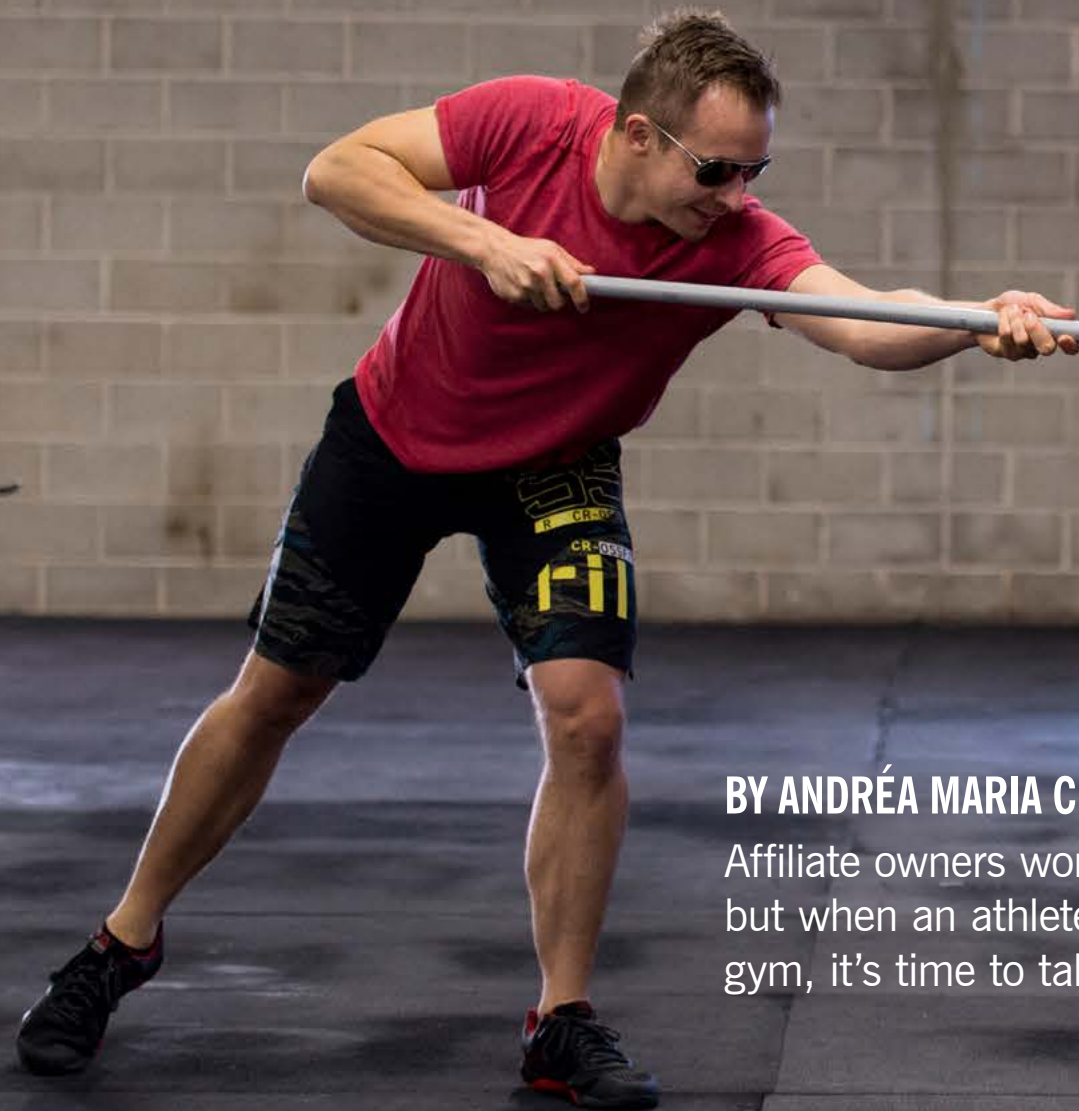


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# NEVER MISS THE JERK



**BY ANDRÉA MARIA CECIL**

Affiliate owners work to please every client, but when an athlete is clearly unsuited to a gym, it's time to take action.



Peter Haas (right) of CrossFit Downtown Winston said he stays vigilant to ensure his members buy into his vision of community.

Doug Chapman has seen it all: stalking, rudeness, willful ignorance.

There are many reasons he's asked clients to leave his affiliate, CrossFit Ann Arbor in Michigan. And since opening the gym in 2005, he's come to recognize the red flags early.

"When they're noncompliant for instruction to a class," Chapman said dryly. "Basically you know when you're organizing a class ... and somebody's off doing their own thing, talking—it's disrespectful."

He added: "It basically detracts from the class, the learning process for everybody."

When newcomers arrive, Chapman advises his team of coaches to vet them for a good fit.

"People come in with all kinds of goals and ideas of what they expect, but if it doesn't match, you need to redirect them away from you," he advised.

It's something nearly every affiliate owner has encountered: Firing a client. Although unpleasant, owners said, it's necessary for the vitality of your box.

