



In Loving Memory

Members of the CrossFit community explain how they cope and heal after losing a coach or member.

BY ELEANOR BROWN



Shawn Thumma (left) and Colin Woodside share a moment of reflection after a tribute workout in Lauriel Luther's honor

Dan Hollingsworth



Before Luther passed, her mantra became part of a T-shirt representing her fight.

Dan Hollingsworth

At Kitsap CrossFit, Moani Daniel was known as reserved but friendly, a hard worker who never complained about anything—not even workouts with her least favorite component: running.

Fellow member Lauriel Luther was seen as a powerful athlete and a positive person. Luther had competed in the 2010 CrossFit Games South West Regional and was always focused on helping others.

Within weeks, Kitsap CrossFit lost them both.

On March 9, 2014, Daniel died of a rare complication during childbirth. On April 2, Luther passed away after a lengthy struggle with brain cancer.

“We knew that Lauriel was in the final throes of her battle with cancer, and so we had—to some degree—been preparing ourselves for that moment, and then to get blindsided with Moani’s death was a real shock to the system,” said Dan Hollingsworth, program director at Kitsap CrossFit in Poulsbo, Washington.

CrossFit athletes are accustomed to supporting each other through struggles with the barbell and in search of PRs, but coping with grief is a new experience—until it happens.

“The unfortunate reality is that you’re occasionally going to lose some people, and that’s just a part of life,” Hollingsworth said.

And yet, he admitted, “We certainly don’t have an action plan for this.”

None of the boxes discussed below had a plan for dealing with the death of a member or coach. They wrestled with the process blindly—from notifying their members to creating memorials to supporting each other through mid-workout bursts of grief. But examining the decisions they made shows that loss affects affiliates in similar ways, and that boxes can learn from each other in order to support their communities through a difficult time.

Sharing the News

One of the first issues a box faces after a death is how to share the news within its community.

Laura Hart of CrossFit Indulto in Sandy Springs, Georgia, described coach Tim Barta as “one of the best people you’ve ever met”: humble, giving, and passionate about CrossFit and coaching.

When he died unexpectedly in October 2014, Hart was shocked.

“Your first thought is, ‘How do you deal with it? How do you tell people?’ Because we’re not a big gym, every time someone comes or goes it makes a huge ripple, and so I think I was nervous about the sadness and having to tell people.”

Hart said she and her husband, Ryan, “were really hesitant to make announcements via social media, because we felt like that’s not what it’s for, and that people deserved to hear it from us. We tried to do it more one-on-one.”

But when the news began to spread on Facebook, “We had to improvise.”

At Kitsap CrossFit, Hollingsworth took a different approach.

“Our goal was to let our members know before they just happened to log onto Facebook and see something or before they heard some rumor around the gym.”

As active writers, he and partner Amy chose to share the news on their blog.

Most of the affiliates discussed in this article posted the news of the member’s passing on the social-media platform they use most regularly—usually Facebook or the box’s blog. Often, out of respect, they contacted the family before sharing any information.

But once the news was out, the journey had only just begun. And the next step for every box was to bring their members together physically to share information and, most importantly, to grieve.

Gathering Together

Fredda Wasserman, the clinical director of adult programs and education at Our House, said coming together as a community as soon as possible is vital. Our House is a grief-support center with locations in Los Angeles, California, and Woodland Hills, California.

Attendance does not have to be mandatory, but she recommended “a formal invitation to a time that is set aside specifically for this, because grief is something that really needs to be shared.”

Wasserman explained the gathering doesn't have to be a traditional memorial.

“Whatever way that people decide to do it, it's just to be in the company of others and hear other people's memories and be with people who really understand because they knew that person, too.”

That connection is exactly what Natalie Garcia of Viking CrossFit in Orem, Utah, wanted. Member Katrina Lawrence, Garcia said, “just kind of sparkled. She was one of those people where you were better for knowing her.”

“We just needed to be with each other, we needed to talk about it, we needed to cry together.”

—*Natalie Garcia*

When Katrina died in childbirth in May 2013, Garcia immediately posted an invitation on Facebook, announcing a gathering that night at the box.

