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CULTURE CLUB

What does your CrossFit affiliate say to members without saying a thing?

BY CHRIS COOPER





As a coach, how excited do you get about your members' PRs?

Anthony's truck sagged on the driver's side as it approached my parking lot.

The balding powerlifter had worn out its springs as surely as he'd worn out his welcome at every gym in town. And now it was my turn to send him away.

I met him in the parking lot and placed my hand on his door before he could get out.

When I opened my second gym in 2008, my ideal clientele didn't include powerlifters. But I thought my powerlifting buddies would be a good source of revenue: I had a reverse-hyperextension machine, glute-ham developers, chains and bands. I had expensive bars and a poster of Louie Simmons on my wall.

But the powerlifters didn't mix with the other members. They were loud and intimidating. Instead of leading average folks toward strength, they were condescending. They hit on my female clients while class was in session.

They didn't fit the culture I espoused, so I started to remove them from the gym.

Anthony was the first to go.

The parking-lot conversation was awkward, but I was resolute. As he drove away, he said, "I thought you were different, man."

He was right: I was different. While I had all the equipment, I wasn't running a powerlifting gym. I was running—and I still run—a CrossFit gym. The difference isn't the equipment but the culture.

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Powerlifters, weightlifters and runners are all welcome here. Their goals outside the gym might be different, but the standard inside is the same: Make everyone else happier. Failure to meet that standard is the only reason I've ever canceled a client's membership. Our Client Bill of Rights includes, "Be nice to everyone (except the coaches—you can be as mean as you like to them)."

As CrossFit culture changes fitness and bleeds into the mainstream, the spectrum of new clientele is broadening. On one end, the infirm grandmother looking to tie her own shoes is attracted to functional movement; on the other, weightlifters seeking platform space are attracted to access and equipment. And many gym owners would love to have both groups working in collaboration.

Is it possible?

Same Squat, Different Bar

Jason Williams was a founding partner of Thames CrossFit in London, England. He's also the owner of CrossFit Hale in Richmond, California. Though the gyms are on different sides of the planet, Williams says the culture is almost identical.

"There is a difference in demographic between the two. Thames is a younger, more athletic crowd, and Hale is slightly older, with young families—but the culture of both is surprisingly similar," he said. "It's a family-oriented environment. We tend to weed out ego/bravado in our screening and during our coaching of classes." One of the oldest affiliates in the U.K., CrossFit Thames has seen its culture evolve since the gym opened in 2009.

"It went through a darker period when we had folks who were a lot more interested in competition and advanced programming, etc.," Williams said. "We had to gently discourage this and in some cases push it away, as it wasn't serving the greater good."

"Now that we've focused on basic functional fitness, with scaling appropriate to athletes' levels, both our advanced and beginner athletes are much happier. Our barbecues and get-togethers are epic, and everyone just loves being there."

Lessons learned the hard way at Thames were avoided at Hale, and the newer box has been thriving from its start in 2013.

As many gym owners know, the culture of a facility can reflect the owner's personality. Williams is renowned locally for a relaxed-but-professional attitude, and his clients thrive in that environment.

"Ultimately, when people are getting results, learning something, enjoying the people around them and having fun, we know we are on the right track," Williams said.

You'll Know It When You Feel It

"They may forget what you said—but they will never forget how you made them feel," Carl W. Buehner said.

In other words, the perfect culture isn't seen but felt at CrossFit affiliates.

I want every CrossFit Catalyst client to leave happier than when he or she arrives. That's the goal we repeat with our coaches at almost every meeting. Our original slogan—"Inspiration and Education"—now takes a back seat to our motto: "Exercise until you're happy." Coaches are selected based on consistency and happiness rather than knowledge. I can teach coaches to fix squats, but I can't fix personality.

At CrossFit Catalyst, the culture reflects the personality of my ideal client. We created our space and its atmosphere for the people we want to attract, please and retain. I talk about target markets and demographics with owners of other gyms on a daily basis, and I've learned that you can't be everything to everyone. When a new client doesn't fit, we don't chase him.

Once, my head coach—a lively 24-year-old with an encyclopedic knowledge of movement—was turned down as a trainer by a 16-year-old boy, and she felt guilty for not "closing the sale." Ten years ago, I might have stressed over the point. But after witnessing the ideal culture for several years, I was confident in saying, "Charity, if he doesn't want you as a coach, we don't want him as a client."

