

THE

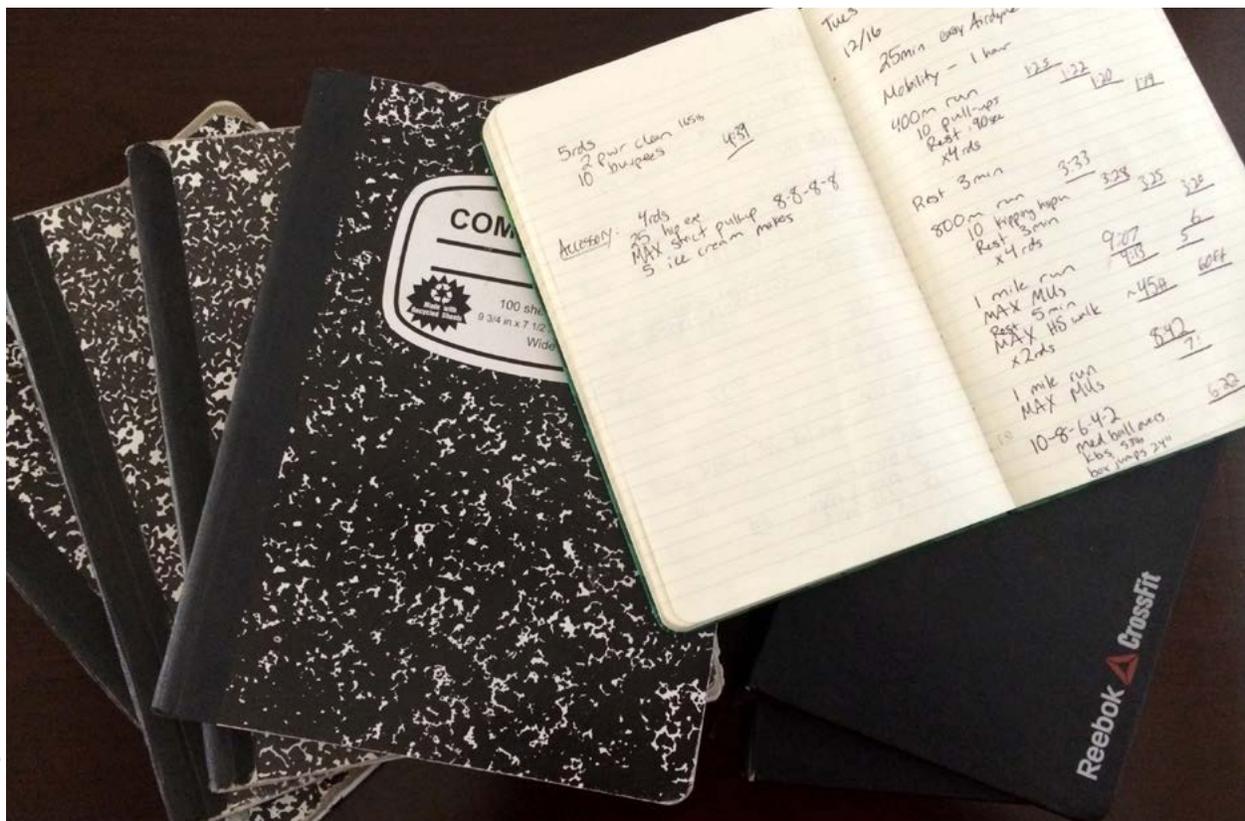
CrossFit JOURNAL

Know Your Numbers

"My Fran time? I know it was under 12 minutes with somewhere between 45 and 95 lb. Does that help?"

By Emily Beers

February 2015



Katie Hogan

It's next to impossible to find a CrossFit coach who hasn't encountered this problem: the client who can't supply a coach with a single number.

He can't tell the coach how much he can deadlift or squat. He can't recall his Helen time or any of his 2014 Reebok

CrossFit Games Open scores. He can't remember if a vague press number was for 1, 3, 5 or 10 reps. He stares blankly when told to do a workout with approximately 50 percent of his 1-rep-max clean and then starts loading his bar by looking at the loads others have selected.

“The methodology that drives CrossFit is entirely empirical.”

—Greg Glassman

By failing to provide any point of reference to the coach, the athlete is preventing the coach from tailoring the workout to the athlete and helping him get the best results possible. Consider an athlete whose 5 x 5 squat workout includes 3 “work sets” that are far too light to produce any improvements in strength. Or consider a conditioning workout that quickly becomes a test of strength when an athlete has supplied vague numbers and a coach wasn't able to scale appropriately.

What's a coach to do? Sit down with the athlete and have an educational heart-to-heart? Buy him a notebook and a pen? Berate him to start using the logbook he's already been given? March him over to the computer and sign him up for an online workout tracker?

CrossFit is observable, measurable and repeatable. In the 2007 CrossFit Journal article [“Understanding CrossFit,”](#) CrossFit Inc. Founder and CEO Greg Glassman explained why data matters.

“The methodology that drives CrossFit is entirely empirical,” Glassman wrote. “We believe that meaningful statements about safety, efficacy, and efficiency, the three most important and interdependent facets of any fitness program, can be supported only by measurable, observable, repeatable facts, i.e., data.”

