

CROSSFIT COUPLE BEATING MS, PREDIABETES

Jackie and Justin Roth use fitness and healthy eating to improve quality of life and reduce disease symptoms, but the discipline and community they found at Mountain Loop CrossFit changed their lives in unexpected ways.



BY HILARY ACHAUER

Jackie Roth was doing her best to prove gym owner Mitch Roehl wrong.

In January 2015, Jackie joined Roehl's Mountain Loop CrossFit in Lake Stevens, Washington, and started working out twice a week.

She continued to drink six Red Bulls and a soda and smoke a pack of cigarettes every day. More often than not, lunch was at Taco Bell or Jack in the Box.

Roehl told 37-year-old Jackie she couldn't outwork an unhealthy diet.

"OK, yeah, sure, watch me," Jackie said she thought.

Jackie desperately wanted to change. She was 100 lb. overweight and had struggled with her weight her entire life. She'd tried diet pills, juicing and human chorionic gonadotropin (HCG) shots, but she would always regain the weight she lost. What Jackie didn't realize was that although a change would require determination, consistency and hard work, she first needed to surrender. She had to wave the white flag, admit defeat and ask for help.

For Jackie, defeat came in the form of a doctor's appointment.

In August 2015, Jackie's feet and legs became so swollen that the indentations remained when she pressed on them. She went to the doctor and discovered she had high blood pressure and was prediabetic.

Finally, Jackie surrendered.

"I emailed (Roehl) and I said, 'You know what? My way isn't working. I'm willing to try whatever you want me to do,'" Jackie said.

Roehl said: "Start showing up."

"I Feel Free"

While Jackie was dabbling in CrossFit, her husband, Justin, was all in.

Justin, 37, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS) when he was 21. He walked into Mountain Loop CrossFit in February 2015 using a cane.

He knew the progression: first the cane, then the walker, then the wheelchair.

"I didn't even want to get close to there," Justin said.

Fighting a progressive disease such as MS can be terrifying and isolating. There's no cure, and as the immune system attacks the protective covering of nerves, the nerves can become permanently damaged. Many people with MS slowly lose the ability to walk, and the symptoms grow worse over time.

Roehl had never coached anyone with MS, so after his first meeting with Justin, he did some research.

"It was kind of an eye-opener for me as a coach," Roehl said. "I'm fairly good friends with Jesse Ward and I asked him a few questions. He's coached a few clients with MS. We started with just the complete basics," Roehl said of the CrossFit Inc. Level 1 Seminar Staff member and principal at Lynnwood CrossFit in Washington.

Once Justin finished his on-ramp program and entered regular classes, Roehl said he took off.

"It was amazing," Roehl said, "Jackie would send me videos of (Justin) in the living room practicing his planks. Or he was bound and determined to be able to jump rope. This guy can't even hardly walk sometimes without a cane and he's trying to jump rope. She sends me a video one day of him jumping rope in the house."

After about eight months of CrossFit, Justin put away his cane.

Justin, a stay-at-home-dad to the couple's 4-year-old son, started coming to the gym six days a week. He began to put on muscle, and soon he was able to easily get his son off to school and give him a bath. In the year he's been doing CrossFit, Justin has gained 25 lb.

"His balance and strength (have) improved. He is walking better than he has in years," Roehl said. "He's a really big inspiration to everybody else as well in the gym. You can only imagine seeing somebody go from where he was to now."



Mountain Loop CrossFit

Affiliate owner Mitch Roehl (left) shares the love with clients Jackie Roth (center) and Justin Roth, both of whom have improved fitness dramatically in the last year.

Roehl keeps a careful eye on Justin, making sure he doesn't push too hard.

"He is probably the hardest-working guy in the gym. Sometimes I have to come over there and say, 'Justin, slow down.' For the last five or six years he hasn't been able to be part of much. So I know for him he just loves being a part of it. He's the first one to grab a mop and clean up," Roehl said.

After about eight months of CrossFit, Justin put away his cane.

"I feel more independent. I feel free. I don't have a restriction of having a cane," Justin said. "There's no words really how appreciative I am of fitness and CrossFit."

