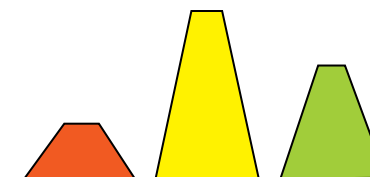




THE
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WARM AND HAPPY

CrossFit coaches share their favorite warm-up
games to get athletes laughing and moving.

BY BRITTNEY SALINE



“High knees, lunges and PVC pass-throughs!”

While lunging her way across the room for what feels like the millionth time, an athlete steals a jealous glance at the CrossFit Kids class in the next room, giggling wildly as they play a [tic-tac-toe racing game](#).

At CrossFit Leverage, warm-up games aren't just for kids.

“All of our members have got real jobs and real lives outside of this place,” said affiliate owner Dave Fecht, “and if they’ve had a long, stressful week, it’s silly games like this that kind of give them a chance to play and have fun.”

Besides ending the monotony and helping athletes crack a smile, the occasional warm-up game can also break the ice for new members or athletes from different class times.

“It’s a good way for people to overcome that standoffishness or nerves coming into their first main group class,” said Aaron McIlwee, director of CrossFit East Auckland.

“And it’ll still get the heart rate going,” said James McDermott, head coach at Albany CrossFit. “It will still prepare them for the WOD, they’ll still break a light sweat, but they’re gonna have fun, too. And if you have people laughing and smiling, then you already know it’s going to be a good day.”

Sweat and smiles: Two elements of a great warm-up.



Lateral movement makes the stick game a great warm-up option.

The Stick Game

CrossFit Island Park head coach Keith Van Wickler plucked the concept of the stick game from within the chasms of the internet.

“That one we like a lot because it gets everyone in the group kind of competing with each other at the same time,” he said.

The concept is simple: At the coach’s call, athletes, standing in a circle holding a PVC pipe on end before them, rapidly rotate clockwise or counterclockwise while leaving their stick behind and attempting to grab their neighbor’s before it hits the floor.

“It works on aspects of fitness that you don’t see focused on too much in workouts,” Van Wickler said. “So, lateral movement, moving in the frontal plane instead of the sagittal plane, reaction time and hand-eye coordination. When (athletes) are playing the game and having fun, they’re not even thinking about all that, but they’re training it at the same time.”

Equipment

1. One PVC pipe per athlete.

Rules

Arrange athletes in one large circle, about 2 feet between athletes. At the coach’s call of “left” or “right,” athletes rotate, leaving their PVC pipes balanced on end while attempting to grab their neighbor’s stick. If an athlete fails to catch the next person’s pipe, he or she must do 10 burpees before re-entering play. Every few rounds, athletes take a step backward to increase difficulty.

Variation

For large classes, split athletes into smaller circles and play eliminations rounds.

Bonus Challenges

1. Athletes must hold their dominant hands behind their backs, using only their non-dominant hand to play.
2. Athletes may only grab sticks with the hand opposite the direction called.



The group must communicate to spin its designated member away from the tagger.

Funnel Tag

For some, the game of tag might bring up horrifying memories from middle-school P.E. class. Perhaps fonder memories will come from a game of **funnel tag**, a team-based adaptation with a literal twist.

Standing in a circle, arms entwined as in a pre-game huddle, athletes protect one chosen person in the huddle from another athlete outside the circle by spinning and sprinting like a human tornado.

A more entertaining way to ramp up the heart rate than the standard 400-m run—uncontrollable laughter might benefit the abdominal muscles in addition to making breathing more challenging—the game “gets the blood flowing and gets the body warm and ready to go,” said LYFE Fitness/Team CrossFit coach Ernie Azpeitia.

Sudden changes in direction as the human cyclone tries to maneuver its chosen athlete away from the tagger, he said, are a great way to prime the reflexes and train in the lateral plane.

“It’s a great team-builder, too,” Azpeitia added. “You have to communicate with each other. Even if you mess up, it’s funny and people laugh.”

Equipment

None.

Rules

Divide the class into groups of 6 or 7 athletes. Each group chooses one athlete to be the tagger and one athlete for the tagger to pursue. The group faces each other in a circle, arm-over-arm, and spins to the left or right in an attempt to keep the chosen athlete as far from the tagger as possible. The tagger must remain outside the circle, sprinting around it in pursuit of the prey.

