
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Master of the Many

It takes great skill to manage a large group of athletes. Affiliate owners share how they learned to do it and how they're teaching others to be leaders.

By Emily Beers

April 2015



Coaching a group class is a bit like being an offensive lineman on the football field: When you perform well, you're not always rewarded, but it's incredibly obvious when you mess up.

When you're disorganized and don't pay attention to the small details, your class can quickly spiral into a sea of chaos and confusion. But when you master how to properly coach a group of 20 people, classes appear to run almost effortlessly.

1 of 7



Courtesy of Jonas Deffes

Jonas Deffes (right) says coaching large groups is about carefully managing growth, not taking on more than you can handle and then easing other coaches into it.

In the 2006 CrossFit Journal article “Scaling Professional Training,” CrossFit Inc. Founder and CEO Greg Glassman wrote about the challenges of the transition from working predominantly in a one-on-one setting to coaching group classes. As a solution to a busy schedule, Glassman started training his existing clients in pairs and slowly moved to larger groups.

“To run group classes without compromising our hallmark laser focus and commitment to the athlete, the trainer has to learn to give each member of the group the impression that he is getting all the attention that he could get in one-on-one training, and that requires tremendous training skill,” Glassman wrote of one of the challenges.

It’s been nine years since Glassman wrote the article, but coaches today are continually faced with the same challenges Glassman identified: It can be daunting to stand in front of a large, diverse group of athletes and give useful cues and advice so each one gets a great workout with the right loads and modifications. Coaches are also tasked

with managing the group and ensuring the class starts and finishes on time, the workout is safely organized, and athletes are always listening and following instructions. Through it all, coaches are expected to be engaging and inspiring.

So how does the affiliate owner get coaches ready to lead and manage a large group with skill?

Slow and Steady: From One-on-One to 100

Jonas Deffes of Supra CrossFit in New Orleans, Louisiana, followed a path similar to Glassman’s. He began his fitness career as a personal trainer. He started training clients in 2003, and when Hurricane Katrina destroyed everything he owned, he moved to Florida in 2004. He began to educate himself in CrossFit methodology, which he used on his personal-training clients. Eventually, also like Glassman, Deffes turned his one-on-one sessions into small group classes when his schedule grew too busy. Before he knew it, he was running a successful boot-camp business.

“Boot camps allowed me to leverage my time,” said Deffes, whose classes quickly grew from 10 to 20 to 50 and beyond. Eventually 100 people were showing up. His classes, which were held in a park he leased, were so consistently large he at one point hired a cop to direct traffic.

For Deffes, being able to handle large numbers was all about carefully managing his growth.

By 2012, Deffes knew CrossFit affiliation was what he wanted. He earned a CrossFit Level 1 Certificate and opened his affiliate in January 2013. Supra CrossFit now has 350 members.

For Deffes, being able to handle large numbers was all about carefully managing his growth. He was patient and never took on more than he knew he could handle. He believes this approach was key to his success.

“Make sure you grow your classes at a rate you’re able to manage. Going from one to 15 might be too big of a jump,

so you might want to start with a group of six people. Then try 10. Then move to 20," Deffes explained. "And by the time you get to 50 people, you know you can probably teach as many people as possible."

Similarly, he believes you should employ the same technique when teaching a new coach: Ease him into larger groups of athletes carefully and avoid throwing him into situations he's not ready for. It's up to the affiliate owner, or the coach's mentor, to recognize what his mentee is capable of.

At Deffes' affiliate, his new coaches start by shadowing a more senior coach. They watch silently on the sidelines until they're comfortable cueing and correcting form. Deffes believes this process is important for two reasons: It ensures the new coach builds confidence, and members get used to—and start to trust—the new coach.

"Your clients will gradually see this person moving up through the ranks, and then eventually the main coach

will let the new coach lead the warm-up or the strength portion of the class," he said. "Gradually do it in steps to make sure the new trainer is coming along and is getting properly acclimated."

Winston Thompson is another affiliate owner who coached boot camps prior to opening CrossFit Tipping Point in Norcross, Georgia, in 2014. His classes are still small and manageable—usually fewer than 10 athletes—but he's confident his boot-camp experience will allow him to easily handle larger classes as his affiliate continues to grow.

And when he grows large enough to take on a new coach, he's going to proceed as Deffes did and build up his coaches slowly and systematically. This concept is something Thompson also learned during his boot-camp days.

