel, such as a barbell club or a competitor's program. These programs often generate new revenue streams for Walker's coaches and his gym.

Walker also offers cost-free nutritional education to his coaches: Each goes through the nutrition series Walker developed via his StoneAgeFuel seminars. In the Fluff to Tuff Healthy Eating Program, coaches learn about the

science behind diet, weight loss, athletic performance and autoimmune diseases.

"If you're at a point where you think you know everything, you've failed as a coach."

—Chandler Walker

"It basically gives them a basic course in metabolism and biochemistry so they can learn without having to pay for a university course," Walker said.

According to Walker, education doesn't always have to happen during a formal course or seminar, nor does it have to be costly to be effective. In fact, Walker believes some of the most important education takes place on the floor at

the gym, and he uses test days as part of the process. His written evaluations are broad and cover things as simple as starting the class on time, as well as warm-up procedures, technical knowledge, communication skills and so on. He also provides specific notes to address individual strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement.

Similar to Walker, Stephane Rochet believes you can continue your education without spending hundreds or thousands of dollars.

“The main way I like to gain knowledge that I can apply is by going out and visiting another coach,” said Rochet, who has been part of the Level 1 Seminar Staff for eight years and also serves as a CrossFit Weightlifting coach. “I’ll go see different affiliates. I’ll go and watch other people train. You can always learn something that you can implement.”

Rochet added: “Everyone in their area has people who are very knowledgeable, who are kind of experts in their field. So seek those people out. Whether it’s an author or a coach. You’d be amazed how open people are to helping

others. School is important, and it gives you a foundation, but most of the important stuff you need to know, and to develop your philosophy, primarily comes from learning from other people.”

Rochet explained learning directly from other coaches has been invaluable to his own development. One of the first jobs he had as a strength-and-conditioning coach was at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where he worked with and learned from longtime CrossFit athlete and coach Josh Everett.

After working at UCLA, Rochet became the strength coach at the University of San Diego for seven years. He worked with 500 student-athletes on 17 different teams, and he had several assistants and volunteer coaches working under him.

Although Rochet always put pressure on the university to make room in the budget for formal education for his coaches, he found his own inexpensive ways to help his coaches learn. For example, a simple reading list can be a very effective way to encourage continuing education.



Alicia Anthony/CrossFit Journal

While classes and seminars are great, Stephane Rochet (right) says simple reading lists can assist coaches seeking self-directed education.



Angel Orozco

Angel Orozco has trainers intern before becoming full-fledged coaches at Telegraph CrossFit.

One book Rochet always encouraged his coaches to read was “Science and Practice of Strength Training” by Vladimir Zatsiorsky. He also recommended reading about nutrition, specifically books by Dr. Loren Cordain, including “The Paleo Diet for Athletes.”

On top of keeping coaches reading, attending seminars and certifications, and learning from experts, many affiliates implement in-house internship programs based on continuing education.

Angel Orozco runs an internship program at Telegraph CrossFit in San Francisco, California. His program generally takes five to eight months to complete..

The Level 1 Certificate Course is the first step for any new intern. As many gym owners do, Orozco pays 50 percent of the fee for any relevant course his coaches take, as he knows investing in education will only help his business. When one of his coaches takes a specialty course, such as the CrossFit Weightlifting or Powerlifting courses, Orozco gives him or her plenty of opportunity to share the new knowledge.

“I leave a lot of class time open to coaches’ discretion, as long as it fits within the hour,” Orozco said. This free time

in class—usually at the beginning and end—allows his coaches to put the new drills and skills they’ve learned to immediate use.

On top of this, Saturday and Sunday workouts are completely up to the coach to program.

“So they can create what they want that day. If they’ve just done a powerlifting cert and they want to teach new things to others, they have the green light,” he said.

Orozco also relies on Google Docs to educate his coaches, especially his intern coaches. All the coaches can view and collaborate on the online documents, making them a great way to share knowledge, provide feedback to interns about their coaching performances and generate discussion. It’s also a great way for intern coaches to ask questions of senior coaches, such as why a certain workout was programmed or why certain modifications were used. And Orozco can open the document at any time to see what kind of information and feedback other coaches are sharing with each other.

Choose Your Own Adventure

Education can be found in many forms, be it a classroom, a book, a seminar or course, or a personal session with an expert coach like Broz.

It doesn’t necessarily matter how you educate yourself. The important thing is to constantly seek out good information and good coaches and mentors, to ask lots of questions, to think critically, and to stay up-to-date with what’s new.

For Carroll, the ultimate goal of continuing education is simple: “(It’s about) staying relevant in your field in order to be the best you can be and get the best results for the people who place their trust in you as a coach.”



About the Author

Emily Beers is a CrossFit Journal contributor and coach at CrossFit Vancouver. She finished 37th at the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games.