"I hate to see money walk out the door, but I had some people I got rid of in the winter time and I'm just so happy that their negativity is out of my gym," Chapman said. "Your company is essentially what you are. If we're not all going in the same direction, get off the bus."

## Warning Signs

He calls them "The Gamers"—athletes focused on competition.

"They want the special treatment," said Kris Caswell, owner of CrossFit Ambition in New York.

In particular, he recalled one athlete—decent, but not great—who wanted to qualify for the CrossFit Games.

"It's hard to tell someone, 'You're not going to the CrossFit Games,'" Caswell recounted.

Caswell pointed him toward local competitions and gave him additional programming.

"Then, at some point, this athlete was all of a sudden going from around the top of the whiteboard to right at the top of the whiteboard."

It turned out he was cheating. On one occasion, the athlete padded his Fight Gone Bad score with 30 reps he didn't perform, Caswell said.

"Every workout, I counted. Still wrong. Still wrong."

When Caswell would confront the athlete about it, the response was nearly always the same: "Oh, I'm sorry. I'll redo the workout."

He wasn't just dishonest. He and The Gamers did separate workouts during class time and interrupted Caswell while he was coaching others to ask him questions about their programming.

Eventually, The Gamers left CrossFit Ambition.

"They decided to leave on their own after I stopped giving them programming and extra attention," Caswell said.

He felt disappointed but not regretful.

"They're not my moneymakers for my gym, and they're consuming a lot of my time."

For Peter Haas, the biggest red flag is an athlete's disconnecting from the community, becoming "uncoachable."

"Don't be a prima donna. Don't be a special snowflake," said the owner of CrossFit Downtown Winston in North Carolina. "What makes you so much more important than this community that you're coming into and I'm trying to take care of?"

**"What makes you so much more important than this community that you're coming into?"**

**—Peter Haas**

As an affiliate owner, Haas said he's constantly trying to create his perfect world.

"If that person's not really fitting into it and they're compromising that, then we need to have a conversation."

At CrossFit Rochester in New York, owner Joe Celso has handled a few members who didn't seem to like his programming.

"One lady—she was constantly stepping up, 'We should be doing this,' 'We shouldn't do that' and constantly questioning," Celso remembered.

One day, he'd had enough and told her so during a group class.

"At the end of the day, this is what we're doing, and if you don't like it, you won't work out here," Celso recalled telling her. "She came back the very next day and apologized."

Although the indicators aren't always so obvious, Jocelyn Rylee said when you know, you know.

"If I consistently see someone who signed in and I'm kind of like, 'Ugh,' that's the first sign," said the owner of CrossFit Brio in Canada.

## Action Plan

Affiliate owners said they've learned their lessons over the years. These days, they handle problem clients before they become problem clients.

Celso has prospective new members do a one-week free trial. Caswell borrowed a page from CrossFit VB in Virginia with a so-called "no-asshole clause" included in his waiver. Haas has an earnest talk the moment the athlete enters the premises. And Rylee schools members on the gym's two principles: The Bill and Ted Principle—be excellent to each other—and The Grandma Principle—make good choices.

"Anybody we'd ever had to ask to leave, they haven't followed one of those two (principles)," Rylee noted.

If you end up with a jerk at your gym, affiliate owners had the same advice: Handle the problem right away.



Jocelyn Rylee of CrossFit Brio said a bad member who poisons the atmosphere is simply not worth his or her membership fee.

"Set expectations early and own your box," Celso advised. "You gotta be the owner of it and that's really it. You can't be afraid to tell people when they're wrong or whether they're off base or whether you think they're being disruptive."

He continued: "I don't care how much you think you need a customer, if it's the wrong customer, it's the wrong customer. It's not a retail thing. You're developing relationships with these people. Be the owner. Stand your ground."

Haas takes a two-part approach: the come-to-Jesus talk, which he also calls Dr. Jekyll, and the follow-up conversation—Mr. Hyde.

"You're trying to change this situation. You're trying to help them. You're trying to coach them," he explained. "If you go from there and everything changes ... beautiful. We're great. If it doesn't, that's where (Mr. Hyde) comes in."

It's never worth it to tolerate a negative person, Haas added.

"If you are just sitting there and you are obviously just taking shit from this person and other people are seeing that, that just undermines your entire process," he said. "You need to be confident with what you do as a coach, what you offer, how you help people, how you change people's lives. ... If this person is not a good fit, then I need to go out and find other people who are a good fit."

Rylee said it more plainly.

"I don't need your \$150 a month to put up with you."

Her advice?

"Be really careful to pick out those bad apples or try to deal with them," she said. "It doesn't take more than one person being really negative to set the whole vibe of everyone being very negative."

Or worse: A prospective new member never returns because of one jerk.

"Others will leave because people are douchebags," Chapman said. "Don't serve them. Discrimination applies to race, sexual orientation, everything like that; it doesn't apply to douche or not." ■

## About the Author

Andréa Maria Cecil is assistant managing editor and head writer of the CrossFit Journal.