



THE **CrossFit** JOURNAL

PROBLEMS AND PROS

BY BRITTNEY SALINE

Creative, dedicated CrossFit affiliate owners share how they've overcome obstacles including floods, angry neighbors and endless bureaucracy.



Courtesy of Hudson River CrossFit

Swimming WOD at Hudson River CrossFit?

The rain sounded like gunfire as it pelted John Franklin's home in Hoboken, New Jersey, one night in June 2013. Though it was already past 10 p.m., he pulled on his boots and drove the seven blocks to Hudson River CrossFit, the affiliate he was in the process of opening after months of leading free park workouts.

He was just weeks from the grand opening date, and with the gym sitting right at the city's lowest point, he feared the heavy rain might seep inside.

He heaved the garage door open and flicked on the lights.

"The floor looked kind of like an infinity pool," Franklin recalled, unable to tell where the water ended and dry cement began.

He ventured to the far side of the gym, where a long concrete slab—a storage area in the space's past life as a refrigerator warehouse—was elevated a few inches above the floor. Gray sludge oozed from the hairline crack beneath.



Courtesy of CrossFit 2 Street

George Caroulis of CrossFit 2 Street went out of his way to address each and every concern neighbors voiced when he was opening his affiliate.

"It looked as if the concrete was sweating profusely," he said.

Before he had the chance to reach for a mop, he heard a low gurgle from the direction of the bathroom. In a few seconds, the gurgle became an explosive sputter as the drains in the gym's two sinks, showers and toilets began spewing sewage in succession "almost like a fountain show," Franklin said.

As Franklin stood ankle deep in sewer refuse, he thought of the three friends who had showed up to his park workouts.

"Am I just making like really bad life choices?" he asked himself. "Because we had no idea how this would actually work—or would anybody actually sign up for this CrossFit thing?"

Today, Hudson River CrossFit boasts around 250 members, one of two affiliates that make up Flipside Performance (the other is Bowery CrossFit in Manhattan, New York, which Franklin opened at the end of 2013).

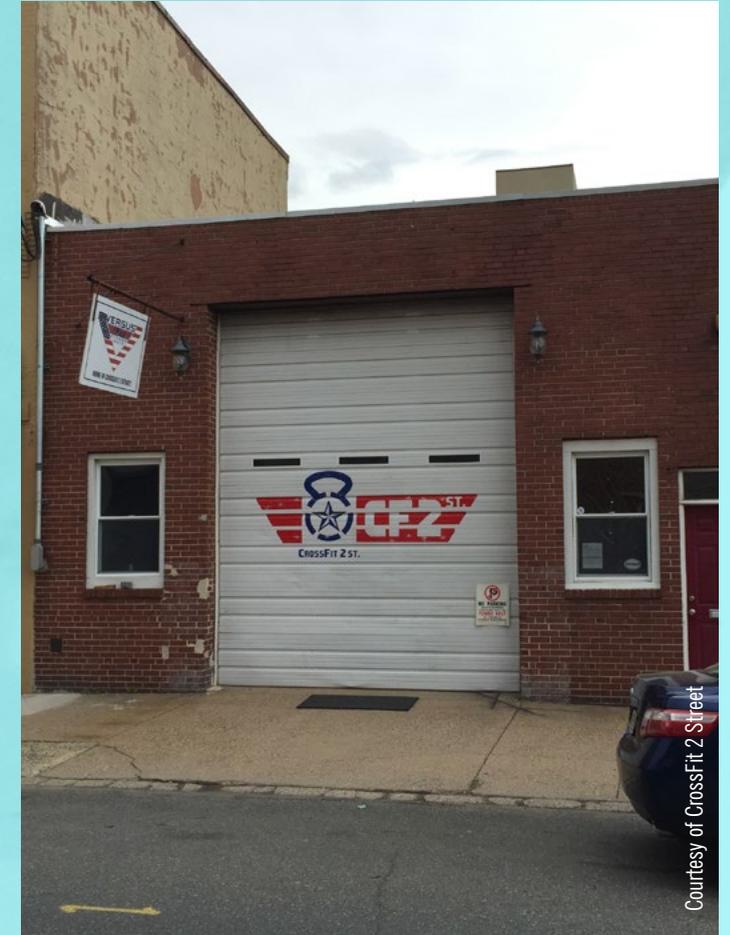
With heavy rain flooding Hudson River CrossFit about once a month, Franklin and his staff have become pros at keeping their heads above water, loading all their equipment into an elevated storage room every time the weather report predicts a storm.

