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# CROSSFIT AFFILIATES: GLAMOUR VS. GRIT

BY BRITTNEY SALINE

Some clients prefer polished brass pull-up bars, while others like a little rust on the barbell.

Nearly 5,000 miles and an ocean apart, two classes of CrossFit athletes are doing work.

Their lungs are searing, but all that matters is the last few reps—and getting them in before the minute turns over.

As the last barbell settles at CrossFit Fifty, an open-air garage gym in Honolulu, Hawaii, the athletes lie on the sun-stricken pavement, heaving as they stare up into the electric-blue sky. At CrossFit Below Zero/I.C.E. NYC, tucked inside a luxury condominium in Manhattan, an athlete rests against a marble column, chalk dust trickling from the brass-coated pull-up bar above.

Once they can breathe again, CrossFit Fifty athletes report to the whiteboard one by one to scrawl their scores next to a list of mantras—“don’t panic” among them. CrossFit Below Zero athletes sign on to Wodify, broadcasting their efforts on bright flatscreens mounted in a neat line on the wall.

One group leaves sweaty and sun-kissed, hiking the 400 meters to their cars down the block. The other crew stops for a shower in a gleaming spa-like bathroom where high-end shampoos, hair spray and body towels big enough to camp under return the New Yorkers to normal before they step back into the Manhattan streets.

Both leave a little fitter than they were before.

## Bait and Snatch

Izzy Levy, a personal trainer of nearly 20 years, owned a globo gym when he did his first CrossFit workout in 2011.

“It was Memorial Day Murph, and it just completely destroyed me,” he said.

Hooked, he began following [CrossFit.com](http://CrossFit.com), eventually joining CrossFit by the Sea in Avon, New Jersey. Soon, he was dreaming of owning his own affiliate. But as he shared his excitement with friends and globo-gym clients, he noticed a problem.

“Everybody had these preconceived notions (about CrossFit),” he said.

Many imagined a dungeon full of meatheads and drill sergeants, and they feared getting hurt or growing bulky. Though Levy knew skilled coaching and good programming—2014 Reebok CrossFit Games champion Camille Leblanc-Bazin eventually became his director of programming—would assuage these fears, the first challenge would be getting people in the door.

“So we wanted to do things a bit differently,” Levy said. “What we wanted to do was to build a beautiful gym, not just basically a basement or a warehouse with cinder-block walls and rubber floors and scary-looking people throwing kettlebells on the floor. So we built what I consider to be an aesthetically pleasing gym, so now people are going to come in who were not going to come

into a box before.”

That was the business model Levy brought to his partners and investors. To demonstrate, he brought them to five different affiliates across the city.

“And I said, ‘I can guarantee you if you join this (gym) for two months, you’ll be in the best shape of your life. Just accept that as a fact,’” he said. “And then I walked into some of the more successful boxes in the city, and I said, ‘Would you join here?’”

They wouldn’t, the investors said.

“And the reason was because it’s dirty and grungy and there’s scary-looking people throwing weights around, and there’s no showers and there’s no amenities, and it plays right into the stereotype,” Levy said.

Part of the issue, he continued, is the fitness market in Manhattan, where many New Yorkers are accustomed to boutique operations.

“If you opened up a bare-bones CrossFit gym, these people will not walk in,” Levy said. “They may step foot in, but they’ll quickly turn around and walk out because they’re used to having towel service and laundry service and shampoo and conditioner and hair blowers and pretty aesthetics.”

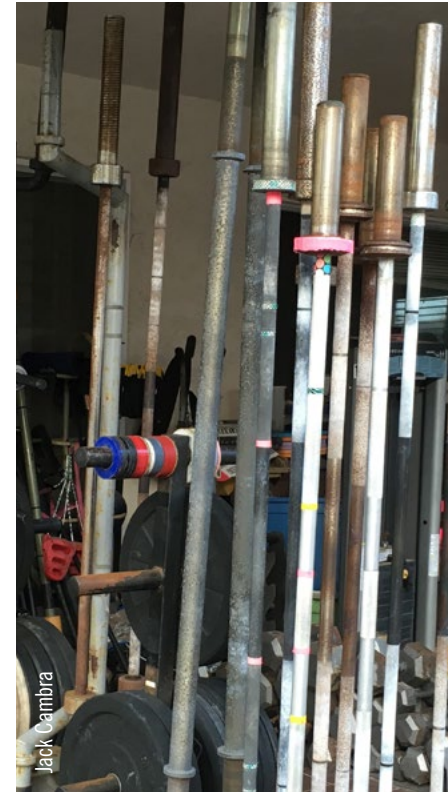
“What we wanted to do was to build a beautiful gym, not just basically a basement or a warehouse.”  
—Izzy Levy