“We just needed to be with each other, we needed to talk about it, we needed to cry together.”

Hart felt the same way. Coaches cancelled classes at CrossFit Indulto the evening of Barta's viewing to allow everyone in their box to attend, and they gathered together afterward as well.

“Where else can you go?” Hart asked. “Nobody understands or gets it. CrossFit is weird; it attaches you to people in ways that



Brian Sullivan/CrossFit Journal

Conrad Jackson (in yellow) paid tribute to fallen fire-fighters at the Hotshots 19 memorial workout in August 2013 in Arizona.

Sharing the Loss

In August of 2013, Richard Millsap was leading a class at his box, CrossFit Mosaic, in Winter Garden, Florida, when a man walked in and shot him twice. Millsap was killed.

Jeremy Brassard, head coach at nearby Armor CrossFit in Ocoee, Florida, was stunned by the news. He and Millsap had been professionally friendly, and Brassard described him as “the epitome of what a CrossFit coach should be.” He said Millsap was committed to making a difference and thought of CrossFit Mosaic as a way to give and minister.

When Brassard heard of Millsap's death, he thought immediately of the family left behind.

“I'd met his wife, I'd met his kids, and I'm a dad. I have four kids. I thought, ‘What if this happened to me?’ I felt like we had to do something.”

Immediately, Brassard reached out to other Orlando-area box owners, and together they held a fundraising workout to benefit Millsap's wife and children. When the word spread, affiliates across the country joined in.

“We had boxes from places I'd never even heard of sending us checks,” he said. Their fundraising efforts raised well over US\$40,000 in Millsap's honor.

Members of CrossFit Mosaic were invited to work out at Armor CrossFit, with their membership fees to be paid directly to Millsap's widow, Karen. And while CrossFit Inc. offered five complimentary spots in Level 1 seminars to athletes interested in taking over at CrossFit Mosaic, the gym eventually closed. But Brassard said there are about 14 people from Millsap's box who are now members of Armor CrossFit.

Brassard wasn't surprised by the support the event and the Millsap family received in Orlando and across the country, nor did he think he did anything unusual.

“That's how CrossFit should be,” he said. “When it comes to another box, we're an extended family. This is all much, much, much bigger than us. I think we have a responsibility to each other.”

other people just can't understand. People who hardly knew Tim outside the gym feel this loss because they still saw him every day. It's just a different kind of relationship, but that doesn't make it any less important."

That different kind of relationship means a different kind of mourning.

Powerful Emotions

Wasserman said grieving the death of someone such as a co-worker or a box member—as opposed to a relative—can be an unfamiliar experience.

A key pain point is that people outside the box don't recognize the emotional impact of the loss.

"If your close family member dies, everyone extends their condolences to you and checks in on you and recognizes that you're going to be going through a lot of emotions. When it's at a community like the gym, people don't get that. They don't send you a condolence card. They don't ask how you are doing without this person," Wasserman said.

To people outside CrossFit, the hole left by a member's or coach's passing is inexplicable. Hollingsworth described the struggle this way: "It's so hard to express to people who aren't a part of CrossFit. People are like, 'I have a community,' and I'm like, 'Yeah, I'm sure you do. But this is different.'"

Emotions can run high at CrossFit gyms. Affiliate owners and coaches are used to tears and anger, frustration and fear. But having those emotions arise from the death of a community member is new territory.

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Hart said reactions to Barta's death ran the gamut from curiosity (after almost four years in recovery, he died of a drug overdose) to anger to great sadness.

"(There were) people coming in and just crying. You'd be in the middle of a workout and something would come up. This hour is your time to get away, and when what you're trying to get away from is here, what do you do?" Hart asked.

The only answer to that, said Hart and the other box owners, is to allow the feelings to happen and to support people through the mourning process.

"As far as grief goes, you just let people deal with it how they're going to deal with it. And sometimes that's just that you shut up and listen. Let them talk and just love 'em," said Jeremy Brassard, of Armor CrossFit in Ocoee, Florida (see sidebar on Page 3).