Most people who get into CrossFit understand this concept, and their desire to improve their fitness naturally leads them to diligently pull out their notebook or phone to log their scores after each workout. Some athletes do

the same with their nutrition, their sleep and even their stress levels. Others still get so caught up in the numbers they can tell you their Open scores going back to 2011.

It's satisfying to see improvement, and keeping track of data can also tell athletes and coaches what's working and what's not, allowing them to make appropriate adjustments.

Katie Hogan, a longtime coach and member of CrossFit's Level 1 Seminar Staff, pointed out measuring progress empirically is something high-level athletes have been doing for a long time.

“In a lot of non-CrossFit gyms, most people don't track their workouts. But looking back to when I was trying to perform my best in college, we wrote everything we did in the weight room. We were very data driven, and we weren't doing CrossFit then,” said Hogan, who played volleyball and competed in shot put and javelin at the University of California, San Diego.



Tracy Nguyen

A desire to improve fitness naturally leads many athletes to diligently log their scores after each workout.

"CrossFit didn't invent tracking workouts, but for a lot of people CrossFit is their first experience with a sophisticated strength-and-conditioning program, so (tracking their progress) is a new idea," she said.

Some people have to be taught, convinced and reminded of the importance of recording their performances and their progress in the gym.

Hogan loves how CrossFit brings the concept of measuring and tracking your fitness to the general population. With that said, some people have to be taught, convinced and reminded of the importance of recording their performances and their progress in the gym.



Courtesy of Erik Preston

At House of CrossFit, former owner Erik Preston created a wall-mounted matrix he used to record his clients' benchmark numbers. In time, they started logging numbers themselves.

While 100 percent compliance might be unrealistic, coaches such as Hogan and fellow Level 1 Seminar Staff member Erik Preston have developed strategies to help their clients understand and even embrace the idea of recording their numbers.

The Culture of Data

Erik Preston is the former owner of House of CrossFit in Carlsbad, California, an affiliate he opened in 2008. He transferred ownership last October to become a full-time member of CrossFit's Seminar Staff. Preston admitted it was difficult at times to get certain clients to understand and comply with his request to record their workouts at House of CrossFit.

"For some (the concept) is a quick transition, and for others it's harder," Preston said. "If you polled any affiliate owner, you would find different species inside each CrossFit box. Some people are religious about tracking all their metrics, including nutrition and sleep and stress."

Preston discovered the transition happened naturally for these athletes.

"First, people see anecdotally how they're improving, and then eventually they start to latch on," he said.

Preston found that one very important aspect of tracking data is found in the culture and programming of each individual box.

"Some gyms might not repeat benchmark workouts as regularly as others, so clients don't really have a metric to compare," he explained.

When Preston ran the show at House of CrossFit, he made it a priority to ensure his athletes repeated benchmark lifts and workouts and tracked their numbers. To help create a data-conscious culture, he initially took on the task himself.

"I had a big matrix placed on the wall, and I recorded all the data for their benchmark lifts," Preston said. "It turned our culture—over time—into one where people would huddle over that matrix on the wall to eventually (record) data on their own."



Trac Nguyen

Many coaches find success when they create a culture where athletes care about their numbers.

While some coaches like using a board to motivate clients, Preston was less concerned with creating a personal-bests culture than he was with creating a milestone culture that highlighted achievements such as mobility improvements, skill acquisition, and first overhead squats and pull-ups.

“This reinforced the fact that mechanics play a huge role (in fitness), too,” Preston said.

Similarly, fellow Level 1 Seminar Staff member Stephane Rochet had success in creating a culture where athletes learned to care about their numbers when he was a strength-and-conditioning coach for seven years at the University of San Diego, where he worked with 500 athletes on 17 teams. Rochet set up a giant leaderboard for his varsity athletes and started tracking their numbers for them—such as their maxes for presses, squats and pull-ups.

“We would also do met-cons, and they would compete against the other people on their team,” Rochet said. “Or sometimes two teams would compete against each other.”

He added: “They responded well to this. It was important to let them know that they should take pride in this stuff and that the things we were measuring correlated to

better performance on the field or the court. And once they saw that, they got into it.”

For Preston, the real beauty of recording performance is how it creates a level of accountability and how it encourages people to work harder than they otherwise would.

“It’s not always what the data brings out. It’s the act of measuring and observing that keeps (people) engaged (and more invested), and it can affect their intensity and their effort in the workout,” he said.

Hard Numbers Vs. the “Suck-O-Meter”

On top of being part of the CrossFit Level 1 Seminar Staff for the last three-and-a-half years, Hogan coaches at CrossFit CSA in Dublin, California. Although she’s careful not to generalize, Hogan has discovered former high-level athletes tend to catch on pretty quickly to the idea of monitoring physical progress with empirical data, whereas people who have never played sports before often have a harder time understanding why data is so important. Some simply find it tedious to write their scores down after every trip to the gym, so they just avoid doing it altogether.

Hogan believes educating these individuals is key. She'll often sit down with them and explain she's not just trying to be a nagging coach; there's a reason behind her requests for data tracking. During these meetings, Hogan always asks her clients about their goals.

