

THE
CrossFit JOURNAL

THE BATTLE FOR MEXICO

Government and CrossFit affiliates fight
against Big Soda in a nation where sugary
beverages are part of the culture.

BY HILARY ACHAUER



In Chiapas, Mexico, Coca-Cola has become a part of religious and cultural rituals.

“The average family in Mexico (eats) breakfast with soda,” said Pablo Romo, owner of CrossFit Lava in Mexico. “They eat (lunch) with soda, they eat dinner with soda. Soda all the time.”

In 2011, Mexico led the world in soda consumption, with an average per capita consumption of [43 gallons per year](#). Unsurprisingly, the country also leads the world in adult obesity. As of 2014, more than 70 percent of adults in Mexico were overweight and 32 percent were obese, according to the [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development](#). The country has the [world's highest death rate](#) from chronic disease caused by sugary drinks, and Mexico City's secretary of health, Armando Ahued Ortega, expressed concern that the high rate of diabetes is causing Mexico's health system to collapse.

A few years ago, those concerned about public health in Mexico saw disaster looming and fixed their sights on soda.

Mexican Success

Soda was an audacious target: Sugary beverages are an important part of Mexican culture. Vicente Fox, Mexico's president from 2000 to 2006, drove a Coca-Cola delivery truck in 1964 and later climbed the ranks to become president of Coca-Cola Mexico and head of Coca-Cola's Latin American operations.

Coca-Cola controls [73 percent of the market in Mexico](#), as compared to 42 percent in the United States. Many areas of Mexico don't have access to a reliable source of clean drinking water, but soda is everywhere. Due to the low price of Mexican sugar, soda is often less expensive than bottled water. Even worse, Coca-Cola is cheaper in rural areas than in urban areas, and it has become part of religious and cultural rituals in regions such as Chiapas (see cover photo). The result: [rising rates of diabetes](#) among indigenous people in Mexico.

Despite Big Soda's economic and cultural stranglehold on Mexico, obesity and diabetes are hard to ignore. The solution suggested by most global health experts was a soda tax. Soda taxes have three main effects: they create increased prices that influence consumption, they generate revenue, and they put soda in the same category as cigarettes. The last point is key: Changing public perception is an essential part of changing habits, especially in a nation in which soda is deeply ingrained in culture.



Pat Sherwood (center) of CrossFit Media is flanked by Gaby Espinosa and José Arce of Clovis CrossFit.

Groups such as the Alianza por la Salud Alimentaria (Alliance for Healthy Food) and El Poder del Consumidor (Consumer Power) had been working with government officials and research scientists on a soda tax for years, and then, in 2012, a breakthrough: Bloomberg Philanthropies donated a total of US\$16.5 million to the cause, according to New York University professor Marion Nestle in “Soda Politics: Taking on Big Soda (and Winning).”

Changing public perception is an essential part of changing habits, especially in a nation in which soda is deeply ingrained in culture.

With the help of the Bloomberg money and extremely effective advocacy, Mexico successfully passed a tax of 1 peso (about 6 cents) per liter on sugary drinks and an 8 percent tax on junk foods in 2013. The taxes went into effect in January 2014.

In “Soda Politics,” Nestle wrote that soda sales immediately dropped by 10 percent after the tax went into effect. By the end of 2014, soda sales were down 12 percent, and in the poorest regions of Mexico, soda consumption fell by 17 percent, according to [Theguardian.com](#).

Exercise Isn’t Everything

Reducing soda consumption is an important start, but the next step is challenging the beverage industry’s current PR campaign, which suggests exercise can erase a bad diet.

Staff at Clovis CrossFit in Hermosillo, Sonora, said every person who walks in believes exercising will allow him or her to eat anything.

“One hundred percent. All of them,” said Gaby Espinosa, manager of the affiliate and wife of owner José Arce.

The Global Energy Balance Network (GEBN), a now-defunct nonprofit organization secretly funded by [The Coca-Cola Co.](#),



spent millions to promote one idea: If you exercise, even less-than-healthy foods and beverages can be part of your diet. It was a canny marketing move because no one is going to oppose exercise.

While it’s true that exercise is important, experts are clear that exercise cannot negate the effects of excessive amounts of sugary beverages and foods laced with added sugar.

