

Everything changed when I put each lifter on the platform alone with the group watching.

In the final week of a two-month focus on the snatch and clean and jerk, I had athletes list three snatch attempts based on confidence and form: “What are you 90 percent certain you can lift well every single time?” The goal was to use sure-thing loads and add a bit of pressure so athletes might know what a weightlifting competition would feel like.

Some of the athletes made all attempts, but about half missed at least once, and a few missed twice. To my greater surprise, each athlete showed form variations I didn’t expect after seven weeks in which the lifters had eliminated many errors and become much more consistent. For 14 sessions in a row we had drilled mechanics, and technique and consistency had improved across the board. But when the athletes were alone on the platform with submaximal loads, many old errors came back.

Perplexed, I did what any intelligent coach would do: I talked to my dog about it.

Lifting Heavy

Dogs have always been a big part of CrossFit. Athena, a pit bull, was a fixture at Greg Glassman’s original gym in Santa Cruz, California, and people who worked out there recall she would hop up on a plyo box for applause from CrossFit Inc.’s Founder and CEO.

I doubt it’s a coincidence that Glassman, a trainer, had and continues to have an interest in dogs. Teaching a canine to sit isn’t all that different from teaching an athlete to squat when you get right down to it. I didn’t realize the relationship until I got a dog in 2015.

Heavy, a St. Bernard/English-mastiff cross, was 110 lb. at one year and strong as Jason Khalipa. Heavy’s pretty trainable, and when she’s motivated she’ll respond almost instantly to over a dozen commands. Of course, she isn’t always motivated, and our thick bitch has moments when she just doesn’t care what we say or do.

Determined to break through to her, I hit the internet in search of tips for training stubborn dogs. I found a bunch, but I also found this paragraph from Laurie Luck: “In my 15 years of training, I’ve not yet run into a stubborn or hard-headed dog. And I don’t think that’s because I’ve figured out how to screen the stubborn or hard-headed dogs out. I don’t think there are any out there.”

In “[How to Deal With a Stubborn Dog](#),” Luck explained that

dogs thought to be obstinate are actually untrained beasts who are distracted—and here’s where we link up with weightlifting and CrossFit again.

Some gifted dogs learn commands relatively quickly, while others struggle and are labeled stubborn or untalented. In either case, dogs need hundreds or thousands of repetitions, and trainers will tell you even the best beasts are only reliable about 80-90 percent of the time once they’re well trained.

Sounds a lot like Olympic weightlifting, doesn’t it?

Similarly, many dogs are reliable only in certain situations. For instance, in the back yard I’ve taught Heavy to stay for up to three minutes with laser focus on the treat in my hand and slobber gushing from her substantial jowls. Outside the yard, “stay!” has no effect. This is very common, and training books advise slowly adding distractions when working with a dog, teaching it to focus despite new stimulus.

Intensity brings results, but consider it a distraction that can change mechanics if consistency born of repetition is lacking.

So as I firmly told Heavy to stay yet watched her coiling up to playfully launch herself at the approaching Alaskan malamute, I had a revelation: Surprising instances of suboptimal movement are the product of athletes who need more repetition and less distraction to ingrain good habits forever. Training is incomplete—no matter how well they move at times.

Consider the athlete who shows off beautiful warm-up air squats that turn ugly when Cindy starts. How about the “good mover” who transforms into a round-backed brawler in a competition workout? And then there are the CrossFit Kids—the program emphasizes that young athletes in the throes of growth spurts, hormone changes and Snapchats will often start moving poorly with almost no warning even though they know better.

The fix is the same as it is when training dogs: Relentlessly but patiently ingrain good patterns with only the level of distraction that can be tolerated at any given point. That level might be



Mike Warrentin/CrossFit Journal

By training a dog to obey commands consistently, you can eventually teach that dog to obey you even when distractions are present.

different from day to day. Gradually increase distractions. Take a step back when problems arise—this part is critical but often ignored. Add more distractions only when results are consistently better.

It’s an incremental process that’s clearly laid out in this classic CrossFit progression: mechanics, consistency, intensity.

Intensity brings results, but consider it a distraction that can change mechanics if consistency born of repetition is lacking. Intensity comes last for a reason. Other distractions include competition pressure, life stress, minor aches and pains, that smokin’ body in the 3-p.m. class. All these things—and many

more—can turn a glorious split jerk into a hot mess.

In my class, I had the loads and reps dialed in correctly for the athletes: Each attempt was very makeable and below maximum effort. What I didn’t anticipate was the dramatic effect the modest pressure would have on new movement patterns that hadn’t become completely automatic in every situation.

I and my athletes forgot to account for distractions—and this happens more often than you might think. We’ve all seen the athlete who squats 195 for a triple but gets buried by 200 for a single because the PR attempt got in her head. And how many people suddenly started missing double-unders in the CrossFit



Games Open for no apparent reason?

The lesson, of course, is that coaching is more than just cueing and writing prescriptions of sets, reps and loads. Good coaches are keenly aware of their athletes' levels of development and work hard to figure out exactly what their charges need to succeed in any given workout. They're very sensitive to the great many things that can affect athletic performance, and their programming and cueing reflect their daily evaluation of each athlete.

Other coaches simply write the workout on the board and expect results to come quickly and in every situation for every trainee. That can work with very gifted athletes, but it's equivalent to saying "down" after a dog has already decided to hit the floor.

"The degree of reliability is directly related to the number of successful responses in various environments," Paul Owens wrote in "The Dog Whisperer," and he might as well have been talking about CrossFit athletes.

If an athlete is missing lifts more often than he or she should, or if a dog-in-training suddenly yanks you across the lawn, the solution is likely the same: more repetition and less distraction.

Or, in CrossFit terms, go back to mechanics, consistency, intensity. ■

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If you can teach a dog to stay, you can probably teach an athlete to squat—and vice versa.