



THE  
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# TRAINING TIPS: FROM WRECK TO RECOVERY

BY SHANE UPCHURCH, CF-L3





Courtesy of Shane Upchurch



Upchurch struggled with dorsiflexion after the injury, so he slowly combined small, progressive increases in range of motion with strength work in the new range.

On Aug. 8, 2015, I was hit on my motorcycle by a box truck that ran a red light. I suffered degloving of my lower left leg, three displaced ribs, a bruised lung and swelling of the brain. I spent one month in a hospital and underwent a free flap transplant to my lower left leg, a craniotomy and a few other smaller operations.

After I was released from the hospital, I spent about five weeks on a couch resting.

I finally began working with a physical therapist, and in the beginning I mostly rode the Airdyne before doing my therapy homework.

After being cleared by my doctors for all activity, I began working my way back to CrossFit-style training. After all, it was arguably this fit lifestyle that helped me bounce back in the first place.

In dealing with my return to CrossFit, I've learned a few things I think would be beneficial to other coaches and athletes who are coming back from an injury or even just a lot of time off CrossFit. I narrowed my experiences down to five concepts that have helped me the most.

## 1. The New Normal

When I returned everything felt heavy. My form was garbage at any moderately heavy weight, and it was frustrating and misleading to think of what I had been able to do only months before. I had to quickly learn and accept that my normal was now different than before and would never be the same again. Accepting this fact was actually very relieving because it removed all preconceived notions of what I could and couldn't do.

The new normal will be harder for some clients to accept, but the sooner they do, the sooner they'll progress. Depending on the injury they're coming back from, they might never have the body they used to, and they might not be able to do what they could before. That's OK. We can call it bad or good, but it really boils down to what you have to work with in the moment. If you're caught up on what you used to have or what you will have in the future, you'll never really improve the version of you that is available right now—which is all you really ever have.

This acceptance also gives you a blank logbook to begin tracking your progress. That means PRs every day—at least for a while—so enjoy the journey, acknowledge the victories, and respect the athlete you are today.

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## 2. Volume

Soreness is a big factor in coming back from an injury. If you make returning clients so sore that their next days are impossible, they won't come back. More discomfort is the last thing they want.

It's better to play it safe than push the envelope too soon. Depending on the injuries or how long the clients have been out, some movements and loads might be accessible but leave them so sore that they're unable to train. Remember, the goal is to get them to a point where they can exercise and help recovery, not to train at a volume that best prepares them for competition.

In my situation, I started out by staying around the 30-rep range. I also started at very light loads and worried more about positions and full range of motion. Over the course of a week or two, I would bump the reps up by 15-20, and during the following week or so, I would also increase the load slightly. I continued until I could do most CrossFit workouts without being excessively sore for the next few days. I entered the CrossFit Games Open this year with a goal of doing everything as prescribed, and I made it, finishing in the top 40 percent of my region.

## 3. Strength and Range of Motion

An athlete who is coming back from an injury will probably have some sort of movement restriction, and full range of motion trumps strength 90 percent of the time, especially if we're training to be better at life. I had a lack of dorsiflexion in my left ankle, which made it very difficult to go deep into a squat and keep my chest up.



Some days I would throw air squats into a conditioning session and work to a butt target I eventually eliminated. Other days I wanted to work more on strength, even if it was only in a partial range of motion. For squats, I would use a box. I have a client who is recovering from back surgery, and we sometimes work with a trap bar to get him in a better position with a load. Other times we go with empty-bar deadlifts and focus on increasing range of motion.

As range of motion improves, continue to challenge strength in the new range. The end goal should always be a full range of motion with progressively heavier weight, but don't let the pursuit of full range of motion deter you from lifting heavy at times.

This brings up max lifts. I would never max out in a shortened range of motion, and I didn't truly max any lifts for several months after returning to activity. I would often find a weight that challenged my technique, and I made sure it was as heavy as or slightly heavier than what I had done before for a similar rep scheme. This kept me progressing at a consistent rate and prevented any new injuries.

#### 4. Perfect Positions

Let's be honest: Once you've achieved a certain level of strength, it's really hard to go back to the basics. Returning from an injury is a great time to do just that. We're not training for anything in particular, we need to take it slow, and our conditioning is garbage anyway, so the idea of high intensity seems silly. We also know that perfect positions make a stronger athlete, so why not strive for those positions?

I've often said that the best part of returning from ground zero is that I have no excuse not to work on perfecting movement patterns, and I'll bet I end up stronger because of it.

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Courtesy of Shane Upchurch

Upchurch recovering from his accident in 2015.

I spent a lot of my warm-up time working on perfecting positions and dealing with different mobility issues, performing exercises such as hollow holds, wall slides, squat holds, single-arm and single-leg work, stability drills and more.

I found Interval Weight Training worked perfectly for this because it allowed to me to work on quality lifting at low intensity, with a more basic movement at high intensity to follow.

Interval Weight Training was created by Pat O'Shea, and the basics involve lifting 5-8 reps at 70 percent perceived exertion, then following up with 1-2 minutes of all-out intensity on another activity. Rest 1-2 minutes and repeat for 3-5 rounds. In the original format, you would then rest 5 minutes and repeat with new movements. A typical workout for me looked like this:



Dave Little

Upchurch today.

- 3 rounds of:
  - 6 low-hang box power cleans
  - 90 seconds for max calories on an Airdyne
  - Rest 2 minutes
- Rest 5 minutes
- 3 rounds of:
  - 8 trap-bar deadlifts
  - 60 seconds for max calories on a ski erg
  - Rest 2 minutes

This system allowed me to focus on hitting good positions with submaximal weights while slowly increasing volume, and it also developed conditioning. Interval Weight Training wasn't the only

thing I did, but I added workouts like this into my training, and I still do them.

#### 5. The Big Picture

I couldn't do a number of things when I first got back to exercising—double-unders, for instance. Jumping rope at all was a chore, and it didn't take long before I caught myself falling back into old habits and creating plans for how I would conquer double-unders immediately. But why? If my goals were to get back to a level of fitness similar to what I had before and to be able to do things in life without special preparation, why did it matter?

I found that a better approach was addressing weaknesses as I found them, just as I would attack a chipper. Only making a start is needed this very moment.

I began with single-unders in warm-ups, and I kept an eye on volume levels to make sure I wasn't making any huge jumps. Over time, I tried a few double-unders with almost zero success, and then a few group workouts came up with a format that allowed me to try them again. This went on for a while. Finally, during a workout that had athletes running 400 m and then doing double-unders, I strung together 9. I didn't get any more in later rounds, and that was OK. Then in Open Workout 16.2 I got 50 in a row!

#### The Long Game

It's very easy to get overwhelmed with all the areas for improvement in CrossFit, and we can quickly fall into the trap of wanting to fix everything today. Viewing goals on a much larger timeline really helps keep things in perspective and keeps me from getting carried away.

I plan to live to 100, so that leaves me 68 years to keep working on the things I can't do today. If your goal is to win the CrossFit Games, then your approach is going to be much different, but for most of our clients the 100-year approach will work very well. ■

**About the Author:** Shane Upchurch, CF-L3, is a coach at [CrossFit Roots](#) in Boulder, Colorado. He's been involved with CrossFit for 10 years, and he's coached for seven of those. His accident opened his eyes to the beauty of the CrossFit community, and he continues to chase his passion of a healthy lifestyle through activity and nutrition. He and his wife are believers in the Paleo lifestyle and plan to have a farm that will allow them to provide real food to their family and friends.