Commitment and Results

Meanwhile, Jackie, who works full time as a chemical-dependency counselor, was taking action.

"I was diagnosed with prediabetes, and I came home with these medications (for diabetes and high blood pressure), and so I started. I started showing up. I started two days a week, three days a week. Now I go six days a week," Jackie said.

Before that, Jackie used her twice-weekly workouts as a license to eat whatever she wanted.

"I was like, 'Well, I've worked out. I'm sure I've burnt enough calories to eat this pie and these cookies and all this other garbage,'" she said.

While eight months of twice-weekly CrossFit workouts had improved her strength, her health was in dire shape.

So Jackie quit everything.

She removed the junk food from the house. She replaced the Red Bulls and soda with water. She stopped smoking. To provide some structure and external motivation, Jackie signed up for the Lurong Living Challenge, a five-week nutrition-and-fitness challenge.

Jackie and Justin learned how to prepare healthy food in advance. On Sundays, they made egg-and-vegetable "muffins" for breakfast and cooked food ahead of time so a healthy meal would be as easy as a stop at Jack in the Box. Jackie made sure she always had fresh fruit and vegetables in the house.

Just as important, Jackie accepted she wouldn't always achieve perfection.

"I still struggle every day. There's days I eat like crap, there's days I do really well. And my main thing is I don't get down on myself any more about it. If I have a cheat day, I have a cheat day as long as it doesn't turn into a cheat week and a cheat month. Really getting the whole family in on eating healthy has really helped," Jackie said.

With both Jackie and Justin on board, workouts became a team effort.

"We work out every day at 4:30 p.m. and Saturday at 9:30 a.m. We pack the kid up and we go," Jackie said.

Since August, Jackie has lost about 20 lb. Her clothes fit better, she's stronger, and she doesn't get as winded during workouts.

After her disastrous check-up in August, Jackie started taking blood-pressure medication but decided not to take her diabetes medicine, hoping her lifestyle changes would do the trick.

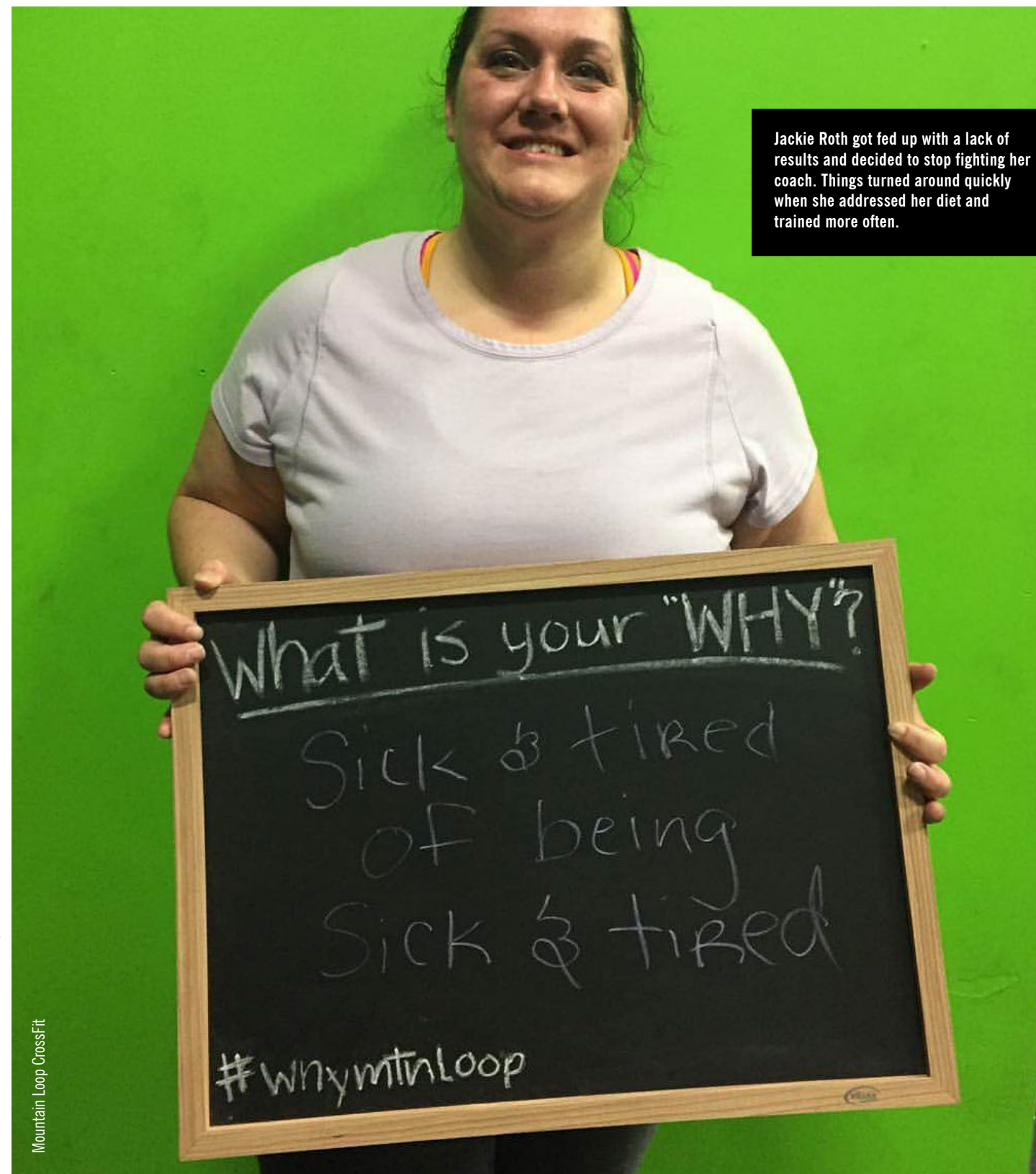
On Feb. 5, 2016, Jackie went back to her doctor.