“When you look at the data from research on obesity and exercise, there’s no compelling evidence that exercise has any effect on weight,” award-winning science journalist Gary Taubes told [Reader’s Digest](#) in 2011.

The so-called “energy balance”—calories in versus calories out—is overly simplistic because all foods are not created equal, and the same quantities of different foods have different effects on the body.

Consider a small, balanced meal containing 500 calories of fat, protein and low-glycemic carbohydrates as opposed to a beverage containing 500 calories derived from refined sugars. The nutritional value of the balanced meal far outweighs that of the sugar-laced soda that’s devoid of fiber, vitamins and minerals.

“Refined carbohydrates raise your insulin levels,” Taubes told [Reader’s Digest](#). “Scientists have known since the early 1960s that insulin is the primary hormone that regulates your fat tissue.”

The GEBN is gone after its ties to Big Soda were revealed, but [Exercise Is Medicine \(EIM\)](#) survives. EIM is a global organization focused on promoting exercise as the key to good health. Managed by the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), EIM is closely linked to Coca-Cola, its “[first founding partner](#).” Lon Kilgore outlined the program’s many flaws in the [CrossFit Journal](#) article “[Exercise Is Medicine: Imprecision and Impracticality](#).”

“We tell them training hard every day is not going to (balance) the ... quantity that they drink.”

—Gaby Espinosa



CrossFit Lava opened in 2013, and owner Pablo Romo said fitness culture is growing in Mexico.

Arce has owned Clovis CrossFit since 2013.

In 2008, Arce and Espinosa owned an advertising agency. An unhealthy diet and the pressures of raising their two daughters while running a business had taken their toll, and Arce found himself out of shape and overweight. To get in shape, Arce began training and competing in triathlons. He lost 90 lb. over three years, but in 2011 he had a bike accident that resulted in a minor injury. When looking for rehab exercises online, Arce discovered CrossFit. He attended a Level 1 Certificate Course in August 2012, and by June 2013 Arce and Espinosa had closed their agency and opened a CrossFit affiliate.

After owning Clovis CrossFit for three years and preaching good health and nutrition to their members, Arce and Espinosa decided they needed to make a change at home. In 2015, the family stopped drinking soda.

“(We stopped drinking soda) because we really want to live a healthy lifestyle and teach our daughters that it is a correct lifestyle for them,” Espinosa said.

They cut out soda and sugar, hoping their results would inspire their members.

“For us, (after giving up soda) the performance got better, and (our) health, and we really look better now,” Espinosa said.

“Our clients notice this,” Arce said. “And they say, ‘What are you doing?’ ‘I’m doing what I (told) you yesterday or last year,’ and they say, ‘OK, I’m going to start doing that.’”

Few actually follow through.

“They still are drinking (soda). They fight (us) every day. We talk to them. We tell them training hard every day is not going to (balance) the ... quantity that they drink,” Espinosa said.

Long-term habits influenced by relentless marketing are not easily broken, and Espinosa said she hasn’t seen the behavior of their members change as a result of the soda tax. On the other hand, five members followed Espinosa and Arce’s advice, and they’ve seen positive changes in their weight and health.

“The others are seeing their changes and asking them (about the results), and they answer, ‘I’m doing what José is doing,’” Espinosa said.

She said the members complain it’s hard to give up soda and sugar.



Pablo Romo (right) said Mexico's soda tax isn't having the desired effect on its own, so he works hard to teach clients about nutrition.

"It's hard, but you can do it," Espinosa said she explains. "And we tell them, 'This (does) not have an ... (expiration) date ... it's for all of your life.'"

Espinosa added: "Really, we want to help people. We want to make a difference in their life like we experienced a difference in our lives."

Simple Changes, Drastic Results

Like Arce and Espinosa, Romo, the owner of CrossFit Lava outside Mexico City, came to CrossFit from the corporate world. He worked at Hewlett-Packard, spending all day sitting in front of the computer. He always exercised, but his poor diet was taking a toll.

"I used to eat junk food because I didn't have time to eat healthy food," Romo said. He gained weight and felt unhealthy.

"I used to drink a lot of soda," Romo said. "Coke, every time Coke and Coke and Coke and Coke. That's why I gained too much weight."

Then he discovered CrossFit in 2012. He gave up junk food and soda.

