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# THE SILVER MARKET

BY EMILY BEERS

Affiliate owners share how they're tailoring their approaches to introduce Baby Boomers to CrossFit.



Courtesy of Neil Hauger

“A lot of helping them is about having face time with these people and being a lot more hands-on,” said Neil Hauger (left), owner of CrossFit 1080 in Minnesota.

The loud music, the intimidating movements and the unbearable crash of barbells smashing the floor—none of it appealed to Lucia Bragan.

“My husband had been doing CrossFit for four and a half years, and I would go watch sometimes. I knew I wasn’t capable of doing what he was doing,” said the 77-year-old from Maryland.

“And they played really loud music with that heavy beat. I guess it charges the younger folks up and gets them going, but for me it was a turn-off. I wouldn’t be able to hear the coach.”

Needless to say, Bragan had no intention of ever following in her husband’s footsteps by joining Rock Creek CrossFit in Kensington, Maryland—at least until coach Trina Kerns approached her in September 2015 and offered an alternative. The process would start with a face-to-face introductory session at a time when the gym was quiet and empty. No loud weights. No blaring music.

Bragan decided to take Kerns up on her offer. The two met up and discussed Bragan’s health history, and then Kerns put her through a short fitness assessment.

Bragan remembers being intimidated and somewhat overwhelmed, but Kerns was with her every step of the way, which made her more comfortable, she said.

“She asked me to reach up and hang from the bar and I couldn’t do it. I was on a box because I couldn’t reach the bar, and she asked me to lift just one leg off the box instead. So I lifted one leg up and kept the other one on the box and was able to do that,” Bragan said.

Soon, Bragan realized CrossFit—and lifting weights—wasn’t as scary as she thought it would be.

“When I (used to think) about lifting weights, I envisioned the big weightlifters—the heavy-duty muscled men who pick up 350 pounds and raise it above their heads and throw it back down to the floor, and I would think, ‘Forget it,’” Bragan said. “But when I found out I could start with 15 lb., it made a big difference.”

She added: “Turning off the music and the one-on-one coaching with Trina because I’m not a very athletic person ... (also) made the difference for me. I never would have joined the regular program.”

That’s not to say older athletes can’t join normal CrossFit classes. Many masters athletes thrive in general classes that welcome everyone from teens to those well beyond 50, and great coaches are able to modify workouts for athletes of very different levels in a group setting. Some affiliates, however, are finding success creating entire programs that are tailored to help groups of Baby Boomers use CrossFit to stay fitter in their Golden Years.

## The Personal Touch

One of the original CrossFit concepts is that all human beings essentially have the same fitness requirements. Load and intensity might vary with age, but the program is basically the same.

“The needs of an Olympic athlete and our grandparents differ by degree, not kind,” CrossFit Inc. Founder and CEO Greg Glassman wrote in the October 2002 CrossFit Journal article **“What Is Fitness?”** Glassman, of course, was basing that statement on experience. He worked with older athletes as well as young fire-breathers, and while he had Nicole Carroll, Annie Sakamoto and Eva Twardokens push through a tough workout like **Nasty Girls**, he had 60-something **Mary Conover** doing shallow squats to a tall plyo box when she started a CrossFit program.

When working with older athletes, movements can be modified—but they’re still doing CrossFit. For instance, masters might do step-ups instead of box jumps, they might squat holding a kettlebell instead of a barbell, or they might row if the impact of jogging troubles them. Loads, repetitions and time domains can be modified to suit the needs of the individual. But each athlete is still getting fitter, improving range of motion and maintaining or improving his or her capabilities by performing constantly varied functional movements at relatively high intensity.

The degree-not-kind philosophy is as relevant today as it was when Glassman was running the original CrossFit gym, and it doesn’t just apply to movements. The principle also applies to communication, atmosphere and other aspects of interaction. For example, introducing CrossFit to a 20-year-old athlete often looks very different than introducing a 65-year-old to a barbell for the first time in her life, explained Kerns, 43.

“We’ve used our same routines for elderly individuals with heart disease and cage fighters one month out from televised bouts. We scale load and intensity; we don’t change programs.”  
—Greg Glassman



Courtesy of Neil Hauger

Hauger, 52, modifies pull-ups at CrossFit 1080. When working with older athletes, creative scaling can help Baby Boomers work around fears, injuries and flexibility issues to get a great training session.

Understanding age-related differences has been a key to success, said Kerns, who started working with senior citizens in 2008 as a personal trainer at a YMCA. When she began coaching at Rock Creek CrossFit in 2015, Kerns saw an opportunity with older clients. She noticed older folks like Bragan were intimidated to try CrossFit, but she was sure she could connect with hesitant older prospects if she tailored her approach.

Kerns said she quickly learned small details make all the difference: phoning instead of emailing, turning music off during training sessions, interacting face-to-face rather than online.

“One-on-one time and face time make them more comfortable. Twenty-year-olds just want to work out. But older athletes want to talk first and feel comfortable,” Kerns explained.

To accommodate the older demographic, Kerns schedules a one-on-one sit-down meeting with prospective Baby Boomer clients, which gives her a chance to chat and connect, talk about details, and discover any concerns or health issues that need addressing before working out, she said.

Neil Hauger, owner of CrossFit 1080 in Woodbury, Minnesota, has had a similar experience.