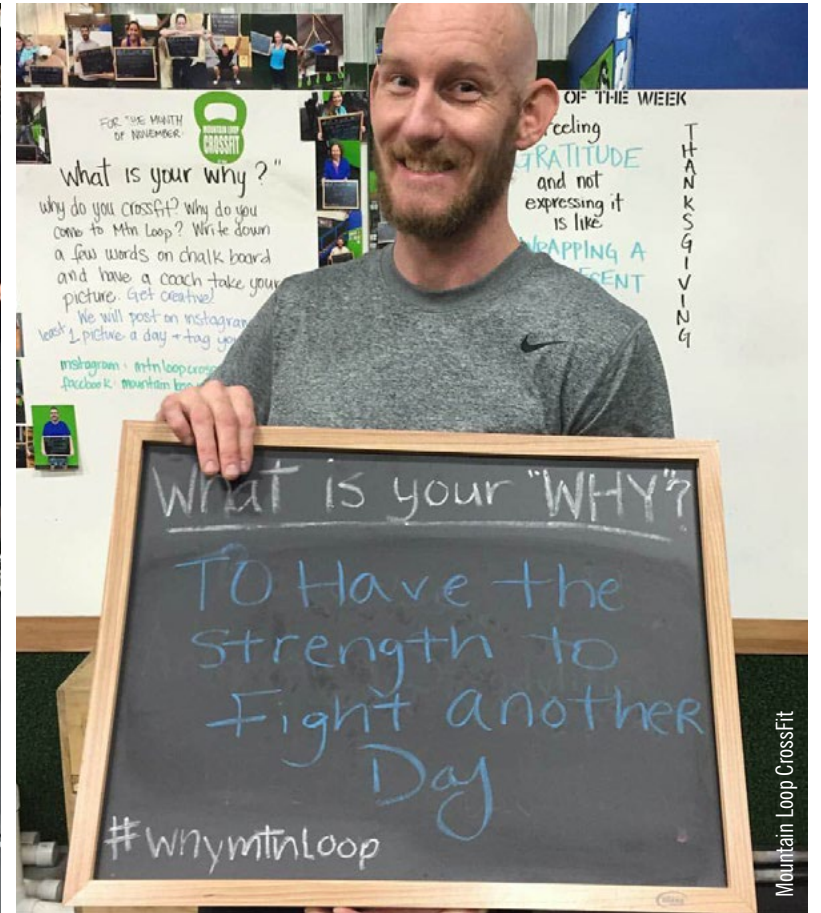
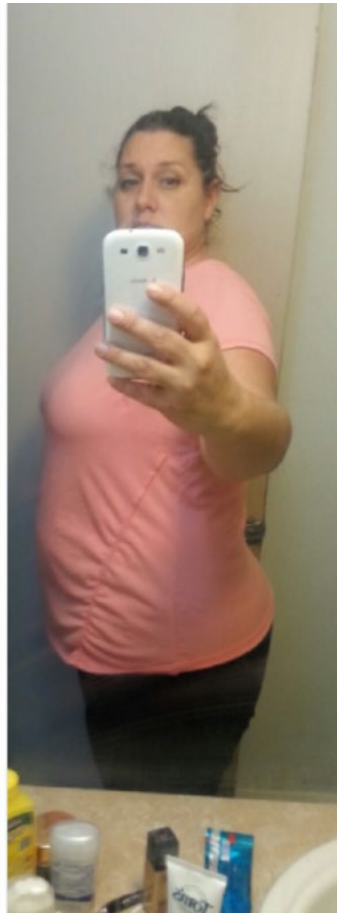
The results were good. Jackie's blood pressure had dropped from 152/84 in August to 122/82, almost in the normal range of 120/80. In August, her A1C test, which measures the average blood glucose for the past two to three months, was 5.8 percent. According to the American Diabetes Association, a prediabetes range is 5.7 to 6.4 percent. Six months later, off the Red Bull and soda, Jackie's A1C numbers dropped to 5.6 percent, taking her out of the prediabetic range.