After securing a 4,500-square-foot space in the basement of a luxury apartment building in Tribeca, Levy hired an architect to make his gym sparkle. On the building’s ground level, a blue reception desk sits in front of a wall speckled with slate-gray hexagonal tiles, mirroring the I.C.E. logo. The ceiling and doorways are sheathed in brass, and just beyond the reception area, 20-foot mirrors framed in brass create a kaleidoscope effect.

“It’s where everybody takes a selfie,” Levy said.

The workout floor is tiled with Ecore. Several marble pillars framed in brass support the ceilings, brass pull-up bars etched with the I.C.E. logo linking them. A pair of benches dotted with throw pillows featuring motivational messages sit against the back wall. But the real gem is the bathroom.

“If you walk into a bathroom that has dust bunnies in the corner and there’s no toilet paper and it’s disgusting, you wouldn’t feel comfortable in there,” Levy said.



Jack Cambra



Jack Cambra

CrossFit Fifty: A rugged outdoor affiliate where the workout goes down rain or shine, hot or cold, windy or calm.



Gustav Lillequist (photographer) and DesBrisay and Smith Architects



Gustav Lillequist (photographer) and DesBrisay and Smith Architects

CrossFit Below Zero/I.C.E. NYC: Perhaps home to the poshest pull-up bars in the world.



The glittering "selfie staircase" at CrossFit Below Zero: Stare off into infinity and get your mind right for the workout.

Gustav Lillquist (photographer) and DesBrisay and Smith Architects



Forecast calls for deadlifts, sweat and effort, also known as "fitness."

Jack Cambra



Crush a workout, then relax in the spa-like showers at CrossFit Below Zero

Gustav Lillquist (photographer) and DesBrisay and Smith Architects

The bathrooms at Below Zero are so nice that sometimes members come to the gym just to shower, Levy said.

A jet-black tiled backsplash set in the white marble wall surrounds a row of sinks—also white marble—with brass faucets. Neat stacks of hand towels and jars of cotton swabs dot the counter, and a lit mirror, framed in brass, spans an entire wall. Next to a bank of black day lockers sit a wicker hamper shaped like a penguin and a basket of full-length body towels. The showers are stocked with every soap, shampoo and conditioner, and Levy keeps the women's bathroom supplied with a variety of free feminine products.

"All it does from the onset is bring people in the door and make them feel comfortable," Levy said. "Once they become members, then it's just an added value."

But gleaming facilities and free hairspray aren't Levy's main maneuver. The majority of his CrossFit members, he said, are converts from I.C.E.'s barbell-less, bootcamp-style high-intensity-interval-training (HIIT) classes, which are purposely scheduled between CrossFit classes.

"When you have 25 to 30 people waiting for the HIIT class to start, they're seeing the aftermath of a CrossFit class," Levy said. "People dying on the floor, shaking and then smiling and everybody getting together and cheering each other on, and they're thinking, 'I don't look like that at the end of my workout. Nobody's patting me on the back and cheering me.' They see the aftermath of a CrossFit class and then they're willing to try it."

Thirty-two-year-old Jenny Trang was one such convert. For years, her friends had tried to convince her to try CrossFit. A former college lacrosse player, she wasn't at all afraid of hard work.

"It looked like a meathead sport," she said. "It was intimidating. I didn't want to get injured, and I thought no one cares about form probably because there are no mirrors, and they're just gonna yell at me to do more weight."

Trang discovered I.C.E. after participating in a free bootcamp-style workout Levy led at a popular athletic-clothing store in April. An aficionado of group fitness classes, she signed up for Levy's HIIT class and was impressed from the moment she walked in the door.

"It was really nice," she said. "And it was clean, which was awesome. My biggest complaint is always when it's super dirty, because you're rolling and doing burpees and everything on the floor."

The spa-like bathroom was a welcome surprise.