If the tagger successfully tags the athlete, cyclone athletes must do 5 burpees. If the cyclone fends off the tagger for a predetermined amount of time (1-2 minutes should suffice), the tagger must complete 5 burpees. Choose a new tagger and target for each round.



Team inchworm requires coordination and gets both the upper and lower body working.

Team Inchworm

After a late night or a long day at work, athletes sometimes arrive at the gym dragging ass. Thankfully, CrossFit East Auckland’s got a warm-up for that: [team inchworm race](#). In teams of at least three, athletes inch their way across the floor in a seated crab-walk position, pulling with their feet on the floor while pushing back on the ankles of the athlete behind—like a human rowboat.

McIlwee invented the game while warming up his class for a heavy squat day.

“It gets the heart rate moving and the legs prepped,” he said.

Unlike a warm-up of simple air squats, he said, the game also works the lats, traps and triceps while challenging athletes to keep a tight midline. Going even short distances in his 120-square-m gym, McIlwee said, is enough to take athletes’ breath away.

“They went one length and back the other and they were absolutely knackered,” he said.

At the same time, the game promotes communication and teamwork.

“They have to work as a team to be able to move,” he said. “Like a rowing race, everyone’s gotta be on point for the boat to move ... the team that works together the best wins.”

Equipment

None.

Rules

Depending on class size, divide athletes into two or more teams of at least three athletes. On the call of go, teams inch forward while seated to a set point approximately 10 m from the start. Each athlete but the last must grip the ankles of the person behind, with the final athlete pushing off the floor with his or her hands.

At the 10-m mark, athletes turn around in place so the rear athlete becomes the leader, then race back to the start line. For added incentive, the losing team might do 10 burpees.

Bonus Challenge

Instead of turning around at the 10-m mark, athletes remain in position and proceed to inch backward to the start line.



Symbolic frolic: Farmers set objects up and lumberjacks knock them down.

Farmers and Lumberjacks

“The older we get, we kind of just play less,” noted Nick Bastianelli, owner of CrossFit 248. “And that playing is really important for us physically as well as emotionally.”

So every now and then he takes a leaf out of the CrossFit Kids book and swaps the line drills for farmers and lumberjacks in his adult CrossFit classes.

“It’s a good stress reliever,” he said. “A lot of our athletes are professionals working white-collar jobs, many of them sit at desks all day, and a large majority of them have really high-stress positions. They kind of count on us to change that.”

Adult athletes at CrossFit 248 play it just like the kids do. Divided into two teams, “lumberjacks” attempt to knock down cones set around the room, while “farmers” pick them back up. If all the cones are up or down, the opposing team must do 10 burpees or another movement of the victor’s choice.

“We’re getting people sprinting forward, back-pedaling, shuffling from side to side, and they’re constantly moving and stopping,” Bastianelli said. “It’s just a good all-round warm-up.”

The zig-zags, swerves, sudden lurches and dives—movements uncommon in most programming—help preserve muscular balance, Bastianelli continued.

“It’s really important to work in all planes,” he said. “It helps build a bullet-proof athlete.”

Equipment

Six to 10 cones, depending on class size. The smaller the cone, the greater the challenge.

Rules

After scattering the cones across the field of play—some standing up, some lying down—divide the class into two equal teams. At the call of go, lumberjacks try to knock all the cones down while the farmers set them upright. Athletes may only use their hands to right or upset a cone, and guarding is not allowed. The winning team gets to choose the fitness-related punishment—“motivational consequences”—for the losers.

Variation

For large classes, limit duration of play. The team with the most cones knocked down or standing up when the time expires wins.



Leaving a gap in the circle inserts a margin of safety so rising athletes don't trip runners.

Follow the Leader

“If you catch her, she’s gotta do the dishes!” said Jason Ackerman as a married pair of athletes raced through a game of [follow the leader](#).

Ackerman is a CrossFit Inc. Level 1 Seminar Staff member and former CrossFit Clifton Park/Albany CrossFit coach, and though he no longer coaches at Albany CrossFit, McDermott has kept the game alive in his stead.

“CrossFit in itself is adult play ... but I think you need to go beyond that and bring it back way more basic, way more to almost childhood things,” McDermott said.

