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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## Forging Elite Leadership

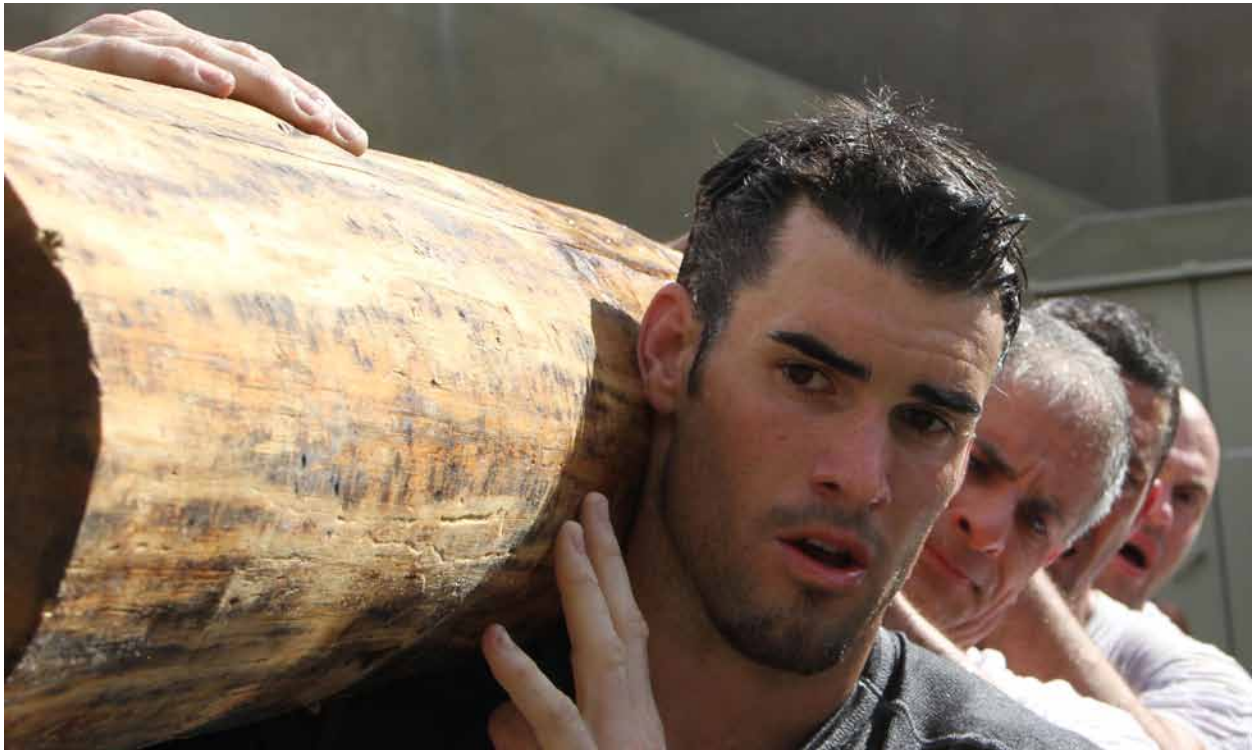
After surviving SEALFIT's Kokoro Camp, Greg Amundson outlines a leadership model based on the physical modalities of CrossFit training.

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By **Greg Amundson** CrossFit Amundson

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Photos: Heber Cannon

"I'm leaving on a jet plane. Don't know . . ."

Lying on our backs, covered in wet sand, our heads pointing towards the ocean in the middle of the night, a large wave crashed over Tommy Hackenbruck and me, pulling us deeper into the frigid Pacific waters. As soon as we resurfaced, Tommy and I re-locked arms and continued in harmony, "Don't know when I'll be back again!"

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***Original firebreather Greg Amundson and some of the candidates getting ready for the challenges of Kokoro Camp.***

I was freezing cold, hungry, tired, chafed from sand drills and incredibly sore, and I faced the dark truth that I had over 30 more hours of torment ahead of me. However, as Tommy and I sang our favorite John Denver song at the top of our lungs, there was nowhere I would have rather been than at Kokoro Camp No. 12.

### **In the Presence of a Leader**

In December 2004, Coach Greg Glassman, Josh Everett, Kurtis Bowler and I traveled to Ft. Lewis, Wash., to conduct a private three-day CrossFit seminar for members of the Army 1st Special Forces Group. In the early days of the CrossFit training program, a huge emphasis was placed upon what we termed “performance on demand,” as attendees and instructors were called to perform upwards of three grueling CrossFit workouts a day.

This particular seminar was very exciting for me. I had recently returned from Army Basic Combat Training and was two weeks away from beginning Officer Candidate School. I was honored to be in the presence of established leaders and warriors so I could apply the skills they would undoubtedly teach me to my upcoming training. Little did I know that one particular display of leadership would leave a lasting impression upon me for the rest of my life.