"You need to be careful of what kind of responsibilities you pass along (to new trainers). Be mindful if you're making people do something that's out of their skill set. But if they're coaching something they're really good at,



Courtesy of Jonas Deffes

Before affiliation, Deffes leased a park for boot-camp classes. As his business grew, he learned more and more about class management.

they can knock it out of the park and gain confidence,” Thompson said. “It’s like a quarterback. At the start of the game, he makes a lot of short passes to gain confidence, and then longer ones later on in the game.”

Thompson believes being mindful of strengths and weaknesses helps a new coach develop confidence and personal style. Coaches still need to follow the appropriate class format of the day, but the delivery of the class comes down to individual personality.

“When you try to get someone to do something exactly your way, it doesn’t work as well. It’s going to be much more organic if you let them do it their own way, as long as they follow the right structure,” he said.

Challenges and Solutions

Even when you train your coaches carefully, challenges always appear when dealing with groups. Diversity is a common stumbling block.

A group class can be made up of people of varying levels, ages, and athletic and health backgrounds. One athlete

might be recovering from the flu, another has arthritis, and a third is attending her first group class. Several others might be very experienced.

It’s important to know exactly how to cue so you connect with those who need the coaching without interrupting the flow of the class for other athletes. Deffes learned a trick that worked for him when he was coaching oversized classes, and he still employs it today.

“You become like a human whiteboard dictating the workout, cueing the movements to the group,” he said. “You might be coaching 10 people, and only one person has bad form. But you can basically give a cue that can help everyone, and I guarantee there is one more person doing it wrong, too, and now everyone hears.”

For instance, rolling through the points of performance for a squat will help new athletes move properly, while simultaneously fine-tuning the more experienced athletes. The more cues—and ways to explain movements—you have in your toolset, the better. Diversity will help make sure athletes don’t feel as if they’re hearing the same generic cue for the 10th time that week.



Israel Woolfolk

Athletes with diverse skills present challenges, but experienced coaches are able to quickly adjust workouts to ensure each client gets what he or she needs.

Thompson agrees handling diverse fitness levels can be challenging for a new coach, and he has his own solution: “The biggest thing is that you have to listen and talk to your athletes. You need to find out what they need from you on an individual basis that day.”

Thompson ensures he talks to his athletes during warm-up, and from there he scales individuals according to their feedback.

Thompson also uses experienced athletes to help the less-experienced ones. He often pairs an experienced athlete with a novice during a strength session, so the novice can learn by watching a partner.

“And our experienced athletes usually take pride in what they’re doing and enjoy showing others what they’ve learned,” he said.

Technical coaching aside, it can be challenging to create personal relationships with your clients when you’re in a large group. Deffes, however, sees the group class as a great opportunity because group sessions are generally free of the personal distractions and drama that came up when he was a personal trainer.

“Personal training ended up being a therapy session and took away from the workout. . . . It would distract from the training aspect of it,” Deffes said. “When you shift to group training, there’s no time to talk about Nancy’s problem with her relationship or John’s date last night because all you have time for is to instruct the class.”

**Have you heard a new coach
timidly call a class to order,
sometimes speaking so quietly no
one can hear?**

Deffes strives to create and maintain tight relationships with clients, but he believes the time for chitchat is before and after class.



Alyssa Porter

Coaches need to ensure they interact with each member, but they also need to ensure they don’t spend too much time with one athlete at the expense of 10 others.

“There’s still the community feeling, but when you’re teaching the class it’s more about the workout. Just like any teacher, it’s all about the information you’re trying to give them. So you’re focused on what counts more: the exercise program, that their form is right, that the energy is good,” he said. “Then after class you can be social!”

Similarly, Patrick Lyden of CrossFit EXP in Leominster, Massachusetts, builds social time into his group classes. His sessions are structured so there’s always a 15-minute break between them, meaning coaches have 15 minutes before and after class to connect with members.

“In a group, you want to reduce drama in people’s lives, not add to the drama,” said Lyden, who was formerly a microbiologist and personal trainer.



Patrick Lyden

Being clear and being heard are important to Patrick Lyden, who makes a point of speaking loudly and turning down the music during explanations.

To ensure coaches are connecting with each member during class—even if it’s about the deadlift as opposed to a date the night before—Lyden instated what he calls a “three-touch rule.”

“During the class, each coach needs to connect with each member three times, typically at the beginning or before class, the middle and the end of class,” Lyden explained. He believes this is an easy way to ensure members feel they’re being adequately coached and cared for.

