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LOOK YOUR PERSONAL BEST

CrossFit athletes talk about their shift from aesthetic to performance goals and how they learned to be happy with the results.



BY HILARY ACHAUER



Jamie Hagiya placed 18th at the 2016 Reebok CrossFit Games—despite proudly not having six-pack abs.

In June 2016, a group of athletes ran hill sprints as part of Reebok CrossFit One Training Grounds, an invite-only camp for CrossFit Games qualifiers.

It was hot that day. At the top of the hill, after the sprints were done, seven of the women posed for a photo. Six of them had their shirts off. Ben Bergeron, one of the coaches in attendance, took the photo and posted the picture on [Instagram](#).

Jamie Hagiya, a first-time Games qualifier, saw the photo, and instead of looking with pride at her place among an elite group of athletes, she only noticed one thing: her stomach.

“I’m standing next to Jen Smith, and Katrin (Davidsdottir) is in the photo, and Christy Adkins, and all these women and their abs are crazy,” Hagiya said.

“‘I look disgusting,’” this Games athlete said to herself.

Then she stopped.

“This is ridiculous that I’m comparing myself to these girls,” Hagiya said she thought next. “It doesn’t mean that I don’t work hard.”

A few days later Hagiya took to [Instagram](#) herself:

“My body does not look like all the other @crossfitgames female athletes with crazy ripped abs and zero body fat on their stomachs. I wish I could look like that, but I’ve come to the realization that this is my body. ... But the bottom line is I need to eat to perform. I can’t worry about trying to look like a (Games) athlete because having a six pack doesn’t always make for the best athlete.”

Many people join a CrossFit gym hoping to make aesthetic changes but then discover it’s much more interesting to learn how to do a muscle-up or increase squat numbers. However, this newfound focus on performance rarely means athletes completely abandon aesthetics.

We all care about how we look, and our feelings about our appearance can vary depending on the day, our mood, and the Instagram post.

Bikinis to Bar Muscle-Ups

Hagiya said she’s had body-image issues for as long as she can remember. The former collegiate basketball player at the University of Southern California was always bigger than her sister and all her friends growing up.

“When I found CrossFit, I was like, ‘Oh, (look at) Camille Leblanc-Bazinet. We have a similar body type, and everyone thinks she has a beautiful body and she’s strong, and that made me feel a lot better about myself and embrace being strong,’” Hagiya said.

That didn’t mean her body-image issues vanished. It’s never that easy.

“I remember my very first CrossFit competition,” Hagiya said. “I was going head-to-head against this other girl ... and she looked so ripped it was crazy, and I was like ‘I’m going to lose so bad,’ and then I ended up beating her, but I was still like, ‘Oh, wow.’ ... Just by the way she looks, I was intimidated by that.”

Hagiya continued: “I’ve always been self-conscious of that. I don’t really work out with my shirt off in competitions.”

Not everyone feels the pressure to get smaller. Starrisha Godfrey-Canada has been doing CrossFit at [StrengthRx CrossFit](#) in Los Angeles, California, since April 2015. She originally joined because she had planned a summer trip to Brazil.

“And what I know about Brazil are the beaches, (the Brazilian women) are confident, the bathing suits are barely there, and I was like, ‘Oh my goodness,’” Godfrey-Canada said.

“I’m naturally very petite and thin, and I’ve never been comfortable being as small as I am,” she said. “I wanted to be curvy, and I wanted to be confident in a bathing suit and not have it hanging off me, and all these things. That’s why I actually stepped foot in a CrossFit gym.”

At first, Godfrey-Canada found CrossFit frustrating. An athlete in high school, she was usually the fastest one on her team, but she found she could barely get through her first CrossFit workouts.

“When did this happen? When did I get so out of shape?” she asked herself.

A low point was when the workout involved overhead squats and snatches. Godfrey-Canada had 2.5-lb. weights on the 35-lb. barbell, and the coach told her to take those off. Then, after watching her perform a few reps, he told her it would be a good idea for her to switch to a PVC pipe.

“I understand it’s a progression and a personal journey, but that threw me off. I’m the only person in here doing overhead squats and snatches with the PVC pipe. I can’t even use the training bar,” she said.

“(I got) more into the strength, really being a part of the community. That’s when my goals shifted.”
—Starrisha Godfrey-Canada

Godfrey-Canada’s trip to Brazil fell through but she kept going to StrengthRx, increasing her attendance from three to four times a week to five or six.

“(I got) more into the strength, really being a part of the com-

Jamie Hagiya's fans at the California Regional, where the 31-year-old athlete placed fifth.





Because of her CrossFit experience, 44-year-old April Zusman said she cares more about performance than aesthetics.

munity. That's when my goals shifted. I made a commitment to continue to go on a more regular basis," Godfrey-Canada said.

Now, more than a year later, Godfrey-Canada can deadlift 240 lb. and do three bar muscle-ups in a row.