"It was a big draw," she said. "If there were no shower, I wouldn't try to spend time hanging out (after class). I'd rather just go home and shower. And (at I.C.E.) you don't have to

pack a bunch of stuff either. As a woman, you're already carrying two to three bags walking around New York, so it's nice that I don't have to bring a ton of stuff. I have everything I need here."

Trang signed up for I.C.E.'s CrossFit classes after her first HIIT class. Though the amenities were nice, they weren't what made her come back for the barbell.

"What made me feel more comfortable was how welcoming and supportive everyone at I.C.E. was, and particularly their focus on correct form and injury prevention," she said. "And I love the camaraderie of it. It's really more a sense of family than just even a community. Everyone's invested in you improving and doing well."

Levy doesn't believe that the comforts of his gym detract from the physical and mental benefits of CrossFit, which are usually derived from being comfortable in the uncomfortable.

"Try a workout and tell me if you get the same exhilaration and the same endorphins at the end," he said. "If the stimulus is the same, anything else that's an improvement is just added value. If (clients) prefer to inhale dirt and dust then that's great. ... There's nothing wrong with that, but I don't think you're gonna be able to convert new people with that model."

## The Gym That Time Forgot

Like Levy, Jack Cambra fell in love with CrossFit after "getting my ass whooped" in his first workout—a mash-up of single-arm deadlifts, push presses and Turkish get-ups—at CrossFit Hawaii/Hardass Fitness in 2010. At the time, he'd been competing as a submission grappler.

"I thought, 'Man, if I wrestle anyone who's doing this, I'm gonna get murdered,'" he recounted.

Though he did not join the gym, Cambra became obsessed with CrossFit gym blogs, piecing their challenges and CrossFit.com workouts together with equipment he had at home. After reading articles from the CrossFit Journal featuring people who had started their own affiliates, Cambra began to dream of being a gym owner.

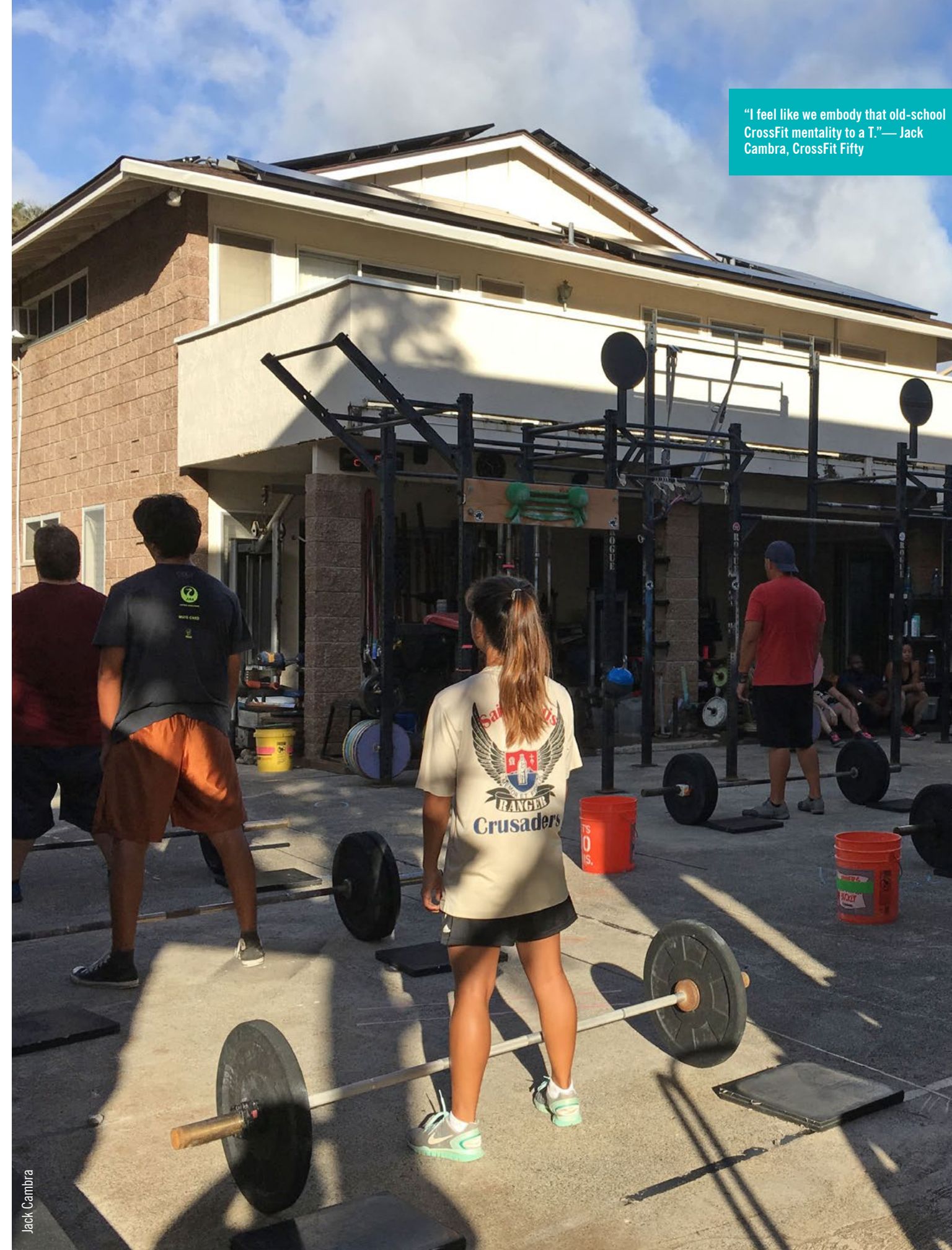
"They were just talking about how their life changed running the gym and I was like, 'Man, I want a CrossFit affiliate,'" he said. "I kinda said it to myself like how a kid would want to be president. I didn't think it would actually happen."

