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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## Unfit to Print?

Affiliate owners explain how the publication of shoddy science affects their businesses and the CrossFit brand.

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By Emily Beers

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Tai Randall/CrossFit Journal

### *How much misinformation is packed in our country's libraries?*

It was just one short paragraph, but those five sentences have become the basis of two lawsuits.

The peer-reviewed study “[CrossFit-Based High Intensity Power Training Improves Maximal Aerobic Fitness and Body Composition](#)” was published November 2013 in the Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research, the official journal of the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA). Among other things, the authors stated 16 percent of 54

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CrossFit athletes from CrossFit 614 in Columbus, Ohio, were injured during a 10-week study about high-intensity power training (HIPT). Ohio State University (OSU) administered the study.

In the study, Michael M. Smith et al. stated:

A unique concern with any high intensity training program such as HIPT or other similar programs is the risk of overuse injury. In spite of a deliberate periodization and supervision of our Crossfit-based training program by certified fitness professionals, a notable percentage of our subjects (16%) did not complete the training program and return for follow-up testing. While peer-reviewed evidence of injury rates pertaining to high intensity training programs is sparse, there are emerging reports of increased rates of musculoskeletal and metabolic injury in these programs(1). This may call into question the risk-benefit ratio for such extreme training programs, as the relatively small aerobic fitness and body composition improvements observed among individuals who are already considered to be “above average” and “well above average” may not be worth the risk of injury and lost training time. Further work in this area is needed to explore how to best realize improvements to health without increasing risk above background levels associated with participation in any non-high intensity based fitness regimen.

Although the study also concluded CrossFit improves  $VO_2$  max and body composition, these conclusions didn't become the focus of other articles that were written and splashed all over social media in the following weeks. The media focused on one statistic: the nine athletes (16 percent of participants) reported to be injured and unable to complete the testing.

Outside Magazine's “[Is CrossFit Killing Us?](#)” was arguably the story that received the most attention, but others also made their rounds on social media. Women's Health published “[Does CrossFit Cause Injuries?](#)” which immediately referenced the study's injury data. [Men's Journal](#) also reported the 16 percent injury rate as fact, as did [Healthandfitnessadvice.com](#), which called the data “extremely damning.” [Discovery News](#) published a video that pointed to the same data, but CrossFit Inc. employees contacted Discovery News to report numerous factual errors in the video, and it was removed.



Emily Beers/CrossFit Journal

**Mitch Potterf, owner of CrossFit 614 in Ohio, is suing Ohio State University over a study that claimed he hurt athletes.**

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**In possession of evidence that would clearly invalidate the injury rates reported in the OSU study, Potterf waits as legal process runs its course and critics throw the statistic around any time it will help an argument.**

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A Google search leads to dozens of other websites and blogs that reference the OSU study and its injury statistics. Some note the disputed validity of these numbers is the basis for ongoing litigation, while others do not and present the stats as truth.

In March 2014, Mitch Potterf, owner of CrossFit 614, [filed suit against OSU](#), alleging academic misconduct. Potterf and his lawyer, Ken Donchatz, have collected statements in which every single athlete in the study swears he or she did not get injured. Potterf and Donchatz believe this evidence will help them win the case.

CrossFit Inc. has also taken legal action against the NSCA in a [complaint](#) filed with the United States District Court for the Southern District of California.

In possession of evidence that would clearly invalidate the injury rates reported in the OSU study, Potterf waits as the legal process runs its course and critics throw the statistic around any time it will help an argument. Other affiliate owners and athletes sympathize with Potterf. The OSU study has affected them, too, and they know it's essential to protect the CrossFit brand from misinformation used by both the ignorant and the malicious.

### Damage Control

Affiliate owners Sam Fariss of CrossFit Southern Maryland in Waldorf, Maryland, and Mike Anderson of CrossFit Malibu in Malibu, California, are angry that alleged misinformation has hurt both the CrossFit brand and their businesses. They are completely supportive of the fight against those responsible for the damage.