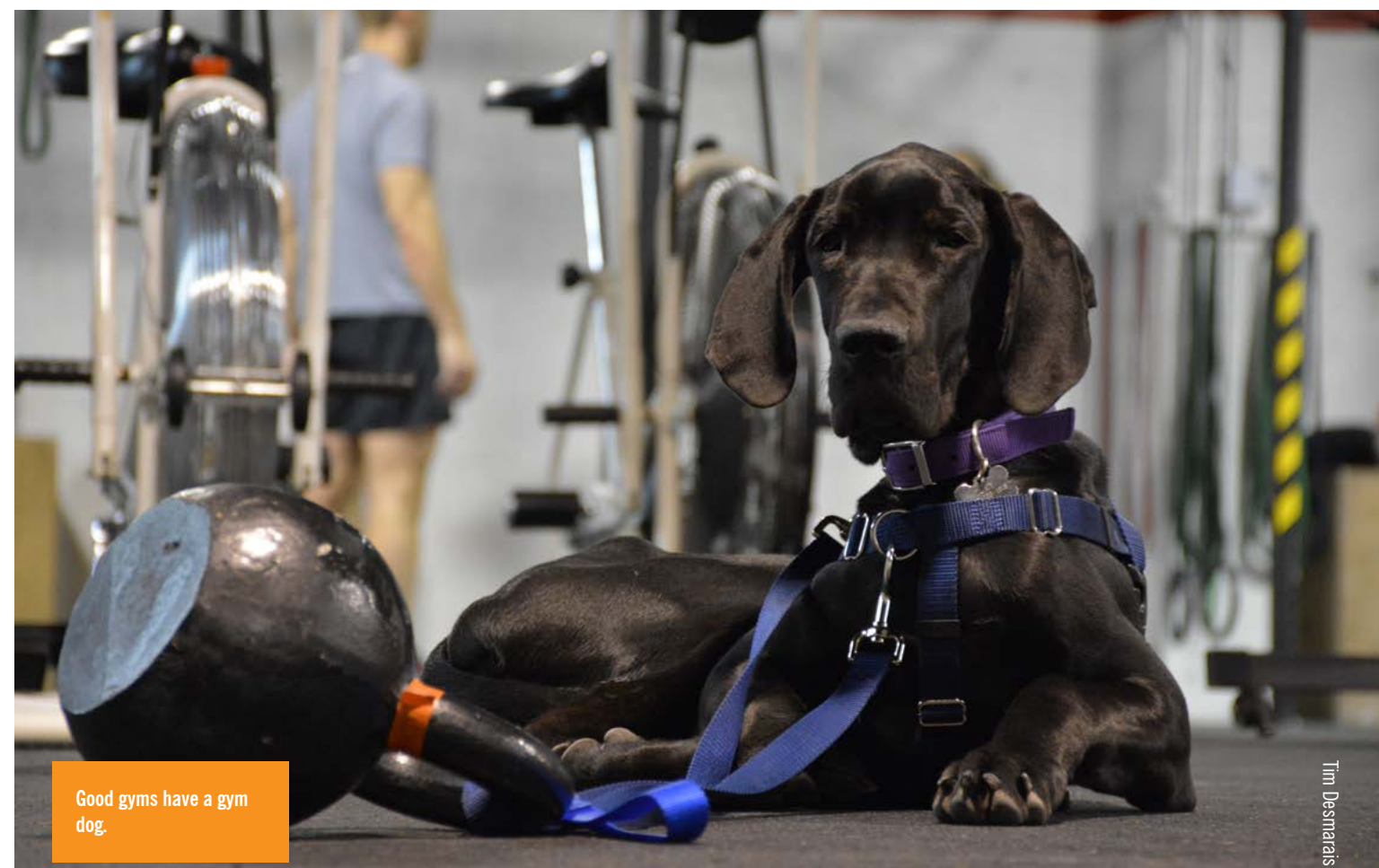
Culture can also change by group: Though every client is a CrossFit Catalyst client, the 6-p.m. group has a different personality than the morning crews. Primarily women who have just finished their workday, the 6-p.m. athletes are motivated differently than the athletes I meet at sunrise.

A few months ago, I took a turn coaching the 6-p.m. class. In my usual fashion, I introduced the workout with a talk about leverage and torque and how deadlifting would benefit them. Then I walked them through the metabolic benefits of the sprints and rope climbs. The noon group loves to know why they're doing things; this group just stared coolly at me.



An affiliate's culture is defined by much more than the programming. Sometimes it's defined by dresses and tutus.

Kendall Ashley Photography



Good gyms have a gym dog.

Tim Desmarais

“When will Taryn be back?” one asked.

I humbly started the clock and a Taylor Swift remix, and then I smiled for 30 minutes straight.

Filtering for Character

In the words of CrossFit Founder and CEO Greg Glassman, “We’re forging elite fitness, but we’re filtering for character.”

Who do I want to coach? It’s not the elite-level powerlifter. It’s the elite-level grandma who hugs me in our noon group. It’s the skinny guy learning to squat before he returns to the job site. We can accommodate the elite powerlifter, too, but only if he fits in with our crew. If he does, he’s on the team.

As our culture matures, it’s not uncommon for members to say, “Good game, good game!” or “See you all at recess tomorrow!” as they shake hands with each other. That’s our culture, and it’s the most important thing in our gym. If a member’s technique isn’t perfect today, I can fix it tomorrow. If the culture is right, I’ll have 10 years to make him better. Our longest-served client has been with us for 13 years; five more will reach the 10-year mark in September.

Can culture be shaped? I believe the best parts of a box culture can be reinforced. I praise members publicly when they help one another. I share jokes and funny stories. We brag up personal bests and call members when they reach new podiums. I correct only in private. This approach amplifies our wins and hides our challenges, and we all move toward “happy” together.

Watching Anthony drive away in 2008 was painful. I needed clients and money.

But what I really needed was to create the culture that would lead to both.

Now, my clients depend on me to preserve at all costs a culture of education and inspiration. They need me to be the filter. And I’m up for it. I’ll turn away people like Anthony, hire people like Charity and ensure the atmosphere at the gym is exactly how it needs to be. ■

About the Author:

Chris Cooper owns [CrossFit Catalyst](#) in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. He’s the author of “Two-Brain Business,” “Two-Brain Business 2.0” and “Help First.” He’s great at high-fives and is working to improve his hugging.



Robert Croot

When you’re a coach, fostering the right culture at your gym might mean dressing up as a leprechaun.