Three months later he attended a CrossFit Level 1 Certificate Course and began turning his garage into a gym. The first thing he bought was a set of bumper plates.

"I got (plates to total) 95 lb. and 65 lb., because that was the Rx weight back then," he said.

He lost himself in the CrossFit Journal and CrossFit.com Message Board, picking up advice such as buying stall mats instead of expensive fitness mats and learning how to make **medicine**

"I feel like we embody that old-school CrossFit mentality to a T." — Jack Cambra, CrossFit Fifty



Jack Cambra

balls out of basketballs filled with sand. Add in a few kettlebells and a homemade pull-up bar made of metal piping and he had the makings of a gym.

His 64-year-old mother and the parents of his girlfriend at the time were his first clients.

The motley crew did their workouts in the driveway, and more people trickled in as word spread. To make more room to train, Cambra parked the family cars on the street.

“After a little while the cars stopped going back in because we had class,” he said.

In 2013, Cambra affiliated his garage, and today CrossFit Fifty has about 50 members in addition to a thriving powerlifting program.

Nestled in the Kuliouou Valley, the gym is surrounded by lush, low, green mountains. The affiliate has a rig and more equipment than it did at the start, but not much else has changed. With the garage packed to bursting with all manner of equipment, athletes train in the 25-by-40-foot driveway.

“The gym kept growing until we had world-class equipment, but the grit stood,” Cambra said. “We still (train) in the elements and in the rain.”

“It’s the gym that time forgot,  
and I like it.”  
—Jack Cambra

There’s only one part of CrossFit Fifty where you won’t find a speck of dust—the bathroom.

“We’ve really done the bathroom up because Coach (Greg) Glassman put up that (video) about what tells him that an affiliate is serious,” he said, referencing CrossFit Inc.’s Founder and CEO. “It’s not about how well (its) members are doing their cleans or their snatches; it’s about how clean their bathroom is.”

The bathroom, which Cambra painted baby blue and decorated with chalkboards so members can leave notes for each other, is part of Cambra’s home. An extra door leading to the outside makes it feel separate from the house, and athletes can shower there if they wish.

“We make sure to keep it clean, because you never know if Coach Glassman will walk in your door at any moment,” he said.

Average summertime temperatures in Honolulu range between

85 and 90 F with 65 percent humidity. But CrossFit Fifty athletes train on beneath the noontime sun.

“Saturday class is brutal,” Cambra said. “It gets so hot sometimes you feel like you can’t even breathe.”

But even cloudy days bring their share of challenges. The island typically gets showers at least once a day, so rain-slicked barbells turn even the best hook grippers into butterfingers, and the salty ocean air rusts the spin out of the barbells within months.