"We're very handy with a Shop-Vac these days," he said. "That's how you get all the water out, and then you have to go through the whole process of disinfecting it."

To disinfect the 2,800-square-foot space, Franklin shells out about US\$600 each time for a professional sewage-cleaning service. Adding backflow preventers to the drains would cost nearly \$30,000 and require a total bathroom tear-up, and with real estate at a premium in the area adjacent to New York City, moving is out of the question.

So what keeps Franklin going?

"The community," he said. "Our mission has always been to build a strong urban community ... and we've probably trained 1-2 percent of



Courtesy of CrossFit 2 Street

Shared walls made noise a concern at CrossFit 2 Street.

the entire town. That means any time I walk the dog, any time I go to a restaurant, statistical probability says that I'm gonna run into somebody that I've worked with before. So you have a lot of accidental community that happens, and it's much stronger than anything I've felt."

Challenges are par for the course, Franklin explained: "It's all part of the game. There are certain points ... where I get a little beat down, but in perspective, my life is fantastic. I have a staff that I love, I have members that I love, ... I get to share something that I'm very passionate about with other people, and I'm making a living doing it. It's just a team effort, and having that good staff in place is something that has saved my ass more times than I can count."

Killing Them With Kindness

George Caroulis, owner of CrossFit 2 Street, also wondered if he'd made a poor life choice in 2013 when he arrived to scout the South Philadelphia spot that would eventually become the affiliate's home.

A large garage door took up almost the entire storefront of the 3,000-square-foot space wedged between a split-level duplex and a popcorn shop with two apartments on top. To the rear sat another single-family home. All in all, the affiliate would share walls with five residential units and one business if Caroulis leased the location.

"I remember the first day I pulled up to the address; I thought I was in the wrong spot," Caroulis said.

But his market research had promised the up-and-coming neighborhood was a good place to be, so he took a chance. As he hauled rigs and rubber mats into the garage, neighbors ogled and whispered.

"Every now and then I would start walking over there to introduce myself and talk to them, and by the time I would get there they'd be halfway down the block in different directions," he said.

It wasn't that the neighbors were shy. They were worried. And after Caroulis diligently notified all residents within a four-block radius of the pending affiliate—by city law, the residents had to be given an opportunity to attend the affiliate's zoning hearing—he learned that emails were circulating among the neighbors, damning the presence of a CrossFit gym.

"The last thing we want is loud music, weights dropping, additional parking on our streets and sweaty guys without shirts running around the block," the anonymous email read.

Though none of the residents came to the hearing, noise complaints began to fill Caroulis' inbox days after CrossFit 2 Street opened that October.

One of those complaints came from Joe Nolan, who lives in the duplex next door and shares a wall with the gym. He emailed Caroulis after waking one Saturday—barely recovered from a Friday night on the town—to the rhythmic thud of wall balls behind his headboard.

"It was like that annoying kid in college who would throw a tennis ball against their wall," Nolan said. "And here I am waking up hung over and there's people who are working out, and it's like 'Oh, God, now I feel even worse about myself.'"

Caroulis didn't want bad blood with anyone.

"I decided to kill them with kindness," he said.



Courtesy of CrossFit 2 Street

Building community the right way: A year after the gym opened, all of CrossFit 2 Street's immediate neighbors were members.

Caroulis responded to every complaint in kind, explaining exactly how he would address the issue.

He responded to every complaint in kind, explaining exactly how he would address the issue. He agreed to keep the garage door down at certain times of day to limit the music's reach, and he instituted a no-drop policy—with the exception of one-rep-max attempts, during which athletes must use heavy crash pads to deaden the vibrations.

Most importantly, he never stopped trying to connect.

"Any time I'd see anybody out on the block, I made sure to go over and say hello, ask them how they're doing—just being as friendly as humanly possible," he said. "The last thing I want is someone to have an issue with me or us in any way and not feel comfortable enough to come and talk to me."

