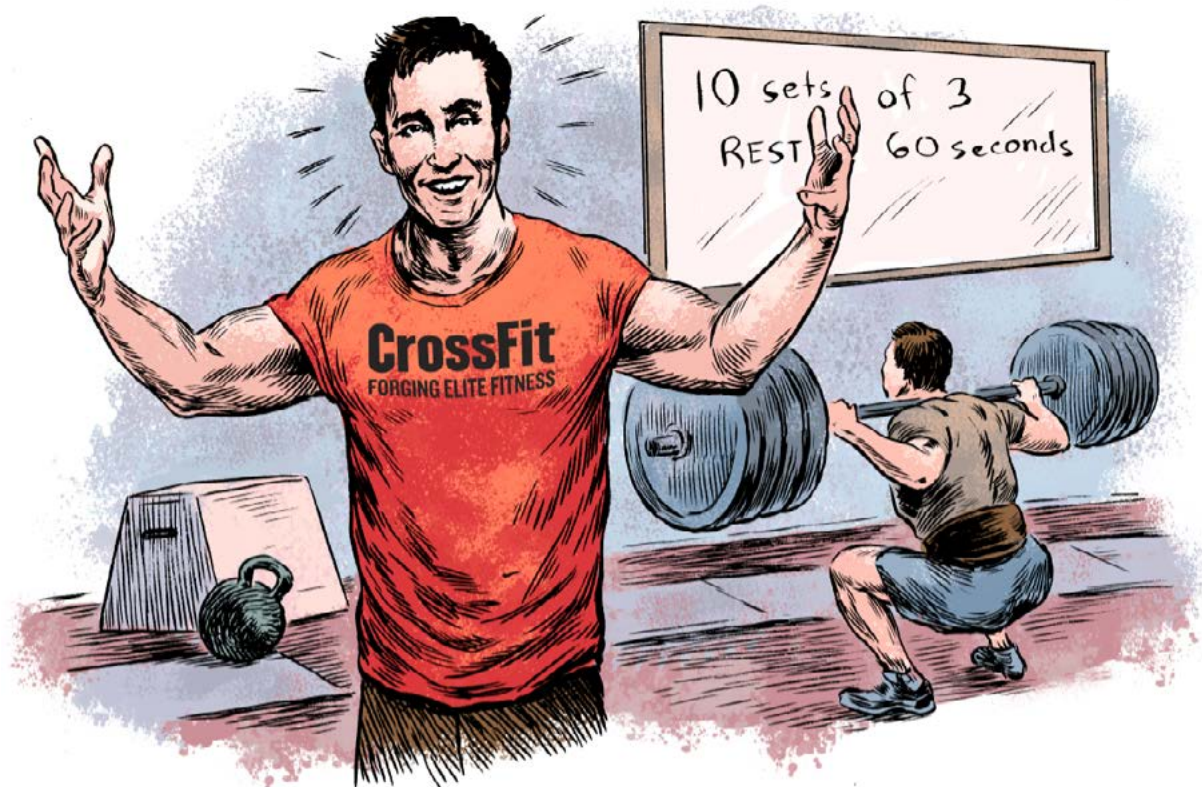

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Tinkering Trainers

CrossFit coaches detail their successful and unsuccessful programming experiments in the search for measurable, observable and repeatable results.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

March 2015



Howell Golsom

Ben Bergeron has experimented with strength-biased programming but now focuses on conditioning—and strength numbers are still improving.

CrossFit athletes are a skeptical bunch. They like to experiment and tinker and tweak.

For Kurtis Bowler that meant messing around with strength-biased programming for his affiliate, Rainier CrossFit.

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"Every year or year-and-a-half, there's an influx of newer people," said the owner of the 10-year-old gym in Washington state.

And with new people come new ideas—or old ideas made new again. Inevitably, they want to try other training methods besides the standard group programming to improve their fitness. Bowler is happy to oblige. He lets members experiment on their own with principles from "Starting Strength," for example, or by adding a Westside Barbell strength cycle to the usual programming.

"I have found that the best way for them to learn that that stuff doesn't work (in improving overall fitness) is for them to give it a go."

Bowler added: "If I'm the only one tellin' 'em, it's like your folks tellin' ya."

So he steps aside, lets them have their moment and then encourages them to "look at the numbers."

At the end of the day, data always wins.

"I have found that we always come back to just programming CrossFit," said Bowler, who is on CrossFit's Level 1 Seminar Staff.

**"I have found that we always
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—Kurtis Bowler

Athletes progress just as well—if not better—training with CrossFit than with any other training method, he added. Plus, they recover better, he said.

"For me, in my training, I just noticed I get stronger doing just CrossFit stuff than I do just trying to get stronger," said Bowler, a longtime strongman competitor.

He's not alone in his thoughts.



Howell Golson

When athletes show an interest in starting a strength program, Kurtis Bowler lets them experiment, knowing they'll always come back to good old CrossFit.

