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# PROGRAMMING: IN-HOUSE OR OUTSOURCE?

Affiliate owners sound off on the best way to program a CrossFit affiliate. **BY EMILY BEERS**





Raul Alonso Valenzuela is passionate about coaching, but he's even more passionate about designing workout plans for his athletes.

"Programming is one of the most satisfying parts of my job," said Valenzuela, owner of CrossFit Down Under in Adelaide, Australia.

He isn't alone: Thousands of affiliate owners share Valenzuela's love for designing and implementing workouts and fitness plans for their athletes. But for every Valenzuela, there's also a Jan Clingston. The owner of CrossFit Kungsbacka in Sweden bowed out of doing his affiliate's programming when he started outsourcing the task in October 2015, and he's very satisfied with his choice.

Some affiliate owners vow they'll always program for their gyms, while others are happy to give the role to a staff person or pay an outside vendor to program. We talk to members of both camps to find out why they do what they do.

## Imported Squats?

Many gyms still use the high-quality free programming on [CrossFit.com](https://www.crossfit.com) and other websites, but the choice can be made to pay for programming that's either generic or tailored exactly to a particular gym. A number of individuals currently offer monthly programming packages for affiliates. A close look at half a dozen options shows a great deal of variance among programs.

One major difference is price: The least expensive program of those surveyed costs US\$75 a month, while the most expensive is \$499 a month. Much of the cost differential can be attributed to the level of detail in each program.

For example, David Spitz of Cal Strength in San Ramon, California, offers a strength program as opposed to a program focused on general physical preparedness (GPP). Spitz's gym, which has been around for a decade and has produced many high-level American weightlifters, has been offering this service to CrossFit affiliates for two years. Those who follow Spitz's Chapters strength program pay \$75 a month, which gives them access to four-week strength cycles, papers Spitz writes based on the data he tracks, and a workout-tracking app that also serves as a forum for interaction and discussion.

Because Spitz's program is solely focused on strength and is not tailored to individual affiliates, gym owners who follow it add their own flair by designing and implementing skill work, conditioning, accessory work, flexibility training and so on.

David Spitz (right) of Cal Strength offers a bolt-on strength program some affiliate owners have used to complement their own conditioning programming.



In contrast, Pat Sherwood, CrossFit Media personality and owner of CrossFit Linchpin in Fremont, California, sells his GPP affiliate program for \$499 a month. Sherwood works with affiliate owners individually and then drafts a program based on the demographics and specific needs and characteristics of that affiliate, such as weather considerations and equipment limitations.

One of the other big differences between affiliate programming is intent. The purpose of some programs—such as Chapters—is to get a large number of athletes on the program, which helps Spitz collect data and test different strength methods.

“It doesn’t matter how elegant my theory is. If I’m not producing results and people aren’t progressing, then I have to make adjustments,” Spitz explained. He said he analyzes his athletes’ numbers each month to help him optimize his program and produce the best results.

Meanwhile, other programs, such as Sherwood’s, are often temporary solutions to help new affiliate owners learn about programming—essentially mentoring them until they feel confident creating their own programming. Sherwood, a former member of CrossFit Inc.’s Seminar Staff, acts more like a coach—or programming mentor—to the affiliate owners he works with.

Despite variance among the programs, there are also many similarities. By and large, affiliate programming is designed for general clients as opposed to competitive CrossFit athletes, though it’s not uncommon for providers to offer two slightly different variations of the same workout—one for competitors and one for general clients. Most programs provide a workout six or seven days a week. In certain cases, additional skill work, flexibility pieces and accessory work are also programmed. Warm-ups are usually not included; however, Pat Barber—a CrossFit Seminar Staff member, the head of coaching development at NorCal CrossFit, and one of the principals at Warmup and Workout—offers a program with a warm-up specific to each session.

Other common features include scaling options to reflect different fitness levels, as well as possible substitutions if a gym doesn’t have enough equipment for an entire class. Further, most programs include links to outside resources—often relevant articles and videos—and coaching tips. Barber’s program, for example, includes a detailed lesson plan—an explanation to help the coach implement the programming correctly. It’s also common for vendors to provide an online forum to allow recipients to ask questions and generate discussion with other owners and coaches.

Finally, affiliate programs are released to their audiences either one week or one month at a time, usually near the end of the previous month so the recipient has a chance to look over the program beforehand.

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Pat Barber’s program includes warm-ups and lesson plans for affiliate owners. Scaling options and online forums are other common features offered by vendors.