Just a year after the gym opened, all the neighbors directly connected to CrossFit 2 Street had become members—even Nolan. Though he'd previously turned down Caroulis' many offers to try a workout, Nolan eventually bored of his globo gym workouts.

Now, he's the one throwing wall balls at his headboard.

"I haven't looked back," he said. "You just expect the meatheads you see in your typical (globo gym), just people who are gigantic and brooding, but even from the first day, everyone walked in, asked me my name. ... These people are a lot like me, and everyone just has a common interest in working out. It's been a really great community."

Caroulis didn't have to make all the changes he made. With no protesters at his zoning hearing, he had a full permit and the right to operate as he saw fit.

"But that's never been my approach to anything," he said. "I always feel like you're going to accomplish more when you're able to work with the people who are against you."

Better Safe Than Sorry

With plans to open an affiliate in Manhattan, New York, Izzy Levy decided to tackle potential noise issues in advance. Before opening I.C.E. NYC/CrossFit Below Zero in February 2016,

Levy spent two years researching locations and zoning laws and interviewing experienced affiliate owners to avoid the pitfalls discovered by other New York affiliates.

Levy had no desire to repeat mistakes made by others.

“What we figured is ‘let’s do it right. Let’s try to figure out the secret sauces and we can avoid these problems,’” he said.

After Levy found a location—a 4,500-square-foot space in the bowels of a luxury apartment building in Tribeca—he hired an acoustics team, not just for eventual tests on the location but also to provide past studies of the team’s previous clients to win over the prospective landlord. Once the lease was signed, the experiments began.

“The first thing you think of is noise ... but the real issue is vibration,” Levy said. “What happens is in a building, when you drop 200 lb. from overhead, vibrations run through the columns, and a penthouse 20 stories above you will feel it just as much as the one right above you.”

To deflect vibration, Levy and the acoustics team decided to decouple the floor, or create a “floating” platform separated from the floor by acoustic isolators that prevent the transmission of vibration from machines—barbells in this case—to the building structure. First, they built a small mock platform to test various materials, dropping 225 lb. from overhead each time.

Steel channels ran from one isolator to the next beneath the platform, topped by layers of dampening material. After a bit of trial and error—sheetrock layers were prone to cracking and foam layers resulted in a floor that was too malleable—the team arrived at the winning cocktail of wood and rubber, which brought the vibrations, measured by seismic readers installed on each of the building’s 17 stories, within the acceptable range. After, Levy soundproofed the walls and the ceilings.

Meanwhile, his physical culture establishment (PCE) permit application with the New York Board of Standards and Appeals (BSA) was under review as part of a nine-month process he began well in advance. The extensive testing resulted in a full PCE permit just weeks before the affiliate’s opening date.

“We’ve been open for three months now and not (had) a single complaint from any of the condo owners,” Levy said.

The investment, he said, was worth the risk.

“It was definitely scary, and then in the last five years (the BSA has) really cracked down on CrossFit gyms, so we knew we were gonna have an uphill battle,” he said. “But we were not willing to have issues in the future. If we build a beautiful business, we don’t want our members to



ICE CrossFit Below Zero

Beneath the floor at CrossFit Below Zero, acoustic isolators ensure vibrations don't run into the apartments above.



ICE CrossFit Below Zero

CrossFit Below Zero invested in acoustics studies to ensure happy neighbors.



Courtesy of Submit 2 Fitness CrossFit

Submit 2 Fitness CrossFit relocated but stayed local despite a reduction in space.

have to be shut down at one point. So we knew the risks, we knew the expense involved, and we decided to do it the right way.”

Knowledge Is Power

Billy De La Rosa, owner of another Manhattan affiliate, six-month-old CrossFit Spot, knows all too well the battle that is convincing the BSA to grant a PCE permit. Even after he presented the board with tests and data similar to Levy’s, the board remained skeptical of how a CrossFit gym would affect the community.

“Is it gonna have a good impact? Are you giving back?” De La Rosa summarized the board’s concerns.

Though CrossFit Spot would be located in the wealthy Lincoln Center district, De La Rosa saw an opportunity to give back among the poorer projects a few blocks away. He proposed a plan to offer free workouts for anyone in the community on the weekends, inviting residents of low-income areas via flyers to attend for free on Saturdays and Sundays.