Many affiliates have fiddled with programming over the years. Sometimes coaches initiated the change. Other times it was members. In either case, box owners said they came out of the experience with a renewed appreciation for Greg Glassman's original prescription.

A lack of commitment to fundamentals will kill a physical training program, warned Glassman, CrossFit Inc.'s Founder and CEO, in a 2005 open letter to CrossFit trainers.

"Rarely now do we see prescribed the short, intense couplets or triplets that epitomize CrossFit programming. Rarely do trainers really nitpick the mechanics of fundamental movements," he wrote in the CrossFit Journal article "[Fundamentals, Virtuosity, and Mastery](#)."

He continued: "There is plenty of time within an hour session to warm up, practice a basic movement or skill or pursue a new PR or max lift, discuss and critique the athletes' efforts, and then pound out a tight little couplet or triplet utilizing these skills or just play!"

In one of its simplest manifestations, Glassman's prescription was illustrated as his Theoretical Hierarchy of Development (Figure 1). In that pyramid, nutrition provides a foundation for metabolic conditioning, and they combine to support

gymnastics. Nutrition, conditioning and the ability to control one's body then allow mastery of external objects. All the elements combine to support sports performance.

"We don't deliberately order these components but nature will," Glassman wrote in the October 2002 CrossFit Journal article "What Is Fitness?" "If you have a deficiency at any level of 'the pyramid' the components above will suffer."

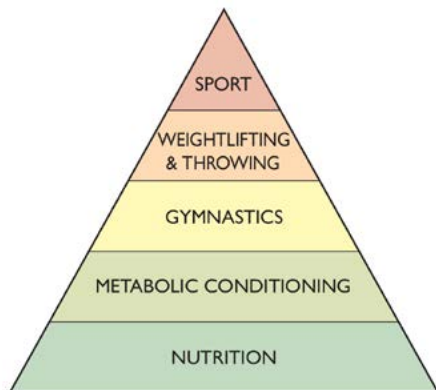


Figure 1: A Theoretical Hierarchy of Development.

Lessons Learned

For three years, Ben Bergeron programmed wrong.

From late 2010 through early 2013, the CrossFit New England owner planned workouts with a strength bias.

"I kind of fell into the same mental trap as other affiliate owners do. ... 'My athletes are having a hard time doing the workouts as prescribed, so let's get them stronger,'" he explained.

At that time, the Massachusetts affiliate would switch up the programming every two months. Sometimes it would focus on running, other times on handstand push-ups. At one point, the spotlight was on metabolic-conditioning workouts, which sit just above nutrition in Glassman's pyramid.

During the conditioning period, athletes began to see their lifts increase more so than when they exclusively focused on strength, Bergeron noted. Since then, CrossFit New England's programming makes met-cons the star of the show.

"These workouts do get people stronger if they just focus on that," Bergeron said.

He jokingly added, "I guess that Greg Glassman guy knew what he was talking about."

In 2011, at CrossFit Inferno in Southern California, Bill Grundler was programming a Jim Wendler 5/3/1 strength cycle that preceded the gym's metabolic-conditioning workouts. The result was unintentional.

"That became the emphasis of the workouts of the day," Grundler said. "Then, all of a sudden, the met-con lost its importance."

Athletes would push "really hard" on the strength portion of the workout and then mentally check out for the met-con, he explained. Likewise, their fitness suffered. No longer were they increasing their work capacity across broad time and modal domains. Their general physical preparedness decreased. They were no longer in a ready state.

Grundler changed the workouts so they began with lifting an increasingly heavy barbell every minute on the minute, followed by a met-con. Strength numbers started to rise.

And Grundler, a firefighter at the time, was happy his programming imitated real life.

**"I guess that Greg Glassman guy
knew what he was talking about."**

—Ben Bergeron

"(There were) a lot more positive gains than 'my front squat went up,'" he explained.

Instead, Inferno athletes saw increased work capacity in addition to strength gains.

Strength, Grundler added, is not "an end all, be all."

The Importance of Experimentation

To be clear, there's nothing wrong with experimentation. It's how CrossFit came into existence.

Any CrossFit coach who is not examining CrossFit.com archives dating back to 2001 is "doing themselves a disservice" because they're not seeing what Glassman tried in early CrossFit.com programming, said Matt Chan, on CrossFit's Level 1 Seminar Staff and an instructor for CrossFit's Competitors Course.

The strength-biased programming that has become popular among some affiliates is nothing new, Chan noted.

"If you look at the archives in 2001 and 2002, you'll see that Greg has already done that. He's tried it," Chan said. "He didn't get the results ... that CrossFit nowadays does."

So when athletes ask about other approaches, the former firefighter challenges them to find something that works better than CrossFit to increase general physical preparedness (GPP).

"Yeah, you might get stronger, but your GPP isn't going to go up," Chan noted.

Experimentation provides an avenue for discoveries, said Reed MacKenzie, owner of CrossFit Taranis in Canada.

