

---

# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

---

## Less Training, More Living

The members of CrossFit Alaska use CrossFit to get into shape for the physical demands of daily life in the North. One member used it to save his life—twice.

---

By Hilary Achauer

February 2013

---



Courtesy of Jim Mitchell

*Seaworthy vessel? Blair Parker, Jim Mitchell, Chuck Akin (l-r) and the makeshift raft they paddled into the Bering Sea.*

Alaska's wilderness is breathtaking and majestic, but everyday life requires a high level of fitness. The rugged environment is unforgiving, and little mistakes and small errors in judgment can have disastrous consequences in the North. When everything goes to hell, strength, endurance and grit can literally mean the difference between life and death.

---

1 of 5

Cheryl Boatman Photography



That's where CrossFit comes in.

In Alaska, functional fitness means being strong enough to rescue stuck ATVs, shovel snow, chop wood and survive an avalanche. Residents hunt game, catch salmon and forage for wild berries. Many Alaskans have physically taxing jobs, and common hobbies including backcountry skiing, mountain climbing and mountain biking. Strength, balance, flexibility and endurance are not skills developed in the gym only to be used in the gym.

"When it comes to training, we train in here to get better out there," said Tony Reishus, owner of CrossFit Alaska.

### The Hunt

"I ate three different game animals one day," Reishus said. The meat wasn't purchased in a store; this was meat hunted, killed and butchered by friends of his.

"People don't realize there's a lot of work involved in hunting," Reishus said. That's especially true in the vast and forbidding wilderness of Alaska, where the hunt usually starts with a long hike over rough terrain.

"Moose hunting is really popular in Alaska," Reishus said. Once the hunter kills the moose, the work has only just begun.

"The animals can weigh up to 1,200 lb.," Reishus explained. "The only way to get it back to car is to butcher the animal on the spot with your strength and then pack the meat in 100-pack portions and carry it through woods and swamp."

CrossFit helps hunters in Alaska get in shape more efficiently, so they can spend more time enjoying the outdoors and less time training. Many of the members of CrossFit Alaska spend the winter backcountry skiing. This involves hiking for three or more hours up a mountain, all for one 20-minute run.

Another favorite wintertime activity is snow-machining (known as "snowmobiling" in the Lower 48). Reishus didn't think it seemed difficult ... until he tried it.

"It takes so much strength to run that thing, especially in deep powder," Reishus said. "I took one out in 10 feet of powder, and you gotta steer the machine with your body weight, then when it gets stuck you have to deadlift and sumo deadlift high pull this awkward machine out of the deep snow."

Cheryl Boatman Photography



*Getting up and over an obstacle using just your arms can come in handy in the wilderness of Alaska.*

In the summer, it's hiking and backpacking.

"People have told me that instead of three hours of hiking many times per week to get in shape, they can do 30 minutes or an hour of CrossFit and get the same results. They can hike less, do a bit of CrossFit, and be good to go," Reishus said.

Being fit enough for leisure activities is one thing, but that fitness can be essential in emergency situations, which are all too common when you live in a very harsh climate.

### Lost at Sea

Sixty-year-old Alaskan Jim Mitchell, a member of CrossFit Alaska, started CrossFit in 2008 to help his skiing, but the tough-as-nails owner of a land-surveying company says his improved endurance, strength and confidence ended up saving his life—twice.

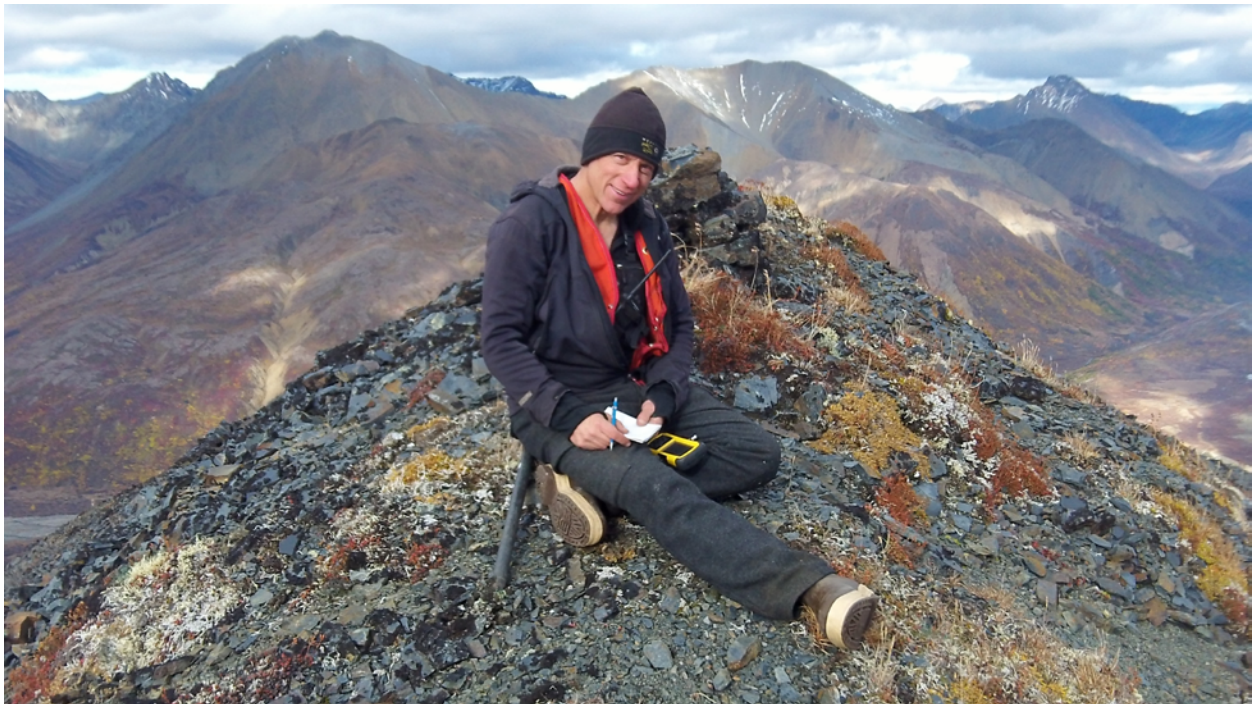
Mitchell's work often takes him to remote locations in Alaska. In June 2009, he and his crew of three were on a contract for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). They were surveying some of the islands that make up the Aleutian Chain, mostly uninhabited, remote volcanic islands in the Bering Sea and the Pacific Ocean.