Remembering and Honoring

To help cope with the loss and create something positive, each of these boxes created two things: a named workout and a fundraiser in the decedent's honor.

The workout itself served an important purpose.

"The CrossFit box is a place for people to work things out, and when you have a tragic event like this, people need to see each other and hug each other and support each other, and at the same time they need to grunt and groan and sweat and cuss. It's cathartic. It definitely helps," Hollingsworth said.

Some of the boxes either do or plan to do the named workout on an annual basis as an opportunity to remember the athlete they lost and honor their community's grief.

Garcia said doing Lawrence's workout on the first anniversary of her death was a different experience.

"A year later was a little bit easier. It was still somber, and people were quieter during that workout because it's for a special purpose. But before and after the workout we would share memories, so it was a little bit on the lighter side because we're past the shock and we're able to celebrate her memory."

The second act, holding a fundraiser, brings both tangible and intangible benefits. The purpose is often to financially help the family of the member who passed or to support a good cause. Kitsap CrossFit donated money in Luther's honor to a military



Brian Sullivan/CrossFit Journal

At the Hotshots 19 memorial, butterflies were released before CrossFit Games athlete Dan Bailey led the VIP heat in prayer.

charity. And Barta's family elected to have the funds raised by CrossFit Indulto go toward a scholarship for athletes interested in earning a CrossFit Level 1 Certificate.

Representatives from each affiliate also mentioned how meaningful the participation of other boxes was to them, whether community members donated money or simply did the workout.

"Everybody has their own CrossFit community within their own gym, but then to have something like this happen and actually feel that family and that love from the CrossFit community throughout the world was absolutely an amazing experience," Garcia said of the international support of their fundraiser.

But working on the event also funneled energy into something positive.

"It allowed people to put their grief into something. So whether it was channeling their grief into the workout or into organizing it, I think it was like a celebration of Tim instead of mourning him, which he probably would have liked," Hart said of CrossFit Indulto's "Throw-in for Tim" workout fundraiser.

Viking CrossFit ended up putting together a large, successful fundraiser to benefit the Lawrence family in Katrina's honor, including a silent auction and a raffle for a car. But the work of organizing the event meant the most.

"For us to be able to put together something like that for a friend that we loved, that's all we could do. That absolutely helped us in the healing process," said Garcia.

Stronger Than Before

As Kitsap CrossFit realized last year, it's entirely possible for any box to lose one of its members or coaches, often without warning.

This is why it is so important, Wasserman said, to "have these conversations now, when nothing is imminent."

If a box's leadership has discussed the possibility of death and how to handle it, community members will not be shielded from sadness, but they might be able to focus their energy on supporting each other and planning ways to honor and remember their departed friend.

And despite their pain, these affiliates have found ways to look at the positive effects.



Dan Hollingsworth

Mike Stadshaug offered some reps in memory of the departed at CrossFit Kitsap.



Brian Sullivan/CrossFit Journal

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—Dan Hollingsworth

“I think it has changed us, but I don’t think it’s bad,” Hart said. “I think people remember (Tim) and love him and know that bad shit happens to good people, and you kind of have to pick it up and move on. But I feel like it’s brought us closer together.”

Garcia saw the impact on two levels at Viking CrossFit: “I think everybody realized how important we are to each other, and that our community is more than just a place to work out. And on an individual level, it just makes you realize how precious life is.”

Hollingsworth believes the community’s grief over losing Daniel and Luther strengthened its connections. “I don’t know that it’s visible, that someone would walk in and be able to palpate why, but I know that because of these things, bonds have been formed between people that are unlike the bonds that they had before.”

He added: “People have a deeper connection with each other because of having gone through these unfortunate events and having been there for each other in a way that they hadn’t ever expected in a gym.” ■

About the Author



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Eleanor Brown is the New York Times and international bestselling author of the novel “The Weird Sisters,” and of the fitness-inspiration book “WOD Motivation.” She has been doing CrossFit for three years and trains at CrossFit Modig in Highlands Ranch, Colorado.

“The comfort of having a friend may be taken away, but not that of having had one.”
—Seneca