

# SOCIAL CLUB

CrossFit affiliate owners discuss how to build a healthy schedule of get-togethers and events that will help grow and strengthen the community.

BY HILARY ACHAUER





Affiliate owners give many reasons for opening a CrossFit gym: a love and passion for CrossFit, the thrill of owning a business, and a desire to build a community, among others.

Almost no affiliate owner ever opens a CrossFit gym because of a love of event planning.

However, many owners have discovered community events—from throwdowns to potlucks—are a vital part of a healthy gym. A thriving CrossFit community starts in the gym, but it’s strengthened and deepened in get-togethers that go beyond regularly scheduled classes.

Building a busy schedule of events doesn’t mean an affiliate owner has to turn into Cruise Director Julie. Here, affiliate owners share why they believe community events are an essential part of a successful affiliate and how others can create a robust roster of yearly events.

## Competitions and Throwdowns

Most CrossFit affiliate events fall into two categories: competitions and social events including fundraisers, parties and activities. [Green Mountain CrossFit](#) in Berlin, Vermont, leans heavily toward the competition side, hosting four events each year.

Nicholas Petterssen, owner of Green Mountain CrossFit, said it all started in 2012 with a single event: The Vermonster Challenge.

“There was a real deficit of any sort of competitive (fitness) in Vermont, and we were traveling out of state to Massachusetts (to compete). We wanted to throw something to get the Vermont community together,” Petterssen said.

He said the event, which has grown each year, is an opportunity for members to compete and volunteer, and it gives his gym a chance to connect with other affiliates.

“Right from the get-go we had a long-term vision of growing it to be a very large event. And so we put a lot of planning and a lot of energy into running a very well-run event,” Petterssen said.

After the success of The Vermonster Challenge, Petterssen and his team gradually added more events, including The Backyard Games for masters and intermediate athletes, the Sweatheart Throwdown on Valentine’s Day, and a power- and Olympic-lifting competition called Lift Up.

Petterssen understands the importance of a well-run event and the amount of work it takes to ensure everything proceeds smoothly.

“When (events) are poorly run it’s really a disappointment. If they don’t



Four Barrel CrossFit members get outside for a Memorial Day workout involving swimming and a burden run with a log.



stay on schedule, if things aren't done well, it doesn't make it worth-while," Petterssen said.

Three full-time staff members work on the affiliate's events.

"We have one person who is responsible for program design, facility and equipment, another person whose focus is the athletes and organizing the heats and communications, (and) another person is in charge of judging," Petterssen said. "It is a three-team hard push for every one of these events. We start six months out planning for each event. And then activity builds and builds ... (then) all three of us are full bore for the weekend."

Before he opened Green Mountain CrossFit, Petterssen said he handled trade-show operations as part of his job in the software industry, but none of his staff has special training in running events.

"We've taken our licks and learned over time how to run things as smoothly as possible. We've gotten better over time. It gets a little easier," he said.

## Workouts—and Beyond

David Osorio opened [CrossFit South Brooklyn](#) in 2007. His affiliate has grown to 700 members served by 23 employees, and Osorio said regular events have made members feel more connected to CrossFit South Brooklyn.

"We try to have something every month," he said. The schedule includes traditional CrossFit events such as Memorial Day Murph, as well as a female-only powerlifting event called the Iron Maidens Raw Open.

"We had several hundred people come out for that and check it out, and we got some coverage on the local media, and that's a big event for us," Osorio said.

Osorio starts off each year with a big community potluck.

"It's a way to bring in the new year, celebrate the accomplishments of last year and recognize some people from the previous year," Osorio said.

"We have a big movie projector in our gym, so we'll try to do a movie night," Osorio said. This year they screened "Fittest on Earth 2015."

The affiliate has organized a snowshoeing trip, a hiking excursion and a stand-up-paddleboarding outing, and its members have participated in a Spartan race. Sometimes only 15 to 20 people join in the fun, but Osorio thinks these smaller group experiences are important for an affiliate like CrossFit South Brooklyn.



Thomas Hinton

Special workouts at CrossFit South Brooklyn (above) and Raleigh CrossFit (below) bring the community together.



Courtesy of Raleigh CrossFit

"We have the smaller events that are more experiential. For us, we really just want to create novel experiences for our members and create opportunities for them, for people to have fun and have positive associations with the gym," Osorio said.

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Osorio has an in-house event planner who helps organize the smaller get-togethers and events. For bigger events, such as the powerlifting competition, a coach takes charge, with the event planner helping with details.

"It's important to have at least one central person for the events," Osorio said. "There's no shortage of ideas ... (you) have to have somebody who has the time to follow through with and (who has) clear checkpoints."

Osorio promotes the events and requests volunteers through the affiliate's blog, which is updated every day by CrossFit South Brooklyn's managing editor. Photos for the blog are supplied by photographers who receive a discount on membership in exchange for uploading a set number of photos onto the gym's Flickr account every week.

"And for events we'll contract (the photographers) out, so one will work the first shift and one the next shift. You have all these awesome photos and use them as promotions for future events," Osorio said.

## Helping Others

Chennelle Miller is the owner of [Raleigh CrossFit](#). Open since 2010, the affiliate has about 200 members. Miller says she plans at least one community event a month, with a focus on fundraisers and donation drives. The affiliate hosts American Red Cross blood drives and book drives, and it organizes a day with Habitat for Humanity.