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**“When people come in they usually have read somewhere that CrossFit is dangerous, and they never have anything to back that up with.”**

**—Mike Anderson**

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“I would totally be pissed if those were my clients and it made me and my affiliate look bad. I can definitely understand suing OSU,” Fariss said of the reportedly injured study participants. “When CrossFit HQ fires back on the NSCA, I see it as standing up for what is right.”



Courtesy of Mike Anderson

**Mike Anderson, owner of CrossFit Malibu in California, says he often fields unsubstantiated questions about the dangers of CrossFit at his affiliate.**

Anderson echoed Fariss' sentiment and believes it's a fight both Potterf and CrossFit Inc. must pursue.

“When there are factual inaccuracies and fraud, that raises obvious red flags, and they need to fight against it,” Anderson said. He encouraged other affiliate owners to watch “[CrossFit: The Good Fight](#),” a 30-minute CrossFit Inc. video in which Russell Berger detailed the chronology of CrossFit's fight against the NSCA, providing background for the current litigation. It was released in March 2015.

“Russell Berger made such a cogent argument that says CrossFit is obligated to defend itself,” Anderson said. The fight is necessary to protect the brand and to protect his affiliate, he added.

Both Fariss and Anderson noticed the outpouring of stories in the media after the OSU study was released in 2013. Fariss said he stays informed so he can be prepared for questions. For instance, if people confront him about the reported 16 percent injury rate in the OSU study, he can educate them.



Courtesy of Sam Fariss

**At CrossFit Southern Maryland, owner Sam Fariss sees a lot of fear mongering perpetuated by rival non-CrossFit gyms.**

"I read the articles to stay ahead of everything that I can," he explained.

Potterf said he's continuously hurt by the OSU study when others point to the injury statistics and tag him in social-media posts, damaging his reputation. In one particular case, an online assailant suggested he could fix those athletes Potterf supposedly injured.

Although Fariss' athletes weren't part of the OSU study, the gym owner has had to deal with similar situations.

Last year, a new member of CrossFit Southern Maryland ran into the owner of a rival non-CrossFit gym in the area. The gym owner tried to convince Fariss' member to join his gym instead, saying the client would be injured within one month of training at Fariss' facility. That member has been with Fariss for a year now and has remained injury-free.

This was not an isolated incident, nor is it uncommon in the fitness community.

"We are seeing a lot of people come in and mention this very thing—(other gyms) just basically talk shit and spread lies to prospective members to drive their own bottom line through fear mongering," Fariss said.

"It's infuriating and maddening," he added.

Anderson said the reason this fear mongering works is because the alleged errors in the OSU study masquerade as legitimate science.

"People get their proof from peer-reviewed articles," Anderson said.

An NSCA publication is a source the public trusts, so it can be used as ammunition to convince others to believe what they read, Anderson said.

Fariss said it isn't uncommon for non-CrossFit athletes to post articles that reference injury rates onto the Facebook pages of athletes who go to Fariss' gym. Fariss said his clients often tag him in the posts, hoping he will provide an explanation and some truth.

Fariss and Anderson want the truth, and they want to repair any damage that's been done by bad science.

"It's impossible to measure the negative effect (on my business because) of articles in the press, but when people come in they usually have read somewhere that CrossFit is dangerous, and they never have anything to back that up with," Anderson said.

### Deciding for Herself

Crystal Voliva had heard about CrossFit repeatedly since 2010. In 2013, she finally decided to do some research on the program.

Voliva said she always does research before making any big decision, but when she started surfing the web for details on starting CrossFit training in North Carolina, she found a mixed bag of information.

"I came across articles that claimed CrossFit is bad for you, that you're going to hurt yourself, that you're going to get rhabdo," she said.

She discovered articles such as “Is CrossFit Killing Us?” and heard the warnings from Women’s Health—both of which prominently featured the injury data from OSU. She also read personal blogs that made reference to the injury statistics.

