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# FOR WHOM THE 'BELLS TOLL

BY ANDRÉA MARIA CECIL

CrossFit Founder Greg Glassman:

“Nobody’s doin’ enough with dumbbells.”





Not convinced dumbbells are a valuable training tool? Try Fran with dumbbells and get back to us.

It makes workouts both easier and harder, movements better and worse, and Fran times go down and up.

It is the dumbbell—the paradox of workout implements.

“(It’s) a different effect. There’s no wiggle room. You can’t be off balance. You gotta keep your head steady. You have to have pretty good form to do stuff with a dumbbell,” explained Jason David, owner of St. Clair Shores CrossFit, roughly 15 miles northeast of Detroit near the shores of Anchor Bay in Michigan.

Dumbbells are vastly underused in most CrossFit affiliates the world over, as recently noted by CrossFit Inc. Founder and CEO Greg Glassman.

“Nobody’s doin’ enough with dumbbells. They’re amazing, amazing tools,” he said in [January](#).

And they’re “hyper friendly” for every CrossFit movement there is, Glassman noted, and yet have the power to make some exercises all the more horrible.

At CrossFit Escape in Queensland, Australia, coach Dylan Twiner uses a 6-kg dumbbell in place of an 8-kg barbell for a 60-year-old athlete with mobility limitations. With the dumbbell, she can handle the likes of front squats and push presses.

“Because it’s smaller, it’s a little bit easier to hold versus the barbell,” Twiner said.

But give a pair of, say, 25-lb. dumbbells to an intermediate or advanced athlete “and their Fran time goes up by 3 minutes,” noted Trevor Varwig, a coach at Straight Flush CrossFit in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Among the dumbbell’s benefits—striking fear into the hearts of many—is its ability to unmask imbalances.

“Each hand has to work independently and freely,” Twiner said. “There is more of a neurological response. ... You’ve got to think about both hands.”

And everyone has some sort of imbalance, noted Michael Rutherford, owner of CrossFit Kansas City in Kansas. Dumbbells appear in his gym’s programming at least once a week.

“We’re not bilaterally perfect,” Rutherford said.

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At Straight Flush CrossFit, dumbbells also appear in the months-old affiliate’s workouts at least once a week—despite athletes’ complaints.

“There’s always moaning and groaning because they know it’s a little more difficult, but in the long run they see that it does make them better,” Varwig said.

Twiner likes to throw dumbbells into a vast majority of CrossFit Escape’s workouts as a way to disguise accessory work.

“If you put it in a workout they don’t realize it, but realistically it’s developing them.”

That development includes improved stabilization overhead, a deeper range of motion in exercises such as the bench press, better grip strength, and skill transfer to inverted movements that include the handstand push-up and handstand walk, “where both hands have to be strong,” Twiner said.

Dumbbells, Varwig noted, offer another form of variance.

“You can’t let yourself be complacent. With dumbbells, it’s a new challenge. It’s not the same old barbell that you’ve picked up 1,000 times before.”

And the instability athletes experience when working with dumbbells for the first time is “brain noise” they need to eliminate, Glassman said.

“You have to learn to not transmit that.”

## About the Author

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