As the sun began to set on Sunday evening and the course drew to a close, Coach Glassman briefed the instructors and soldiers on the final workout. Josh and I had participated in each of the workouts, which at that point totaled around five. Because this was a military certification, Coach had upped the volume and duration of the classic CrossFit events. As a result, we had completed 5 rounds of Helen (run 400 meters, 21 kettlebell swings, 12 pull-ups) and what we called “big fat” versions of Fran and Elizabeth—21, 18, 15, 12, 9, 6 and 3 reps of the thruster/pull-up and barbell-clean/ring-dip couplets. Needless to say, there was not a lot of enthusiasm for the final workout of the day.

As we gathered around Coach, I noticed all the instructors and soldiers looked extremely exhausted. We were dirty, sweaty and hungry. We had our hands on our knees to keep from falling over, and I had a hard time concentrating on the instructions for the workout.

Because I was about to embark upon an intense military leadership course, I had been paying particular attention to the senior officer of the group. I wanted to see firsthand what true leaders said and did to inspire and motivate those people in their command. The officer in charge that weekend was Capt. Perry. An extremely athletic individual, Capt. Perry was physically capable of setting an example

for his men to follow. He eagerly participated in all the workouts during the weekend and consistently achieved some of the fastest times and highest scores in the events. Although he was very confident, I observed that he was also very humble, always putting the welfare of both the CrossFit instructors and his soldiers before himself.

As we huddled together to receive Coach's instructions, I was eager to see how Capt. Perry would raise the spirits of his soldiers to attack the final workout. When Coach finished the brief, he turned to the captain and said, "Sir, go ahead and choose five of your men to complete this workout."

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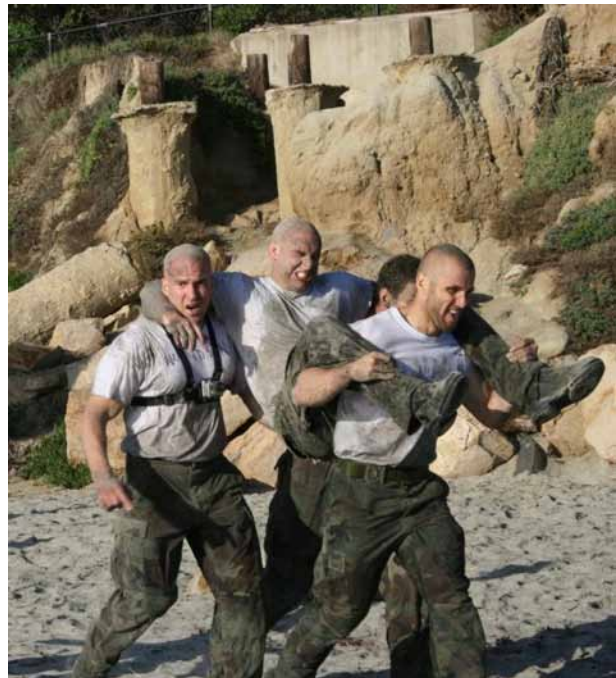
**By his actions, Capt. Perry instilled in me what might be one of the most important leadership lessons there is: A leader must lead by example and from the front.**

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Capt. Perry looked into the eyes of his soldiers and took note of their physical and mental state. Realizing that his soldiers, as well as Josh and I, were well beyond our ability to perform athletically, Capt. Perry did what he always did best: He led by example and from the front.

He took a deep breath and rolled his shoulders back. In a firm voice filled with utter resolve he said, "It's OK, men. I've got this one." With that, he charged forward into the workout. The second he said those words and took his first step, there was an immediate change in the mental and physical composure of the group. A collective surge of energy filled the air, and we all enthusiastically charged after the captain.

By his words and actions, Capt. Perry instilled in me what might be one of the most important leadership lessons there is: A leader must lead by example and from the front. I embraced the lesson he taught me that day and did my best to set a positive example in everything I did from that moment on. Whether it was CrossFit, law enforcement or my military career, I wanted to lead like Capt. Perry in every aspect of my life.



***Under the stress of training, Kokoro candidates learned how teamwork is essential for success.***





*Sometimes leadership is less about ability and more about resolve and strength of will.*

### The Ultimate Challenge

In addition to the significance of being able to set a physical example for others to follow, I was inspired by Capt. Perry to consider how I could apply CrossFit to the more intangible qualities of being an effective leader. Almost six years after my first glimpse at what it meant to truly lead others, I was presented with an opportunity to test everything I had learned in both leadership and CrossFit against the ultimate proving ground of physical and mental endurance: SEALFIT.