Hauger, 52, trains 18 athletes in the 50-plus category, many of whom have pre-existing health issues such as diabetes or cardiac problems. Some have even suffered a cardiovascular event in the past, he explained. Health concerns often lead to fear and intimidation at the very thought of beginning a workout program, Hauger said. But when he convinces them to sit down with him one-on-one, he always has more success, he explained.

“A lot of helping them is about having face time with these people and being a lot more hands-on to keep them from feeling overwhelmed or out of place,” Hauger said.

## Gaining Confidence

After Kerns started bringing 50-, 60- and 70-year-olds into the gym, her next priority was ensuring they stuck around.

She knew if her older athletes felt part of the community, they’d be more likely to commit for years to come. This was the impetus behind her Mighty Masters program, a class for older clients that runs during the week at 11 a.m. when the gym is quiet and the music isn’t playing. The class has helped Kerns’ older athletes connect with each other and the community, she said.

“And it makes them more comfortable working out with people their age.”

Arthur Cohen, 70, is one of the Mighty Masters.

“We call ourselves ‘the old farts,’ but they like to call it ‘the Mighty Masters,’” Cohen said with a laugh.

Working out with his peers is the reason he and wife Erin Fulham had the confidence to start and, more importantly, stick with CrossFit, he said.

“I was totally intimidated by the whole scene (at the start),” said Cohen, who has lost 20 lb. since starting CrossFit one year ago. “I was so far away from being ready for a group class. I would have been totally overwhelmed.”

Hauger, too, is in the process of putting together a formal program for Baby Boomers. Like the Mighty Masters, Hauger plans to run his class in the middle of the day, which he said is ideal for his business, as it will fill some of the quieter hours during the week.

“This demographic can come in the middle of the day when the gym is quiet. And they have money. They’re a demographic who can afford it, and they need more personal attention than they’re going to get at a regular globo gym,” he said.

Mike Casavant is another CrossFit coach who is dedicating much of his time to masters athletes. The owner of Iron Force Athletics in Natick, Massachusetts, programs for more than 400 masters athletes, some of whom are over the age of 55.

Connecting with clients is one key to keeping his older athletes happy and committed, Casavant explained.

“It’s not really about the programming. It’s about being a platform for these people to express themselves. And they’re different than younger people. They have a lot more life experience, and things that resonate with a 22-year-old won’t resonate with a 55-year-old,” he said.

“I don’t use certain slang (language) with older athletes, or I wouldn’t talk to a 55-year-old about ‘South Park.’”

As with Kerns’ Mighty Masters, Casavant said he believes his family of older athletes has grown as large as it has because it provides them an opportunity to be part of a greater community. Many of the interactions happen through a private Facebook group, where coaches and masters discuss everything from training to growing old, share videos, ask questions, give advice and just come together to share a laugh, Casavant explained.

“It gives them something to be part of.”

Although Casavant, Kerns and Hauger all said they see the value in giving older athletes their own community within the larger group, none of them built a masters program with the intention of isolating older athletes from the younger crowd. All of her athletes are welcome to join regular group classes if and when they feel ready, Kerns said. Kerns said she doesn't care whether or not members of her 60-plus crew ever choose to leave the Mighty Masters to train with people half their age. What's more important for her is watching them gain confidence and improve their lives through fitness, she said.

"At the start, barbells intimidated them, but now they think it's really cool they can use all the same equipment as the young people are using," Kerns said. "It gives them a lot of confidence. And it adds to their quality of life."

Even though he still chooses to train with the Mighty Masters, Cohen said he is no longer scared to join a group class with the 20-year-olds.

"If Trina thinks I can handle it, I would give it a go. I would do my best," he said.

**"The question regularly arises as to the applicability of a regimen like CrossFit's to older and deconditioned or detrained populations. The needs of an Olympic athlete and our grandparents differ by degree, not kind."  
—Greg Glassman**

## Their Message

Ginny Jager is a 63-year-old from CrossFit Island Park in Long Beach, New York, who was 40th in the Masters Women 60+ Division in the 2016 Reebok CrossFit Games Open.

As one of the fittest 63-year-olds in the world, Jager said there's a lot of misinformation about who is capable of doing CrossFit. Many of her friends, for example, see how fit she is and assume they aren't good enough to join a CrossFit gym, she said.



Fit over 50.



Trina Kerns with Lucia Bragan.



Trina Kerns (right) and her Mighty Masters.



Trina Kerns with Arthur Cohen.



Ginny Jager, 63.

"Or they think they can't do it because they have injuries, or maybe their back bothers them, or they think they're too old to start CrossFit."

She wants them to know they're wrong, and she wants them to know most people her age aren't gunning for the CrossFit Games. Most of them are like Bragan or Cohen: ordinary people in their 60s and 70s who are improving their fitness and health one day at a time.

For 70-year-old Cohen, it's about being fit enough to garden and do woodwork.

For 77-year-old Bragan, it's about taking it one day at a time to stay as healthy as possible for years to come.

And for Jager, it's about trying to qualify to the CrossFit Games this summer, about pursuing Tough Mudder races, about rock climbing and waterfall rappelling.

While Cohen's, Bragan's and Jager's journeys vary, the original CrossFit message does not: We differ by degree, not kind.

Doing CrossFit and getting fit really helps people realize this, Kerns said. Even 77-year-olds, she added.

"They soon realize they're the same as younger athletes." ■

**About the Author:** Emily Beers is a CrossFit Journal contributor and coach at [CrossFit Vancouver](#). She finished 37th at the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games.