## “I’ve Got It”

Valenzuela believes doing your own programming is an integral part of being an affiliate owner. It’s part of creating your own culture and catering to your athletes’ needs, he said.

“I got into CrossFit because it challenged me and my opinion of fitness. And I really enjoyed having to think about how it all made sense and having to progress and learn new things as an athlete and a coach,” he said. “I started my affiliate in my garage with limited equipment. And part of my learning was about learning how to run things with limited equipment. If you’re getting (programming) offshore, they don’t (necessarily) understand what equipment you have and how you run things.”

Even more important than culture and logistics is staying up to date with new science and trends, he said. Doing your own programming allows you to do this, he added.

“There’s a certain degree of mastery to it,” he said. “And I think you lose that when you’re following something someone else designed.”

When you design your own program, you understand the method behind the madness, the intended stimulus and the reasoning better than anyone else, Valenzuela explained. Conversely, if he were following someone else’s plan, he said he would fear becoming complacent, not to mention less passionate, because he would be less connected to the process.

“If you’re not interested in showing people your knowledge and what you know, then there can be a lack of understanding on your end and theirs,” Valenzuela said.

“I like to know that my clients’ achievements are a combination of my programming and coaching and their hard work.” —Krzysia Stevens

Krzysia Stevens of CrossFit Uckfield in the U.K. holds a similar view. The former primary-school teacher said her role isn’t so different now than it was as a teacher.



Jan Clingston (left) outsourced his programming and said he’s saved four hours each week that he can devote to other tasks.

“Making long-, medium- and short-term plans based upon what I want my class to achieve in a given amount of time (is my job),” she said.

And nobody knows her students better than she does. Her familiarity with her students even includes knowing their schedules each week, she said.

“I know some of my clients come the same days every week, so I make sure the programming (reflects this). For example, Monday isn’t always squat day,” Stevens said.

What’s even more important for Stevens, though, is her desire to be closely involved in her clients’ journeys.

“It isn’t that I wouldn’t trust someone else to do my programming for me. I’m sure there are plenty of folks out there who could do an amazing job—a better job than me, a different job than me. But I like to know that my clients’ achievements are a combination of my programming and coaching and their hard work,” she said. “We are a team and we do it together.”

And because CrossFit is measurable, it’s easy for her to see what’s working and what’s not working, she explained.

“Sometimes the week I had planned turns out to be tougher than I had envisioned. You have to respond to the needs of your clients on a daily basis. Some days, shit happens and things need to be tweaked or even chunked out the window entirely,” she said.

This trial and error is all part of it, she said. And it’s why she loves it.

“I think if I didn’t like programming I would be in the wrong job. It’s part and parcel of what we do.”

## How, not What

Josh Earleywine of CrossFit Sanctify in Madison, Wisconsin, is considering purchasing gym programming. He doesn’t think it will take away from his or his athletes’ growth because he said he thinks the program itself is secondary to its implementation.

“In the five years we’ve been open, I’ve had our members do just about every strength template there is and all sorts of different

things in terms of the workout. At times, I’ve gotten pretty geeky with it trying to figure out what the ideal program is to keep all of my people getting fitter,” he said.

These experiences made Earleywine realize it’s less about the program and more about the coach, he explained.

“I believe if we coaches over deliver and coach the heck out of the program, (my athletes will) get better. And if they believe in the program—and they will if they trust their coach and their coach buys into the program—then they’ll get results.”

He added: “If I find someone I trust to program, and he understands our culture—our class sizes, space, equipment—so logistically he can program something we can pull off, then I won’t have any concerns giving it up.”

“Programming, whether ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ is secondary to effective coaching, appropriate scaling, using sound mechanics, and a group dynamic conducive to pushing oneself.”  
—“CrossFit Level 2 Training Guide and Workbook”

The “CrossFit Level 2 Training Guide and Workbook” covers this very topic:

“A trainer cannot lose sight of the small influence programming has among a host of other factors that determine a client’s success. Programming, whether ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ is secondary to effective coaching, appropriate scaling, using sound mechanics, and a group dynamic conducive to pushing oneself (i.e., highest intensity brought to the work). Even with less-than-optimal programming, a trainer with a good eye for movement mechanics, and who develops a good rapport with his clients, will help clients improve their fitness for years.”

With this in mind, Earleywine feels comfortable hiring someone to relieve him of his programming duties, as it will save him five to eight hours a week, he said—hours he can use on other parts of the business.

