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Human Defense System

CrossFit Defense shows Theresa Smith she already has the tools she needs to defend herself.

By Theresa Smith

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Bek Houston

Theresa Smith's feeling of vulnerability while alone at her affiliate led her to seek out a CrossFit Defense seminar.

Like many other CrossFit gyms, Raise the Bar CrossFit in Ontario, Oregon, is in a crime-ridden industrial area.

We want our members to be able to work out in a place where they can be themselves, and industrial areas are home to large warehouse spaces where weights can be dropped and music played loudly at all hours of the day without pissing

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off the neighbors. Rent is often cheaper in industrial areas, but these affiliate-friendly parts of town can be places where we have to look out for each other and ourselves.

The small city in which I run my affiliate has the reputation of being the most dangerous in the state. We've had break-ins, vandalism, drug busts and even murders in the neighborhood in which I go to work every day, and safety is a very real concern.

Graffiti peppered my back walls a few times, I had threatening situations with passers-by, I started to feel like I had to lock my doors when I was there alone, and I had a bad situation with a neighbor who—seemingly in a drug-fueled rage—physically threatened an entire class during an early-morning session. Except for one week of taekwondo as a teenager, I have no history in self-defense or martial arts. In my gym, I felt exposed and vulnerable to criminal elements. I didn't like that feeling and wanted to take control of the situation.

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The final straw was when someone broke into a coach's car. It happened in broad daylight: A class of athletes worked out just 20 yards away while a thief smashed a window and stole a wallet. The incident destroyed the sense of safety at my gym. A couple of weeks later, we learned it was not just a thug who had stolen the wallet but rather a member of a large group of identity thieves and sex traffickers who had made their way up to Oregon from Georgia.

Around the time of that event, I posted on a Facebook page for CrossFit affiliate owners to see what others do to stay safe when they are at the gym alone so often. The response was tremendous and very passionate. Among almost 100 responses, I received advice ranging from "get a big dog" to "get a gun" to "learn a martial art." All I knew was that I wanted to feel safe right now—not years or months from now after training a dog, mastering a martial art or mastering use of a weapon.



Courtesy of Theresa Smith

Raise the Bar CrossFit is located in Ontario, Oregon, a small city that has the reputation of being the most dangerous in the state.

One answer that kept coming up intrigued me: Check out Tony Blauer's CrossFit Defense course. I decided it was worth a shot and booked myself into the Trainer Course at CrossFit Unbroken in Denver, Colorado, set for the following month.

Knees to Elbows—or Groin

For some reason, I always thought of self-defense as what you do the moment someone physically attacks you. It turns out that's just a small part of it.

As Blauer pointed out at the course, self-defense begins before the danger. He went over his Cycle of Behavior, and one phrase that stuck with me is "false expectations appearing real," or FEAR. The concept made me more aware of my thought processes: Do I set up a bad situation without cause? Do I give power to a person trying to instill fear? How do I react when my own false expectations appear to be real?



Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

At his CrossFit Defense courses, Tony Blauer relates self-defense movements to those commonly found in CrossFit workouts.

For Blauer, mindset and tactics are a winning combination. He teaches simple, effective techniques based on how a person will actually react to an attack. These tactics are not five-finger death punches that require a Bruce Lee level of skill and focus in an attack. Instead, Blauer's program teaches you to use simple movements that capitalize on the body's natural flinch reflex.

One of the first drills we learned was "splayed fingers and outside 90." Blauer paired class members as attackers and victims and had the attacker go in for a bear-hug tackle. He demonstrated what happens if you simply try to push the attacker away, and he showed us the impressive difference when you do the same thing with fingers splayed open and the elbow joints open past 90 degrees to create mechanical advantage. These simple techniques—which can be deployed from the flinch/reflex position of throwing the hands up in front of the face when attacked—recruit the strong extensor muscles and put the victim in a much better defensive position.

We also learned how to slam an attacker's chin, with the ever-familiar medicine ball playing the role of the assailant's

head. Blauer explained that the chin slam works no matter which direction the attacker's head turns, and the chin is a big target compared to, say, an eye or a nose. The movement is very similar to the finish of a wall-ball shot, and Blauer made that connection obvious. The wall-ball shot is ingrained deep into muscle memory of CrossFit athletes, and the link between fitness and defense saved hours of practice. I know how to finish Karen, so I know how to slam an attacker in the chin and fend off a bear hug.

As a coach and athlete, my favorite part of the course was the time spent doing defense WODs (D-WODS). In the "taking-the-garbage-out WOD," athletes took turns posing as attackers and victims, playing out a scene in which a coach is taking the garbage out behind the gym. Turning from the garbage can, the victim encounters an assailant who dives in for an attack. The victim throws his hands up in a reflexive action, deploys the fingers-splayed/outside-90 defense and then slams rapid-succession knee kicks to the ribs of the attacker—a medicine ball—before scrambling under a nearby fence.

We also had an opportunity to come up with our own D-WODs, which allowed us to practice the techniques we learned and see how different movements can be used in different situations. Creating workouts allowed us, as trainers, to understand how we can bring Blauer's techniques back to our own gyms.

Throughout the course, Blauer provided links between self-defense techniques and movements CrossFit athletes regularly perform. The maneuvers and protective tactics used in CrossFit Defense build on movements we already use in our box every day. I might not know how to do advanced martial arts, but I can always remember to "wall-ball a chin" because I've done the movement thousands of times in CrossFit. Similarly, those unfamiliar with knee strikes only have to review the mechanics of knees-to-elbows and apply the same pattern.

Using the body's hard-wired programming is key to Blauer's system, and it's what makes self-defense accessible to anyone.



Bek Houston

At her affiliate, Theresa Smith coaches Defense WODs (D-WODs) a couple of times a month in her all-women's class.

Upon returning home, I felt secure knowing that if I were attacked, I have tools I can use to defend myself. While I still lock the gym when I'm alone, I no longer feel like a victim. I'm more aware of my surroundings and I take precautions—but not out of fear. Now I'm acting on education and awareness.

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I've also put a program into place with my 8-a.m. all-women's CrossFit class. Every month or so, we spend one or two days doing D-WODs in place of the regular workout, and we invite athletes from other classes to join us. They take the training seriously but also enjoy the community-building aspects of the class. We take the time to discuss any areas of concern, and as a group we create D-WODs to practice movements and eliminate our fears in situations we might come across.

In the future, I plan to build out an entire CrossFit Defense specialty program as a separate offering at Raise the Bar CrossFit, and I hope to host a CrossFit Defense seminar in the near future. I want to pass on the skills I learned and create athletes who feel empowered and safe when they are in my gym and in our community.

I spent a powerful weekend and now understand that fear is manageable, my reaction to that fear is controllable, and I am my own bodyguard.



About the Author

Theresa Smith is owner of [Raise the Bar CrossFit](#) in Ontario, Oregon. She is a CrossFit Level 2 trainer and holds a CrossFit Defense certificate.