"(We've done) food drives for the last five years at least," Miller said. She noted the affiliate will do approximately two drives a year, sometimes collecting goods such as paper towels in addition to food.



“This year we are partnering with the USO (United Service Organization) of North Carolina for Memorial Day Murph,” Miller said. “You can kind of be creative. Last year we did it with the Special Operations Warrior Foundation. See what your community is going to be geared toward.”

For a long time, Miller organized all the events herself, but in 2015 she hired another full-time coach, Christina Atti-Uptegrow, who became the community-outreach coordinator.

“She and I work together to plan out events, seek out different events that might be fun. We each have our different responsibility depending on what the event is. (Atti-Uptegrow) was entirely in charge of bringing in the American Red Cross Blood Drive last year and this year,” Miller said.

If an affiliate is looking to do some good in the community, Miller recommends reaching out to local nonprofit groups such as the YMCA or the Boys and Girls Club. She also suggests reaching out to members or friends for community connections.

“I like people to associate good things with CrossFit.” —Chennelle Miller

Miller said she is sensitive about balancing out fundraisers with other events. In May 2016, Raleigh CrossFit is hosting Beers and Barbells, a competition held at a local brewhouse owned by a friend. She said she doesn’t want members to feel as if she’s always asking for money.

“I try to even it out so we can give back and I can give back and we are all continuing to have some fun and (doing) CrossFit,” Miller said.

## The Importance of Events

Hosting events—whether it’s a throwdown or a potluck—takes time. Why should affiliate owners spend their precious hours and money on parties, field trips and in-house competitions?

Petterssen said the biggest benefit from hosting events like The Vermonster Challenge is what he calls “reputation marketing.”

“Being known as a good, quality gym with a really supportive membership ... really builds that reputation so that when other affiliates have people moving into our area, or whatever the situation may be, they can give us a good, quality recommendation,” Petterssen said.



Todd Poole

Competitions such as the Sweatheart Throwdown at Green Mountain CrossFit give members a chance to compete, volunteer or cheer on friends.





CrossFit Punta Gorda athletes donate their time to the environment by hauling 30-lb. bundles of shell to help restore an oyster reef.



Post-workout holiday nutrition at at CrossFit Maribyrnong.



Life's a beach for happy members of South Seattle CrossFit.



Chennelle Miller (left) of Raleigh CrossFit at a Barbells for Boobs Fundraiser.



Raleigh CrossFit's community board lets members know about upcoming events.

Now in his fourth year of running events, Petterssen has also seen a benefit to the gym's bottom line.

"It doesn't match our yearly membership income, but at four times a year, we are bringing in an extra \$5,000 to \$6,000 (USD per event). We've developed good enough systems so that the costs to us are not all that high," he said.

Petterssen said competitions benefit his members—even those who don't compete—because people who serve as a volunteer or judge can experience the competitive side of fitness.

"I think it is cool for many of our members to recognize (CrossFit is a) big organization and it goes beyond the walls of our gym," Petterssen said.

The non-competitive events, like potlucks, are a chance for members to connect. Petterssen thinks this is especially important for an affiliate such as Green Mountain CrossFit, which has been around for six years.

"The potlucks, the social things, the holiday workouts, all those are opportunities for people from different (class times) within our schedule to mingle and get to know each other ... and establish that larger connection," Petterssen said.

Osorio keeps a close eye on the attendance and expenses associated with each of the events at CrossFit South Brooklyn, even though he doesn't see them as revenue generators. Nevertheless, Osorio thinks they are extremely important, and members look forward to the recurring events all year long.

"It's almost like you are creating holidays within your community ... you are creating these landmarks within the year," Osorio said.

Miller said she emphasizes fundraisers at her affiliate because she wants to spread the good feelings people have when they join a CrossFit community. She said she sees her members as people who have something positive in their lives.

"You can spread that positive attitude toward other people who may need that," Miller said. "If in some way we can give back, whether it is through time, money or donation, then I think that you are sort of extending that (sense) of well-being to others. It gives Raleigh CrossFit a really generous place in our community in downtown Raleigh and beyond, and I really like having that. I like people to associate good things with CrossFit."

Celebrations and competitions also have a positive impact on member retention. The more events members can train for and anticipate, the more likely they are to stick around.

"With Fight Gone Bad, it's something people talk about all year round. They look forward to it," Osorio said.

Petterssen said members who volunteer or judge find the experience gives them a deeper connection to the gym, making them feel more valuable and important.

"I don't consider being invested in the events as a way of member retention, although that may aid in that," Miller said. "My goal as an affiliate is that the athletes at Raleigh CrossFit are invested in one another and are proud of what we do as a community."

## Build Slowly

Affiliate owners have a lot on their plates, and tasks are plentiful: keeping members happy, managing staff, maintaining equipment, writing programming, bringing in new members and so on. Often, events can fall by the wayside as owners focus on the day-to-day operations.

Osorio said the key is to start small. CrossFit South Brooklyn events that draw hundreds of people today weren't huge events when he started six years ago.

"It was 10 people who showed up to this thing. And then we did it again, and the next time we had 25. The next time it was 50 and the next time it was 100," Osorio said.

"Have your expectation to make it the best experience for the people who show up, and if that's successful it's going to grow. And if you can create some excitement around it, it's going to grow," he 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](http://hilaryachauer.com).