Follow the leader—in which athletes leap over each other in a never-ending circle like a webpage that won’t finish loading—is a great lung-burning alternative to the standard 400-m run or row, McDermott said.

“Instead of everyone going out and doing a lap in the parking lot, let’s make it fun,” he said.

Athletes begin lying prone on the floor, requiring them to pick themselves up before racing around the circle and leaping over fellow athletes along the way.

“So everyone’s kind of doing a burpee, just not killer burpees,” McDermott said. “They’re also having to jump, they’re having to think, (and) they’re having to be agile not to land on anyone.”

As the class warms up, its members can speed up, attempting to complete the revolution faster with each round. Or the class might try to complete a certain set of revolutions within a predetermined time period.

“Right away, we’re paying attention, we’re being actively involved in class, and we are working towards a common goal, and everyone can congratulate each other at the end,” McDermott said. “And you can also set a standard you can try to beat later on.”

Equipment

None.

Rules

Have all athletes lie prone on the floor in a circle, leaving space between each athlete and a modest gap in the circle where no athletes are lying. If running counter-clockwise, the athlete to the immediate left of the gap starts (as viewed from outside the circle). At the call of go, the athlete jumps up and proceeds

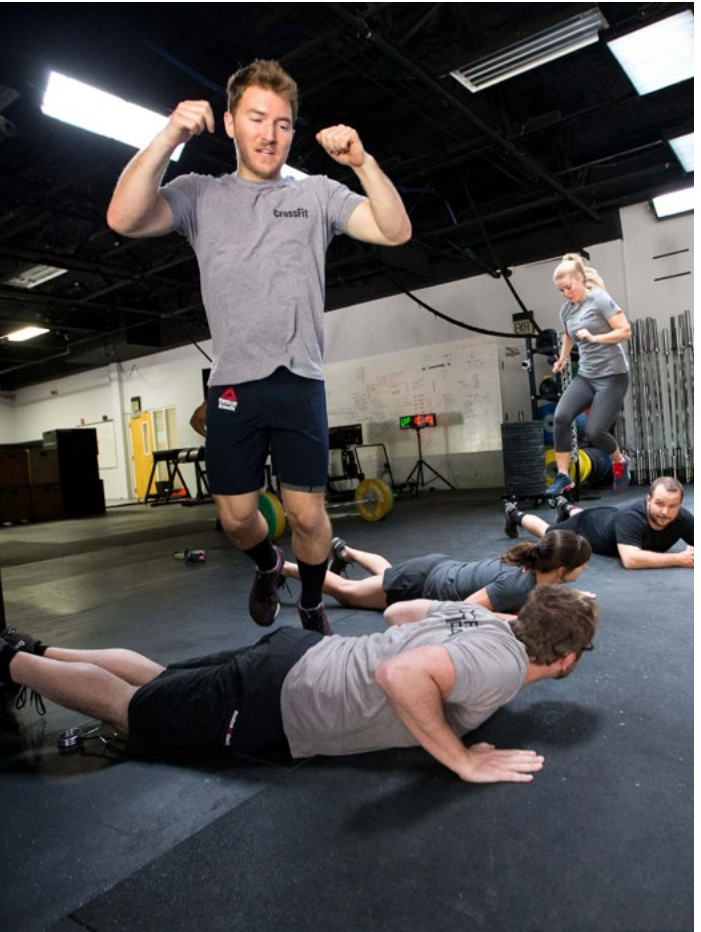
to run around the circle, stepping or jumping over each athlete in turn. When the athlete clears the others and reaches the left side of the gap, he or she lies down. Each athlete springs up to become a runner as soon as he or she is jumped over and becomes the last athlete to the right of the gap. Safety note: athletes who rise at the wrong time can create a tripping hazard, especially when multiple athletes are moving about the circle. Leaving a gap in the circle ensures a margin of safety. Passing should also be discouraged.

Variation

Have every other athlete in a bridge position, requiring the runner to crawl beneath the “bridges.”

Bonus Challenge

Set the clock to count down from 1 minute (give or take, depending on class size). If an entire revolution is not completed before the clock runs out, the whole class must perform 10 burpees.



Sneaky coaches: This game disguises its burpees with running.



Plank tap race: the drag racing of the gymnastics world.