Mitchell and his group were finishing up their work on the island when they got a call on their radio from Rod Whitehead and Bill Osterback. Mitchell had hired Whitehead and his 50-foot fishing boat to transport the four-person surveying crew from island to island. Whitehead and Osterback were headed out in their 15-foot skiff to pick up the surveyors and take them back to the fishing boat when the skiff's engine failed.

The men in the skiff were stranded in 40-knot winds and 20-foot waves, which meant Mitchell and his crew had no way of getting off the island.

"They were going to try to beach (the boat), but there were 10-to-15-foot rollers breaking," Mitchell said. "They would have been pulverized."

Mitchell and his crew weren't sure what to do. They knew they could last for a while on the island—they had water and a fire. The guys on the skiff were much more vulnerable. They could only keep rowing for so long and were vulnerable to hypothermia. Someone needed to get to the fishing boat and call for help.



Courtesy of Jim Mitchell

***Mitchell at work in the Alaska Range, eight months after the avalanche. His right leg is straight because of the large knee brace under his wool pants.***



Cheryl Boatman Photography

**Surviving a tough workout builds mental toughness and tenacity, all of which are important in emergency situations.**

Using materials they found on the island, Mitchell's group made a raft out of boards placed on buoys, held together with fishing net.

"It was 9 p.m., and we knew they weren't going to survive another 24 hours," Mitchell explained. It was Alaska in the summertime, so "it doesn't get dark," Mitchell said.

The four men got in the raft and started paddling, not sure if the raft would hold together. To their surprise, they made it through the breakers. This was their one shot to get to the fishing boat and call for help, so they kept paddling.

It was slow going, but Mitchell said his year of CrossFit helped him through the ordeal.

"I had the confidence that I was going to make it," Mitchell said.

At 10:30 p.m., after an hour and a half of paddling, Mitchell and his group made it to the boat. They called the Coast Guard immediately, and the rescuers finally found Whitehead and Osterback in the morning after they had drifted 75 miles west.

The *Anchorage Daily News* reported that Whitehead credited Mitchell and his crew for saving their lives.

"They're tough guys," Whitehead said in the article, "and the only reason the Coast Guard came is because (the BLM crew) built that raft."

### Surviving an Avalanche

Mitchell kept doing CrossFit and two years later found himself in another dire situation.

"I was backcountry skiing with some friends," Mitchell said. "They were all 30 years younger than me. We kicked off an avalanche and tumbled quite a ways down. Everybody came out fairly well except for me," he said.

Again, he credits CrossFit with saving his life.

"The only reason I'm talking to you today is because I'm strong. I had five broken ribs, a broken leg and a collapsed lung."

Mitchell and his group were rescued by the Alaska Air National Guard. When Mitchell was in the hospital being treated for his injuries, the doctor asked him if he wanted any pain medication. "It doesn't hurt me worse than any workout," he said.

As a result of his strength at the time of the accident, Mitchell was able to avoid surgery, and he used CrossFit as his physical therapy. A year later, he was back to normal. Before the accident, Mitchell's deadlift PR was 315 lb. He recently knocked out two reps at 320 lb.

"CrossFit provides me with the fitness I need so I can do what I want to do with my job and my recreation," Mitchell said. As he enters his 60s, Mitchell said the mental toughness he gains from CrossFit is just as important as the physical strength.

"I learned it's gonna hurt, it's not gonna be pleasant, but it's not gonna kill you," he said.



Cheryl Boatman Photography

*CrossFit Alaska hopes to send a team to the North West Regional competition in 2013.*

### Coming out of Hibernation

As the CrossFit Games Open nears, Reishus said the athletes at CrossFit Alaska are spending more time in the gym in hopes of sending a team to the North West Regional.

"It might turn out to be a *Bad News Bears* story," he said. "We're a small gym from nowhere, Alaska, but who knows? The hardest part is getting skinny enough for the Open with the darkness and cold winters. March seems to come before we can shed the hibernation pounds, but after placing 31st and 34th the previous years, we've got some special motivation."

And if the gym doesn't qualify, its members can rest assured that they'll be more than prepared to kill a moose or survive a natural disaster.