“That was very good with (the BSA),” he reported.

Still, the BSA remained hesitant.

“Their entire issue was that they just couldn’t understand why we had to lift heavy weights and then drop them from above our heads,” De La Rosa said.

So he took a different approach: education.

“I had to first put myself in the board’s shoes,” he said. “I was like, ‘OK, I have to be able to relate this to something they can understand.’”

He explained to the board that the weightlifting done in CrossFit derives from an Olympic sport.

“It’s something that all countries participate in, it’s one of the most beautiful movements out there, and part of the lift is actually dropping the weight,” he told them. “We allow the weights to drop from overhead because it’s the safest position. You can’t expect someone lifting that kind of weight to not drop from overhead.”

“Well, why do you have to lift heavy?” the board replied.

“The new skinny is being strong,” De La Rosa explained. “I told them that more people are realizing that the way to be fit is actually to be strong.”

But it wasn’t until De La Rosa explained how CrossFit Spot’s on-ramp program would work that the board began to ease up. He gave them

a copy of the affiliate's beginners program, which outlined the month-long course.

"I said, 'We don't just allow people to come in here and from Day 1 just start flinging weights around,'" he said. "We teach all the Olympic lifts, all the CrossFit movements, and we make sure they understand and they progress at their own pace. It's not about lifting heavy; it's about doing the work correctly."

When the BSA finally granted De La Rosa the PCE permit, he invited each member to come try CrossFit for a week—though none have accepted the offer yet.

"When they saw that we took the time to actually create a program that teaches people how to safely do these lifts, then they gave a little more credit to what we were saying," he said.

Tales From the Crypt

Still, not even the most thorough testing and preparation can provide a guaranteed defense against the bonds of bureaucracy.

CrossFit NYC began construction on its Upper West Side location in mid-2013. The spot was perfect—more than 3,000 square feet in an L-shaped space six stories below the first residential floor of a condominium formerly home to ABC Studios. With several hundred members already signed up, affiliate owner Hari Singh had big plans for his new gym.

"We figured out exactly what we could do in the space, how many classes we could run," Singh said.

Singh planned to run three classes simultaneously, with a locker room and showers to accommodate three classes' worth of athletes. But soon after construction began, resident complaints began rolling in.

"There was a big article in the New York Post about condos suing crazy CrossFit gyms that hit the newspapers a week before we were supposed to go for our final approval," Singh said. "With that, the building basically went full blast, got our hearing rescheduled, filed petitions, did everything they could to prevent us from getting in."

While searching for ways to expel the affiliate, the condo board's lawyers unearthed a decades-old R8 district zoning law dictating that no commercial space can be within 75 feet of the sidewalk on Columbus Avenue—above or below ground. Most of the affiliate was safely within the commercial zone, but the last 50-by-25 feet bled into a residential district.

"We said, 'That's crazy because ABC Studios has been there for 25



C. Mead Jackson Photography

The crypt at CrossFit NYC: where burpees are banned by bureaucracy.

years," Singh said.

As it turned out, ABC Studios, which was built after the zoning law was implemented, was grandfathered in. When CrossFit NYC stepped in and changed the building's zoning to allow for a PCE, the new zoning laws went into effect, and the affiliate was forced to wall off the space.

"There's nothing on the other side of the wall except dirt," Singh said. "It's just a wall and a hole on the other side. It's a crypt, basically."

The loss was catastrophic.

"We didn't see this coming," he said. "It basically cut our capacity by a third ... It cost three-quarters of a million dollars to build out the space, which included the locker rooms—and the locker rooms were designed to support three classes."

Singh continued: "It's kind of a disaster for us. It's the best space in the gym because it's literally under nothing but dirt—there's not even a

building above it. It's the most soundproof place in New York."

Despite the fears of the residents, the BSA granted CrossFit NYC a two-year PCE permit in November 2014—so long as they followed through with the plan to wall off the offending 1,250 square feet. Six months from now, the gym will be re-evaluated in order to receive a full permit, good for 10 years. But Singh's lawyers doubt that even a record free of noise complaints will be enough to reclaim the crypt.