Another issue—and one Glassman alluded to briefly in “Scaling Professional Training”—is speaking volume. Have you heard a new coach timidly call a class to order, sometimes speaking so quietly no one can hear? Lyden thinks volume is one of the biggest challenges for a new coach.

“When you first start out, especially in a big space like a CrossFit box, you have to yell,” he said, explaining new

coaches often don’t realize just how loud they have to holler in order to capture everyone’s attention.

Lyden focuses on speaking slowly and clearly, also making sure no distractions are present. For example, he takes the time to turn down the music during explanations.

If coaches struggle with volume, Lyden believes things such as whistles can help at times. He used a whistle when he taught outdoors, and just for fun he brought it to class recently. It made everyone laugh, and it helped keep things fun and fresh.

Thompson believes the issue is often less about the natural volume of a person’s voice and more about confidence and presence. Both increase in magnitude over time.

“I’ve seen people be very successful as coaches that you wouldn’t expect would be good because they’re timid. But then when they jump out in front of everyone they command attention,” Thompson said.

This command comes naturally as a coach gets comfortable and gains respect from his athletes.

Finally, time management is crucial to running a smooth class. New coaches can get caught up helping someone, and the entire class spills into the next hour, creating a vicious cycle that’s repeated each hour.

Lyden has a simple solution: Use a timer.

If the new coach holds himself to a timer, he’s less likely to ignore the ticking clock and run overtime. Time caps on workouts also help, as do repeated warnings that remind athletes how much time they have for any part of the session. “Five minutes to finish your last set of front squats” goes a long way in keeping people organized. So does this: “I’m starting the clock for the workout at exactly 5:45, so make sure you’re ready to go.”

Preparation Is Key

The final piece of the puzzle comes down to being organized and prepared. Deffes learned that when coaching 100 people outside. The more people you have, the more details matter—from parking guidelines to timelines to the way people set up for a workout. For example, Deffes lined up

his boot-camp attendees specifically so they'd all be able to hear him. The same is true of a CrossFit class: Athletes need to know placement of mats, boxes and barbells matters.

That physical organization should be reflected in the coach's mind, as well. Lyden believes one of the most important aspects of running a quality group class is organizing your thoughts and planning ahead of time. He learned about preparation early in his career.

Patrick Lyden believes one of the most important aspects of running a quality group class is organizing your thoughts and planning ahead of time.

"My first appointment (as a personal trainer) was with a woman I had met at the health club. It was three hours long. I was so passionate about what I knew," Lyden said. "I filled her ear with so much information. Knowing how to gradually give information—as opposed to giving it all at once—was one lesson I learned."

Lyden joked he doesn't go into his daughter's bedroom and practice in front of stuffed animals, but he believes it's important to show up to class with a structured plan for the hour. This usually involves spending some time reviewing the program for the day, understanding the structure of the workout, having a good warm-up prepared beforehand, planning out scaling options and ways to modify workouts, and thinking about the coaching cues you might use that day. The preparation could also include having a joke to tell the class beforehand to get everyone laughing.

Lyden uses evaluations to help teach these concepts to his coaches. While it's common for senior coaches to evaluate new coaches, new coaches also evaluate more-experienced coaches at Lyden's affiliate. Specifically, the new coach must perform three evaluations on three different coaches.

Lyden explained there are certain things he wants the new coach to notice about class preparation and personality when evaluating others. What was the other coach's rapport like with the members? Did the coach start on time? Was the coach prepared? Did he or she introduce himself to new members? What was the energy and flow of the class like?

Lyden finds evaluations help new coaches recognize the smaller details necessary for classes to run smoothly.

"And it gives me a chance to see if existing coaches are sticking with what we want them to be doing. Coaches really step up their game at (evaluation) time," Lyden said.

That's a win for all parties.

Chaos and Order

When it comes to coaching a group class well, there's very little room for error.

Affiliate owners and coaches have learned when you're lazy with the details, sloppiness will start to take over the class. If you get stuck chatting in the corner and accidentally start a class five minutes late, the entire hour can get thrown off. Or if you don't make it clear how to scale a workout properly and let people run wild with their equipment, you'll suddenly find yourself in a room full of barbells rolling into each other with frazzled athletes chasing after them. And if you don't take the time to bother getting to know your athletes' individual strengths and weaknesses, you might find yourself losing clients fast.

Conversely, when coaches pay attention to small details, class run seamlessly. Suddenly, barbells and athletes are moving in unison and the coach starts to relax and feel like an experienced maestro in control of the orchestra.



About the Author

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