“These people identify CrossFit tracking as something for athletes, which is completely false.”

—Katie Hogan

Sometimes they give answers such as, “Oh, I just want to be in shape.”

“Well, what does that mean to you?” Hogan asks in return.

Some want to gain or lose weight. Some want to feel better. Others want to improve numbers their doctors noted, such as cholesterol levels and blood pressure.

“So what we need to do is attach those goals to numbers,” Hogan tells her clients. “Whatever those goals are, we need to track whatever you're doing and see if we can reach those goals.”

She continues: “Track what we're doing, so when you go into that appointment with your doctor, we have a notebook to look back on, and now we have data so we know what's working and what's not.”

One objection Hogan commonly encounters is the idea that tracking numbers is just for competitors.

“These people identify CrossFit tracking as something for athletes, which is completely false. It's the opposite way to look at it,” she said.

When Hogan encounters these objections, she does her best to convince people they're the exact same as the competitors. Hogan explains how training will enhance the rest of their lives, and keeping track of their progress is an important part of the process.



Henry House

Regardless of an athlete's individual goals, Level 1 Seminar Staff member Katie Hogan firmly believes tracking progress is an important part of success.

"My parents are in their 60s, and they're writing down what they're doing every day. They can whip out their book, and I can see what we need to work on that day," she said.

Despite her efforts, some clients refuse to jump on board. This is where Hogan's tough-love approach begins. As a coach, your instincts might tell you to try harder and give these clients more attention in class, but Hogan does just the opposite.

"It's not worth my time," she said.

To give these clients more attention than other members is like a parent reinforcing bad behavior, she explained. Instead, she uses something she calls the "suck-o-meter." For example, she'll tell a client to lift a weight that's about 70 percent on the suck-o-meter, which is based on an imagined scale on which 100 percent is the maximum discomfort.



Courtesy of Trac Nguyen

Trac Nguyen (left) of CrossFit 101 introduces clients to the gym's tracking system as soon as they walk through the door.

"Everyone else is getting out calculators and notebooks, but if you're going to make up a number every time you come, then that's the best guidance I can give you," she'll tell clients who refuse to provide data.

Of course, Hogan doesn't just abandon these clients. She watches their mechanics closely and helps them adjust when necessary. Generally, though, she's found her admittedly subjective suck-o-meter resonates with clients in a way that gets them close to where they should be in a workout.

"If they're not going to track (numbers), then use the suck-o-meter," she shrugged. "I'm going to work with the people who know what they're going to hit."

Tracking Solutions

There are many ways clients can track their numbers, including online programs, Google documents and old-fashioned notepads. It can be challenging for a coach to know what system works best to maximize compliance.

Trac Nguyen of CrossFit 101 in San Jose, California, had success when he streamlined his gym and pushed one online logging system on his clients. When he launched the system, he instated burpee penalties for ignoring it.

"We had some motivational consequences. If they didn't log, the whole class had to do burpees," Nguyen explained. The burpees were all in good fun, but the consequences produced the desired effect: People started tracking more and more, and now almost all of his members use the software.

Nguyen now starts the process the moment a new client walks through the door for fundamentals. He marches him right over to the computer and shows him how to use the system.

"We spend an entire session where we stand right next to them and let them figure it out," Nguyen said.

He admitted he still has some members who don't use the software. Some of his older members are a bit shy with computers and choose to use a notebook, while a few others use other online tracking services. This doesn't bother Nguyen.

"As long as they have some record to go back to, we're OK with it," he said.

Similarly, Hogan doesn't care what system a client uses as long as he or she is keeping track.

Hogan's gym pushes one tracking program and makes a computer available to clients so they can log their scores the moment they finish a workout. Hogan admitted she signed up for the online program long ago but has never used it.

"I'm a pen-and-paper person," said Hogan, who logs every single workout in a moleskin notebook. She's been doing this for years and is currently working her way through her seventh notebook. She also shares a Google Doc with her coach so he can see her numbers, but it's the notebook that resonates with her.

Hogan understands each athlete needs to find something that works for him or her, be it a glittery pen and a pink notebook, an online document or the newest smart-phone app.

The ultimate goal, of course, is improved fitness.

"It's the same as coaching cues. What coaching cue is the best? The one that works," Hogan said. In her mind, the right method is the one that gets a client to comply.

The bottom line: If 20 athletes in a class know their deadlift PRs and their most recent Elizabeth times, the coach is doing something right. That data will allow the coach to quickly assign the right loads and scale the workout appropriately while avoiding guesswork. The result is a workout perfectly tailored to each athlete—one that will help each achieve his or her goals more quickly. When progress toward those goals is documented, it's great motivation for the athlete to continue training, which helps the affiliate's retention numbers.

The ultimate goal, of course, is improved fitness. That's why athletes decide to do CrossFit in the first place. Because CrossFit will always be based on using measurable results to improve performance over time, smart coaches will find ways to get their athletes to track those results.



About the Author

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



Trac Nguyen

When athletes track their numbers, it takes the guesswork out of coaching and allows coaches to appropriately tailor workouts to the individual.