“We throw towels on the bars, but there’s only so many towels you can throw on, and they all get wet,” Cambra said. “So you gotta adjust your weight. Chalk doesn’t work when it’s raining.”

Still, Cambra doesn’t worry about whether conditions at CrossFit Fifty might turn new members away. He rarely thinks of marketing at all.

“We don’t try to attract anybody at all because popularity is a dangerous thing,” he said. “Our gym attracts the kind of athlete that ends up sticking to the program and letting us help change their lives. You don’t like the sun? Don’t waste your time here, because you’re not gonna like it.”

For competitors, Cambra said, CrossFit Fifty offers “the most realistic training you can get,” he said. “The CrossFit Games happen outdoors, (some) regionals happen outdoors, and almost every damn sport I train people for happens outdoors.”

But it’s not just the competitive athlete he thinks benefits from a little grit and grunge.

“If you take the hard road for everything you do ... little things in life actually become easier,” he said. “A last-minute report you gotta do, or deadlines, it kinda makes you harder to where everyday things become not so bad.”

Not everyone who shows up at his door makes a long-term commitment at CrossFit Fifty, he said. But those who do tend to find their self-confidence growing as much as their fitness.

“A lot of people think, ‘I’m never gonna be able to train like this, in the rain or in the sun, and they end up doing it and they kind of overcome all these doubts,’” he said. “So then you walk in a gym where all the little baby things that people usually worry about—when you don’t worry about it them, your attitude molds towards being not so sensitive to (challenging) situations.”

Jamie Cambra, Jack’s 46-year-old sister, was one such convert. For more than a year after Cambra opened his gym, she refused to train.

“I’d walk past and I’d be like, ‘Hell no,’” she said.

But the more times she walked by, the less she noticed the conditions and the more she saw the community.

“Everyone’s working, everyone’s sharing the grind together,” she said.

Today, she trains four to five days per week, and she doesn’t care about getting dirt on her knees when she does burpees on the ground.

“You realize that you’re a lot tougher than you think you are when you choose to be out there even if it’s cold or the rain’s all over your face and you’re in the puddles doing burpees,” she said.

Nineteen-year-old **Stacia-Al Mahoe**, a CrossFit and powerlifting athlete who holds junior and open United States Powerlifting Association records in the 97-lb. weight class, left a new 5,000-square-foot affiliate—complete with weightlifting platforms and a roof—to train at CrossFit Fifty in 2012.

“I liked it better—it was outside, you get the breeze and a tan while you’re working out,” she joked.

More seriously, she said the conditions at CrossFit Fifty help her train her mental toughness while boosting confidence.

“When it rains, you take some weight off what you normally can do for a deadlift, and so I feel like knowing if you can pull X in the rain, you can pull so much more when it’s dry,” she said. “I think it makes you mentally tough and have a mindset like you’re unstoppable.”

For Cambra, CrossFit Fifty is an homage to the early days of CrossFit.

“I feel like I got to learn about CrossFit when it was still raw,” he said. “And I feel like even though main site has changed, even though the blogs have changed, even though the flavor has changed a little bit ... I feel like we embody that old-school CrossFit mentality to a T. I feel like we’re stuck in time. It’s the gym that time forgot, and I like it.”

## Fitness for All

After the clock stops for the last class of the day, the sun setting behind the mountains, Cambra stows the barbells in their racks in the garage and sweeps the chalk dust off the driveway.

Stateside, Levy wipes down the brass pull-up bars before the cleaning crew arrives for one of two daily scourings.

Though their affiliates may look a little different, the fitness doesn’t.

“I get people who never played sports a day in their life and they become athletic, they become strong, they become something,” Cambra said. “And in the end, I’ll tell you right now, helping somebody get up the stairs (when) they couldn’t before is way more satisfying than my record lifter setting another record.”

Levy has a similar outlook.

“I had a member come to me yesterday (with) rheumatoid arthritis, and he told me for the first time in years he didn’t have to take prednisone because he’s moving properly,” he said. “I have



Rust never sleeps in the ocean air at CrossFit Fifty.

another member ... who’s no longer prediabetic, and we have other people that are off insulin already. That’s the driving force: people improving their lives. And it’s not a tagline, it’s the best feeling in the world.” ■

**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 [britneysaline.com](http://britneysaline.com).