"We thought, 'OK, we'll just wall it off for the two years,' and then when the two years are up, surely the zoning board or whoever's rational will say, 'Yeah, that doesn't make sense, you've been a good guy, you can have the rest of the space.' But it turns out that nobody has the authority to give us back the rest of the space in all of New York," Singh said.

With the complexity of the New York building permits system, redesigning the space was out of the question.

"It turns out that nobody has the authority to give us back the rest of the space in all of New York."
—Hari Singh

"It's endless, and it just wouldn't be worth it," Singh said. "Ultimately, we just accepted that we're only gonna have two-thirds the number of members, that it's not gonna be as profitable as we hoped."

Community Trumps Square Footage

Long-forgotten zoning laws aren't the only things that can surprise affiliate owners. After five years of renting a 2,500-square-foot warehouse space in Secaucus, New Jersey, Submit 2 Fitness CrossFit owner Javier Ferrer found himself with six months to pack up and get out.

He had been subleasing from a friend who ran a martial-arts studio on one side of the warehouse. Investing his heart, soul and what little money he had into his dream of making people fitter, Ferrer spent five years building his own rigs, acquiring equipment and growing his membership to just over 50 athletes. About a month out from taking over the entire warehouse, Ferrer was told the building had been sold and all its tenants had six months to get out.

"I felt like somebody just ripped my heart out," Ferrer recounted. "We worked so hard to where we got to and we had started to get out of the red, and the community was getting built and people's lives were changing. The first thing that came to my mind was, 'What are we gonna tell our people?'"

Most of his members lived or worked within walking distance of the affiliate, so Ferrer and his girlfriend scoured the neighborhood, but every place of comparable size was too expensive.

A few months into the search, Ferrer came upon 3,500-square-foot dream of a warehouse—complete with its own private parking and the option to acquire an additional 10,000 square feet of space—for half the price he was paying. His friends told him he'd be stupid to turn it down. The problem was that it would be a 20-minute drive for most of his members, many of whom were used to a five-minute walk.

"We knew if we went there some people would follow, but it would kind

of be like starting all over again,” Ferrer said.

He considered his athletes.

“It’s an awesome feeling when you have people that were on medication and because they were part of our community they changed their lives around,” he said. “And there were still a lot of families that had a lot of work to do ... I had a heart-to-heart with my girlfriend and I said, ‘We’re gonna have to bite the bullet on this one. We’re gonna have to do whatever it takes to stay in town, because we have an obligation to our community.’”

It was more than a year before Ferrer found a suitable location in town, less than a mile from the original affiliate (luckily, the sale of the original location was stalled, allowing Submit 2 Fitness CrossFit to remain in operation while he searched). Of the new site’s 1,100 square feet, only 900 square feet are suitable for training.

“There is always a solution.
We sacrificed where we needed to
sacrifice to make it work.”
—Javier Ferrer

To save space, Ferrer suspended everything from benches to rowers from hooks bolted high on the wall. He also invested in space-saving equipment such as pull-up rigs and squat racks that fold into the wall, as well as a collapsible GHD from Rogue. To keep from knocking the neighbors’ products off their shelves, Ferrer built a separate barrier for wall-ball shots: It’s made of wood and metal and hangs from the rafters several inches away from the shared wall.

The modifications cost Ferrer thousands in new equipment and gear left behind, and he had to downsize the maximum class from 20 to 10 athletes.

Still, his members are happy, Ferrer said.

“Everyone loves the new cap of 10 (athletes), and so do we,” he said. “We have anywhere from two to three coaches on the floor, so our athletes get that one-on-one feel.”

Today, Submit 2 Fitness CrossFit is nearly 100 members strong. And

though affiliate ownership hasn’t been without hardship, for Ferrer, it’s all part of the game.

“We love what we do and we don’t look at (hardship) as a problem,” he said. “There is always a solution. We sacrificed where we needed to sacrifice to make it work, and if somebody’s not willing to put in the work, the sacrifice, the heartaches and the sleepless nights, they have no business opening up a box.” ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Brittney Saline is a freelance writer contributing to the CrossFit Journal and the CrossFit Games website. She trains at [CrossFit St. Paul](#). To contact her, visit [brittneysaline.com](#).