“The Level 2 Training Guide and Workbook” is also clear that the magic is in the movements, particularly when coached by a skilled trainer:

“Functional movements performed at high intensity, regardless of how well they are combined and varied, are powerful enough to elicit dramatic changes in one’s health and performance, particularly for the unaccustomed. Therefore, trainers can spend more focus on his or her coaching skill set and member rapport instead of striving beyond reason to create the ‘perfect’ template and programming cycles.”

## Get With the Program

Like most affiliate owners, there was a time when Clingston programmed for his gym in Sweden.

But unlike owners of large affiliates, who often have the luxury of delegating various business tasks among multiple coaches, Clingston only had one other assistant coach working with him. He needed to find a way to buy back some precious hours each week, he explained. His answer was to outsource his programming. It’s made a world of difference, he said.

“A lot of the time I’ve saved from programming I’ve used to actually train myself—leading by example, you know?” said Clingston, who has freed up at least four hours each week just by ridding himself of programming duties.

Before he made the change, Clingston admitted he had concerns.

“I was worried there might be some equipment issues in the beginning. We are a small gym with 70 members,” he said. The programming he purchases comes complete with substitution options, so he hasn’t had any problems.

“And we have a forum where we can ask questions and get input from (the other users and the programmer),” he said. “I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve discussed substitutions on stuff like GHD sit-ups.”

His other initial fear was about losing his unique style and brand by giving up programming. This hasn’t happened either, he said.

“My own unique style has a lot more to do with my personality than it has to do with programming,” he said.



Mike Warkentin/CrossFit Journal

“A box of Fran? Who ordered this? Can we send it back?”

Clingston said the new programming has helped his business and his clients: “My athletes are seeing better results.”

George Burke of CrossFit Munster in Munster, Indiana, is another affiliate owner who said his athletes are benefitting from a decision to purchase monthly programming. Burke spends \$75 for a strength program and continues to program his own conditioning workouts, reducing programming time to one day a month.

“The (strength) cycles last four weeks. I usually get the new cycle the Saturday before it starts. And I will spend most of the day Sunday planning met-cons and skills training around it,” Burke explained.

The set-up is working because it allows Burke to continue to be involved in programming but leaves the strength aspect of the program to someone he considers to be more expert than himself, he explained.

“Our members love all the strength work that we do. And our strength levels as a gym have skyrocketed,” he said.

## The Best of Both Worlds

Sonja DeWitt—owner of CrossFit Up in Santa Cruz, California—and husband Ryan DeWitt used to share their gym’s programming load among three coaches.

The situation wasn’t ideal, DeWitt explained, as their program lacked consistency and the coaches could never agree on what was best. But programming just wasn’t something she or her husband was all that passionate about, she said.

“Ryan never wanted to do the programming because it’s just not how his brain works,” DeWitt said. It made sense to pay \$250 to someone more suited to the task.

They decided to keep programming in house and use one of their own coaches to take on the job. The decision has saved them multiple hours each week and has given them peace of mind that the program is designed by someone who knows their members well, DeWitt explained.

“She knows what’s going on at the gym. Like right now, we’re doing a Whole 30 nutrition challenge, so we asked her to program

“The standard by which to evaluate any programming is measurable improvement in performance markers.”  
—“CrossFit Level 2 Training Guide and Workbook”

a test workout at the start and end of the 30 days. Or recently, we had a photo shoot going on in the gym, so we had to program to work around it,” DeWitt said. “And nobody argues anymore.”

But the best part of the change at CrossFit Up, DeWitt said, is the new program is producing better performance.

“The fitness that is being delivered is far better now,” she said.

## Improve Fitness ... By Any Means

A host of options are available to affiliate owners when it comes to programming, including simply sitting down at the computer and creating a great mix of heavy days, couplets, triplets and chippers, all according to CrossFit principles. Whether you choose to design your own program or outsource the task to someone you trust, the “Level 2 Training Guide” is clear that you must monitor the input versus the output:

“Effective—or ‘good’—programming produces results, and the relative degree to which programming is effective is the degree to which it optimizes fitness. The standard by which to evaluate any programming is measurable improvement in performance markers.”

With that in mind, it likely doesn’t really matter who does your programming as long as workouts are well coached and you and your clients are getting fitter. ■

**About the Author:** Emily Beers is a CrossFit Journal contributor and coach at [CrossFit Vancouver](#). She finished 37th at the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games.