"In a month, I have muscles that I have never seen in my life. I did gymnastics and I did swimming and kickboxing and many sports, but (I've) never seen that kind of results that CrossFit gave me," Romo said.

“Coke, every time Coke and Coke and Coke and Coke. That’s why I gained too much weight.”

—Pablo Romo

After about a year of CrossFit, Romo opened CrossFit Lava in 2013 and quit his job at Hewlett-Packard. Since then he's focused on the health and fitness of those around him.

Romo sees a growing culture of fitness in Mexico, but he said he hasn't seen a big shift in attitudes about nutrition or a noticeable change in soda consumption after the tax.

"The regular family, they drink too much Coke, and they don't care if they have to pay much more for that. I think they drink too much alcohol, and obviously sodas and junk food. They don't care if they have to pay more. That's the drink they are used to. They don't drink water. They don't drink healthy drinks," Romo said.

A year ago, Romo was getting coffee in Starbucks and ran into a former customer from Hewlett-Packard, José Luis Dominguez, who goes by Pepe. Romo noticed his friend had put on quite a bit of weight. In Mexico, as in many other Latin American countries, commenting on another person's weight is not the taboo topic it is in the United States, so Romo didn't hide his surprise.

"I say, 'Pepe, you are very fat! What are you doing?'" Romo remembered. Pepe told Romo he had been working too much. Then he looked at Romo, fit and muscled, wearing shorts and a T-shirt in the middle of the day, and asked him what he had been up to.

"I started a business, a CrossFit box. I teach people like you," Romo replied.

That was enough for Pepe. A few days later he showed up at CrossFit Lava with his son, Joey. At 18, Joey was overweight and suffering from asthma and frequent headaches. The young man was shy and physically uncertain. The entire family regularly ate junk food and drank soda, and they were all tired of being overweight and feeling unhealthy.

Once he got them in the gym, Romo began teaching Pepe and Joey how to move. He started slowly, keeping the weights light. After class, Romo would talk to Pepe and Joey about nutrition. Soon, Pepe's wife and daughter showed up at the gym. Now a team, the family cleaned up their nutrition. They ate more fruits, vegetables and protein and stopped eating junk food and soda.

A year later, Joey doesn't have asthma or headaches. He's lost weight, but more importantly he's gained a physical confidence and found joy in movement.

"A whole family changed their lives," Romo said.

The Future

Overcoming decades of advertising influence and changing cultural habits is like turning an ocean liner—it's a slow, gradual process. Reduced soda consumption is the endgame, but first comes the groundwork of changing the public perception of

soda from a fun, harmless drink to a dangerous substance with serious health consequences.

The soda companies are not going down without a fight. In October 2015, aggressive lobbying led Mexico's Chamber of Deputies to agree to cut the soda tax in half for beverages with 5 grams or less of added sugar per 100 milliliters. This shift would have opened the door for soda companies to focus on low-calorie drinks. Public-health advocates reacted immediately, and the Senate [cancelled the tax reduction](#).

A recent study published in [The BMJ](#) evaluated 6,000 households across the country and reinforced the effectiveness of the soda tax one year after it was implemented: Sales of taxed beverages were down 12 percent and sales of untaxed beverages—mainly bottled water—were up 4 percent.

It's a drop in the bucket for a country with the highest rates of adult obesity and soda consumption, but the soda tax is a necessary first step in bringing the country back from the brink of an overwhelming health crisis.

The next step is for health and fitness professionals to influence and educate their clients and continue the conversation about the role of nutrition in overall wellness. People who walk into a CrossFit affiliate have already made a decision to change their lives for the better. Talking with members about reducing sugar and giving up soda is just another way to help them improve their health.

"Our job in the gym is part coaching the CrossFit method and the other part like a therapist," Espinosa said.

She said members often have positive emotions and memories associated with soda—the drink reminds them of family times and celebrations.

A cultural change is needed in Mexico, and the hope is that the soda tax and education efforts at the grassroots level will replace soda-filled memories with an understanding of the true dangers of sugar-sweetened beverages. ■

About the Author

Hilary Achauer is a freelance writer and editor specializing in health and wellness content. In addition to writing articles, online content, blogs and newsletters, Hilary writes for the CrossFit Journal. To contact her, visit hilaryachauer.com.