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CrossFit Is for Everyone

Lynne Knapman explains how CrossFit changed life for her special-needs son.

By Lynne Knapman

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All images: Michelle Lapp

My 21-year-old son Chris participated in his first CrossFit competition a few months ago..

1 of 4



One more rep!

What's so special about that? Chris has a moderate intellectual disability. Along with this disability come poor muscle tone, a severe lack of spatial awareness, a very positive attitude and a predisposition to carry excess weight.

We have always encouraged Chris to be active. He's played many sports, including tennis, baseball, soccer and basketball—mostly in teams with other special-needs children/people. He is not a great athlete by any means, but what he lacks in skill he makes up in attitude and effort.

Taking a Chance

My husband and I have successfully introduced all four of our children to the CrossFit community. Chris was the last to be converted and, given Chris' disability, I did not think he would be able to participate in CrossFit. Our talk at home frequently turned to CrossFit, and our family often felt badly because this excluded Chris. He could not join in the chatter because he had no experience or knowledge of CrossFit.

There are six fabulous trainers at our box, CrossFit Active in Sydney (Waverton), and I organized a PT session for Chris with one of them, Adam Pirri (whom we affectionately just call "Pirri").

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At this point, I would like to declare that my expectations were quite low. I primarily enrolled Chris so that when we talked about the box and CrossFit, he would have something to draw on and could join the conversation. I never dreamed Chris would be able to do any of the movements or a class at the box. He could not jump up a step let alone onto a box!

Pirri persevered, and Chris began to go to PT sessions twice a week. Our trainers are sticklers for technique, and throughout the sessions Pirri built a fantastic relationship with Chris. Pirri puts in the effort to plan special methods that help Chris learn good technique with respect to the CrossFit movements. He even went to the effort to draw up foot-placement mats so Chris could learn the receiving position and squat stance. Pirri is firm with him and has high expectations, and his success in coaching can be attributed to his exceptional talent of breaking skills/tasks into smaller, more-achievable parts for Chris.

Just like it did for the rest of us, CrossFit has brought about many changes for Chris. The obvious ones are physical. It's not exhaustive by any means, but the list goes something like this: he has lost his big tummy, he can now do box jumps on a 20-inch box, he can squat (with his chest up, mostly), and he is on his way to a strict pull-up, which is the envy of many at the box.

In the competition, it was quite startling for me and other CrossFit Active crew members who were there to support him to see his bicep literally pop up as he started his pull-ups. What an amazing surprise! I am confident now that Chris will continue in the acquisition of skills and movements. He and Pirri have a great deal of fun together.

While there is no empirical evidence, just anecdotal, we have noticed many changes, including cognitive ones. Chris' counting is so much better (because, as we all know, it's important to count and score in CrossFit). His ability to recall events has improved phenomenally. Chris can tell us

what WOD he did, how many reps of each movement, his time or how many rounds. He travels independently on public transport to and from the box, which allows him a degree of independence. He is always warmly welcomed at the box by the trainers and crew. His confidence is certainly growing as a result.

Pirri made the decision that he would like to enter Chris in a competition at a local Games Day, and the proposal was supported unconditionally by all the trainers from our box. CrossFit Brookvale graciously accepted his registration and—just like that—Chris was in.

He was so excited to be able to compete and spoke to anyone who was prepared to listen about his competition. We counted the number of sleeps, planned what he would wear and discussed what food we would take. He came to the event and watched very intently, completely absorbed by it. The WODs in the comp were not perfect for Chris, and Pirri had to make some modifications.



The Chris Knapman support crew in full effect.

Chris smiled through the first WOD, clearly enjoying every moment. All commented that they hadn't seen anybody so happy during a competition WOD before. The second WOD included burpees, and Chris began his reps facing away from the crowd. Pirri encouraged him to turn around, and when he did the entire box erupted with applause and screams of support. Chris smiled at the top of every single burpee!

The crew from Active was there ready to support him, cheering the loudest. They encouraged and counted with him and were proud of his achievements.

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What Comes Next?

Pirri has given Chris opportunities and experiences I never imagined he would access. The most exciting part of this is that I strongly suspect Chris' journey is only just beginning.

After the competition, Chris' photo appeared on the CrossFit Active blog: a picture of him competing with his trainer, Pirri, in the background. From the photo, it was difficult to tell who was having the most fun.

Chris cannot read the supportive posts on the blog, so I read them to him. What he can do, though, is feel pride in his performance and achievements. He was thrilled with the support. The trainers at the box have set the tone with Chris, and the crew from the box has enthusiastically followed.

I love CrossFit! You could even say I am obsessive about it. I qualified for the CrossFit Games in the Masters Division last year and competed in the CrossFit Games this year, finishing eighth. I'm proud of my accomplishments, but my best achievement is signing Chris up to CrossFit. His life is so much richer because of it.



About the Author

Lynne Knapman lives in Sydney, Australia, and has four children. She trains at CrossFit Active in Waverton. Lynne has been doing CrossFit for almost two years and qualified for the CrossFit Games in the Masters Division in 2010 and 2011. This year she finished eighth in the 50-55 Division. She is dean of students and a mathematics teacher in a girls' school.