"I'm pretty sure that if somebody approached Greg Glassman and said, 'I've tried this in my gym and it works,' I'm pretty sure he would take it and test and see if it works," said MacKenzie, who opened his affiliate in 2008.

Over the years, CrossFit Taranis has often followed CrossFit.com programming.

"We've never really deviated from Coach Glassman's original prescription as far as how to approach CrossFit training," MacKenzie said. "However, we have added lots of different programs. But it's mainly evolved from clients' interests."

Revisiting CrossFit.com programming is a reminder of what CrossFit should be, Bowler said.

"Main-site programming is good stuff, and I think it's important for people who have been programming, even

for a long time, to go back to dad every once in a while and look at what dad's doing," he explained.

"Doesn't matter how long you've been doing this stuff," Bowler continued, "it's good to keep your eye on that main-site stuff so you don't stray too far from what CrossFit actually is."

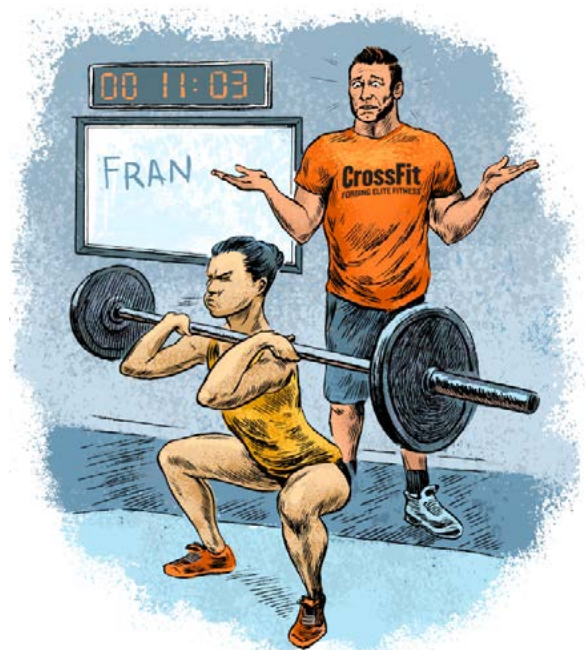
For his part, Grundler said experimentation can be good because it allows the programmer to see, "OK, what exactly is this going to do?"

"I don't think it's bad to do. I don't think it's necessarily a good idea to announce that you're doing it because that will attract or detract people from wanting to do that," Grundler said.

Consider, for example, a group of soccer moms.

"They don't want to lift a lot of weights, but you know that it's good for them," he said.

In that case, Grundler will avoid telling them, for instance, that he has them on a Hatch squat cycle. Instead, he might call it "a squat party."



Howell Golson

Bill Grundler believes overall fitness suffers when athletes are too focused on strength numbers.

Beyond the physical adaptations, such experiments can further engage athletes. That's important, Bowler noted.

"I don't think there's a problem with playing with that stuff. If everybody in your gym wants to do a strength cycle, do a strength cycle," he said. "I think it's important to know that sometimes people just want to have fun, too."

Even more important, said longtime affiliate owners, is evaluating results to determine the next step.

A Word of Caution

While programming experiments can be educational—sometimes even necessary—it's important they have a purpose.

MacKenzie advised CrossFit coaches to perform experiments on themselves first.

"Don't give it to your clients and your people that are trusting you to do things right and do things effectively, using them as guinea pigs initially," he said.

Test it on yourself first, MacKenzie emphasized. If there are no biomechanical issues or injuries with good technique, then it's safe, he said.

"Then you want to expand your sample; test it again that way," he said. "It has to be a responsible testing procedure."

What it can't be is unplanned.

"For the six weeks, we're going to try this thing that I dreamt about last night," MacKenzie joked.

He continued: "It's irresponsible. Try it on yourself and you're going to know within a week if it's doing something beneficial."

And coaches should track results, emphasized Chan's wife, Cherie, who is also on CrossFit's Level 1 Seminar Staff.

"As long as you can recognize that, then there's no harm. It's when you don't actually assess what's going on and see if people are getting better, that's when there's a problem," she said.

Cherie encouraged trainers to reread Glassman's "World-Class Fitness in 100 Words" often.

"You definitely need experimentation. But you need the basics," she said.

"Routine is the enemy of progress and broad adaptation. Don't subscribe to high reps, or low reps, or long rests, or short rests, but strive for variance."

—Greg Glassman

She continued: "I think simplicity is key, and I think consistency is more important than sexy programming. I think we see that all the time—you're gonna get results with people being consistent, and you don't need to keep them attracted by all these bells and whistles. The simplicity is part of the beauty of what we do."

And that's demonstrated in Glassman's pyramid.

"For the fitness that we are pursuing, every parameter within your control needs to be modulated to broaden the stimulus as much as possible," Glassman wrote in "What Is Fitness?" "Your body will only respond to an unaccustomed stressor; routine is the enemy of progress and broad adaptation. Don't subscribe to high reps, or low reps, or long rests, or short rests, but strive for variance."



About the Author

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