Plank Tap Race

Planks are like vegetables: We know they’re good for us, but we don’t always care for them. Best to disguise them in a way that makes them more palatable. For the athletes at CrossFit Leeds, a **race** is just the thing.

“If we can make the warm-ups effective and fun at the same time, then that’s perfect,” affiliate owner Mike Rawlinson said. “It sets everyone off on the right foot and makes for a really good, fun session.”

In this four-footed race, athletes must hold a plank position while scuttling along a row of kettlebells, tapping each bell with each hand. The goal is to beat your partner to the end without sacrificing the midline—or collapsing on the floor.

“It’s short and fast (and) it’s really accessible,” Rawlinson said. “You often get quite close races because it only takes maybe 10 seconds.”

At CrossFit Leeds, the game is often used before workouts with handstand push-ups, cleans or overhead barbell work.

“It’s great for the midline, but also we start to load the shoulders up and the wrists—which are often neglected—getting them in that extended position,” Rawlinson said. “(Athletes) think they’re just playing a game, but we’re actually using it as a really useful tool to get them prepped for whatever’s coming.”

Equipment

12 to 20 kettlebells.

Rules

Place the kettlebells in a straight line about shoulder-width apart. Two at a time, athletes race down either side of the line, maintaining a plank position at all times. Athletes must tap each kettlebell with each hand.

Variations

1. Divide athletes into two teams for an overall race.

2. Athletes race in pairs, with winners facing off in elimination rounds while the rest of the class holds a static plank position until the ultimate champion is crowned.

Bonus Challenge

1. Make the line of kettlebells uneven, requiring the athlete to navigate forward and backward as well as laterally.

2. If an athlete falls to the floor, he or she must go back the space of two kettlebells before continuing.



If two teams are evenly matched, this warm-up can definitely become a workout.

Wall-Ball Burpee Tennis

Is it Wimbledon or the CrossFit Games? At CrossFit Leverage, who can tell?

While playing a casual game of medicine-ball catch one day, CrossFit Leverage coaches noticed a few boxes abandoned in a convenient line across the floor.

“We were like, ‘You know what? We could turn this into kind of a warm-up,’” Fecht reported. Thus **wall-ball burpee tennis** was born. Mimicking a game of doubles tennis, athletes “volley” a 10-lb. medicine ball over a “net” of boxes, completing a burpee after each toss.

Besides encouraging friendly competition, Lecht said, the game jacks up the heart rate with the burpees and works the obliques with the medicine-ball toss.

“With that med-ball side throw, now you’re working rotary muscles, so it helps warm up the midline,” he said. “In CrossFit, we don’t do a lot of rotary movements and lateral movements, and now you’re forced to use those muscle groups that may not fire as much during a workout but that you’re gonna use a lot during everyday stuff.”

Equipment

One 10-lb. medicine ball and four boxes per group of four athletes.

Rules

Depending on class size and available space, create 3 to 4 “courts,” using boxes spaced a few inches apart as nets and cones, kettlebells or chalk to mark the field of play (each side of the court should be about 7 to 9 feet long). Divide athletes into teams of two.

As in a game of doubles tennis, teams volley the medicine ball over the “net.” After each toss, the athlete must complete one burpee, and the ball must bounce once on the opposite side of the “net” before being caught. If at any point an athlete forgets to do a burpee after tossing the ball or if a team fails to return or catch the ball, the match is over and the losing team must perform 10 medicine-ball cleans.



Grudge matches encouraged.

Variation

- 1. Winning teams on each court face off until only one team remains, while athletes cut from play perform burpees, air squats or medicine-ball cleans to keep moving.
- 2. Instead of forming multiple two-person teams, divide the class into two equal teams for one giant match. Athletes must hold the bottom of a squat unless actively catching or throwing the ball or completing a burpee.

Bonus Challenge

With each elimination round, stack more boxes to create a higher net or use a heavier medicine ball.

Play Time!

Warm-up games are not meant to replace the line drills, skill practice, barbell complexes and dynamic stretches that prepare athletes to do CrossFit.

But every now and then “it’s important to play,” McDermott said. “Kids play and adults should play, too, and there are some people out there that never get to play. Their lives are very serious, and it’s good to bring (play) into the gym because the gym should be an escape from whatever’s going on in your life.” ■

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