Jackie will continue taking blood-pressure medication, but she achieved the change in blood glucose without medication.

Since August, Jackie has lost about 20 lb. Her clothes fit better, she's stronger, and she doesn't get as winded during workouts. Justin's cane is gathering dust, and he's continuing to build muscle and gain strength.

Jackie Roth got fed up with a lack of results and decided to stop fighting her coach. Things turned around quickly when she addressed her diet and trained more often.





Before and after pictures of Justin and Jackie. He gained about 25 lb. of muscle in a year, and she's down 20 lb. since August.

"There's no words really how appreciative I am of fitness and CrossFit." —Justin Roth

The two have seen other benefits of their new, healthy habits.

"We work as a team now. We communicate better. There's just the community of CrossFit and everybody cheering everybody on—I've really taken that in my life and put it towards my parenting and my relationship with my husband. Everything flows," Jackie said.

Acceptance and Hope

When Jackie started CrossFit, she was showing up but she wasn't all there.

"About six months ago, she got over how cool CrossFit is," Roehl said. "She realized it's not just cool; she has to work really hard. It's not just wearing the Nanos and stuff."

Other members noticed.

"I've gotten numerous emails in the last couple months saying, 'Jackie is the one that's motivating me to be more consistent,'" Roehl said. "She's been knocking it dead. The intensity level of her workouts (is) so much better."

Justin's battle was different but no less transformative.

"I really didn't think much of life back then," Justin said of his state of mind before starting CrossFit.

"My strength and balance have improved a lot," he said.

Justin also found a community where he felt welcomed and accepted. He said people at Mountain Loop CrossFit don't see his limitations. They just see possibility.

"Being treated differently, there's none of that. It's unbiased. It's great," Justin said. "CrossFit is great. Nothing compares to the feeling of it, the community. It's like acceptance no matter what."

A year ago, Jackie and Justin were struggling. He was using a cane, and she was consuming more than 50 teaspoons of sugar a day—about 44 more than the World Health Organization recommends—eating fast food and smoking.

They tried fighting on their own, doing what they'd always done. But once they put themselves in the hands of Mountain Loop CrossFit, surrendering to the coaches and the community, things started to change.

"Somebody needs to hear it's OK to have all this crap going on but it's OK to take care of yourself," Roehl said. ■

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.