Inspired by the community and the excitement of achieving new goals, Godfrey-Canada spends so much time in the gym that members often think she works there. She doesn't stay after class and cheer on the other members because she's in pursuit of a better bikini body. She stays for other reasons.

"I just love being here," she said about StrengthRx, "I've built such a community."

This isn't to say Godfrey-Canada has cast aside her aesthetic goals. She said she still thinks about aesthetics, but it's no longer her only focus.

"It's a part of my fitness goals," she said.

In Pursuit of Health

Dana Honbo has been working out at StrengthRx for two years after getting frustrated with not seeing results from his traditional gym workouts.

"My main goal was to get a better physique, but I never really got it," Honbo said about his time in a globo gym.

Once the 35-year-old started CrossFit he began eating better.

"When I started off I was subpar, couldn't Rx any (workouts), but as I started to develop strength and form it started taking off. I lost 30 lb., and I'm in the best shape of my life," he said.

Then he turned his attention to the whiteboard, trying to be one of the top five in the gym every day. A minor wrist injury forced Honbo to take a step back and think about his long-term goals.

He said his goals have shifted again.

"Now it's for my health. I want to be able to play with my (2-year-old) daughter," Honbo said.

April Zusman, 44, started CrossFit in 2014 at [CrossFit LVI](#) in Poway, California. Zusman stopped eating processed foods, started cooking for herself, and lost about 25 lb. She felt herself getting stronger and faster and mentally tougher.

Zusman said it felt good to lose weight and feel healthy, but over the last two years she realized that's not what motivates her.

"I used to be more concerned with wanting to look like a certain body type," she said. "Then as time passed and I dropped all the weight, I realized I don't even care about looking like that body type, I want to look like me, I want to be strong, I want to look strong, I want to feel strong. I stopped worrying about being a specific body type because, you know, I'm just not built to be tiny and I've definitely embraced being thick and muscular."

Zusman has been a belly dancer for close to 16 years. She said she used to get out of breath at the end of her performance, but after going to CrossFit classes four to five days a week for two years, her routine feels like a warm-up.

"My endurance has definitely increased," she said, "and my muscle control is much better."

**"Every body is beautiful. It doesn't matter what size you are."
—April Zusman**

Zusman's focus on performance over appearance is not just for her own benefit. She has a 10-year-old daughter, which causes her to think a lot about the implications of an aesthetics-focused life.

"I don't want her to feel like she has to be a certain body type to feel beautiful," Zusman said about her daughter.

"She is an athlete and she has really started to get into CrossFit because of me. And the environment she's around, there are all different body types. I'm constantly telling her, 'Every body is beautiful, it doesn't matter what size you are, you don't have to be this way because that's not realistic,'" she said.

Zusman tells her daughter to stay active, eat a healthy diet and avoid worrying about achieving a certain body type.

"What's realistic is how your body is. What your body composition is," she said.

Acceptance—Finally

Through hard work, talent and dedication, Hagiya has reached the height of performance in the sport of CrossFit, but she doesn't have the defined six-pack abs that have become the aesthetic ideal in the CrossFit community.

"I don't look like these girls," she said of fellow competitors like Davidsdottir and Smith, "but I think it's just come to the point where ... this is how my body is and if I wanted a six pack I'd have to lose about 20 or 30 lb. and I probably wouldn't be able to perform."

The point of her Instagram post, she said, was to let everyone know that "it's OK that you don't have a six pack. If you think you have to look a certain way to make it to the Games ... you don't, because I made it and I don't look like that."

When Hagiya placed fifth at the 2016 California Regional, she



Courtesy StrengthRX CrossFit

Starrisha Godfrey-Canada went from wanting a bikini body to improving her deadlift and bar muscle-ups.



Shaun Cleary/CrossFit Journal

Jamie Hagiya said she's come to embrace her body for what it can do—not how it looks.



Courtesy StrengthRX CrossFit

Dana Honbo used to frequent the Globo gym. Today he does CrossFit for health and longevity.



Courtesy April Zusman

Since starting CrossFit, April Zusman said she no longer gets winded during belly-dancing routines.

“Love yourself and your body and be proud of how hard you work.”

— Jamie Hagiya

looked at the other four qualifying women and noticed she didn't look like any of them, but still she felt like she belonged.

Hagiya has been posting more photos of herself in a sports bra to reinforce the idea that this is the body she has, she worked hard for it, and she's proud of it.

Her advice to other CrossFit athletes who aren't completely satisfied with their physiques is not a new diet plan or specialized programming.

“Be yourself and (accept) what you have. Embrace it and love yourself and your body and be proud of how hard you work,” she said.

The trick—and it's a difficult one to pull off—is to eat well and exercise regularly, then accept the results, which might not be exactly what you imagined. It's unlikely you will stop caring about aesthetics, even with a performance focus, but you can make an effort to accept and celebrate the results of your consistent hard work. ■

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 hilarryachauer.com