All the blogs she read had one thing in common: “It didn’t sound like the people who wrote the blogs had tried CrossFit,” she said.

Her research also led to endless positive stories about CrossFit. She read stories about personal transformations, about weight loss and about reversing the effects of diabetes. She watched videos of 50-year-old women lifting weights and doing pull-ups.

She found affiliate’s official websites to be particularly inspiring.

“(Affiliate) websites would tell me that you don’t have to be fit to start CrossFit, and that it’s scalable,” she said. “Their message was that all skill levels were welcome. Box websites did a nice job explaining that.”

It was time for Voliva to find out the truth. She joined New Order CrossFit in Cary, North Carolina, in 2013 and instantly took to it.

“The fact that it’s easily measurable really sold me,” she said. In just a few months, she lost 50 lb., and her life started improving.

Voliva looks back to 2013 and has only one regret.

“I wish I had looked into it sooner. It’s something I regret to this day. ... Where would I be if I started in 2010?” she asked.

“CrossFit is something that will change your life—if you let it,” she added.

Voliva did her homework and separated misinformation from fact, but how many others read an article quoting the OSU data and wrote CrossFit off as dangerous? How many people missed a chance to get fitter and perhaps change their lives? And how many CrossFit affiliates lost prospective clients who hung onto statistics Potterf intends to prove are false?

### Protecting the Brand

Although Potterf is the affiliate owner suing OSU for academic fraud, he’s not the only one who’s been affected by the study. The entire CrossFit brand—including coaches and affiliates around the world—has been hurt.

Every time someone reads an article quoting erroneous injury statistics, it tarnishes CrossFit, its trainers and its affiliates. Imagine if an automotive journal published erroneous statistics that “proved” 16 percent of a certain manufacturer’s cars would burst into flames upon ignition. How would that affect sales? And how might the manufacturer respond?

Similarly, exercise-science journals have a responsibility to the public. If science can expose bad training protocols and prevent injuries, researchers should broadcast that information loudly and often in order to influence general media outlets. But if poor science



Courtesy of Crystal Voliva

**Crystal Voliva read countless articles that told her she would get injured doing CrossFit. After two years at New Order CrossFit, she wishes she had joined sooner.**

has produced bad statistics with no basis in fact, what damage is done when mainstream media applies the old adage, "If it bleeds, it leads"?

Chris Russell of CrossFit Jax in Jacksonville, Florida, thinks CrossFit is a target because its growth is now a financial threat to other bodies who license personal trainers, such as the NSCA and the American Council on Exercise (ACE).

Russell isn't convinced the alleged inaccuracy of the OSU study was a simple error.

"I don't think it's malicious. I know it is," said Russell, who is a member of CrossFit's Level 1 Seminar Staff.

"(Bodies) like the NSCA and ACE, they're threatened by a new player in the game, so they fear-monger to slow it down," Russell said. "Inject some bullshit into a study. Throw some fake injury numbers in."



Courtesy of Chris Russell

**Chris Russell of CrossFit Jax believes organizations such as the National Strength and Conditioning Association are targeting CrossFit because of its success.**

Anderson added: "It's big business trying to maintain its market share."

Anderson wants to see the people behind the study held responsible.

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**But if poor science has produced bad statistics with no basis in fact, what damage is done when mainstream media applies the old adage, "If it bleeds, it leads"?**

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"You like to think that people will be punished," Anderson said.

He also wants the study retracted.

"That's a minimum. That's what they have to do to maintain the trust people have in them," he said.

CrossFit Inc. has stepped up to maintain the trust of affiliate owners by setting the record straight in court. In Ohio, Potterf is doing his part to protect his own business and the brand he's part of.

Russell has faith CrossFit Inc. and in the CrossFit community will win the fight.

"We will prevail. We are only out for health and fitness for everybody," he said.



### About the Author

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