In October 2010, my good friend Jimi Letchford, Chief Marketing Officer of CrossFit, invited me to join him on a 50-hour SEALFIT camp in Encinitas, Calif. SEALFIT was the brainchild of our mutual friend Mark Divine, a senior ranking Navy officer and a 20-year veteran of the U.S. Navy SEALs, as well as a long-time CrossFit affiliate owner. The camp, called "Kokoro" ("heart" in Japanese), is designed to provide a complete immersion experience for prospective future SEALs and other special-operations components of the United States military. The camp was created to test, evaluate and ultimately enhance a candidate's mental toughness, leadership and physical capacity to endure extreme conditions. Kokoro utilized sleep deprivation, intense physical training, arduous team exercises, ocean exposure and leadership challenges in a chaotic, fast-moving environment, and it was coached by combat-proven Navy SEAL instructors.

Nothing I had been through up to that point in my life seemed even remotely as difficult or as challenging as Kokoro would be. A few days after I agreed to attend the camp, I discovered that Rogue Competition Team athletes Rob Orlando, Tommy Hackenbruck, Mikko Salo, Kristan Clever and Caity Henniger were also going to be in attendance. Knowing that other CrossFit athletes and friends were going to be part of the experience helped me overcome some of the anxiety and nervousness I felt as the days quickly ticked by to the start of the camp.

### The First Glimpse

The report time for Kokoro was Friday, Oct. 24, at noon. Due to the distance I had to travel, I decided to make the trip the day before and stay at local hotel in Encinitas. On Friday morning, I enjoyed a pre-packed Tupperware Zone breakfast in my hotel room, then got dressed in the uniform for the camp: military-style woodland camouflage pants and a white T-shirt. After getting dressed, I walked out of my room to the parking lot of the hotel. No sooner had I stepped outside my room than a voice bellowed, "Hey, are you going to Kokoro?" I looked across the parking lot and saw a large and well-built guy approaching me wearing the same outfit.

It turned out the guy had traveled from the East Coast and arrived early like me. After a brief conversation, he nervously admitted, "I hope I don't quit this year. I did last year, and it was so hard."

"What have I gotten myself into?" I thought.



*Rob Orlando: bowed but unbroken.*

### Feeding the Right Dog

Based on Jimi's and my previous leadership experience in the military, we were selected as class leaders and immediately tasked with organizing the arriving candidates into boat crews. At exactly 1 p.m. on Oct. 24, Jimi and I formed our class into four boat crews on the open cement slab called "The Grinder." Shortly afterward, Mark addressed the candidates of Kokoro Camp No. 12 and asked a question he would frequently revisit over the next 50 hours: "Well, what dog are you feeding right now?"

Mark explained that deep inside each of us lived two dogs, and that each was hungry for food. One of the dogs represented courage, and the other fear. Unless we consciously fed the dog of courage, the dog of fear would receive our unconscious energy and "food." The key to being successful in Kokoro was to continually feed the dog of courage regardless of the physical circumstances we would find ourselves in.

After Mark's opening remarks, a sea of Navy SEAL instructors laid into us with a barrage of calisthenics. In addition to the difficulty of the physical events, the instructors placed well-aimed bursts of water into our faces from several hoses. The combination of water and an increased heart

rate made breathing very hard, especially if you happened to inhale at the same time water was being poured into your mouth and nose.

Sometime during this "welcoming ceremony," I found myself doing flutter kicks next to the guy from the hotel. As an instructor stood over us spraying water into our faces, my acquaintance reached his maximum tolerance and shouted, "I can't do it! I want to quit!" I had given this guy my word that I would help him get through the camp, so I rolled over next to him and said, "It's OK, brother, you can do this."

The Navy SEAL instructor asked, "Does he want to quit?" And as the guy pleaded, "Yes," I yelled, "No!"

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As this was unfolding, I called for Tommy to help me motivate and encourage the guy to stay in the camp. Together, we did all we could, to the point of physically restraining him and not allowing him to walk away from the evolution and quit. I was amazed at the strength in resolve this guy had. He had mentally decided he could not complete the camp, and nothing Tommy or I could do would make him stay. Sometime during the chaos of the beach evolution, he disappeared from the camp.

As the hours wore on, I began to make a critical self-discovery: completion of Kokoro would be more a testament to mental toughness than physical capacity. Although I had spent over nine years training in CrossFit and developing the 10 general physical skills (endurance, stamina, strength, flexibility, power, speed, coordination, agility, balance and accuracy), my success in the camp would hinge upon my ability to translate those physical skills into leadership traits and mental attributes.

In addition, I had to come to terms with the fact I would not be able to literally “lead from the front” in all the physical events that would take place during the camp. It was at that deciding moment, for the first time in nearly six years, that I differentiated between “leading from the front” and “setting a positive example.” Up until that point, I had considered the two to be nearly inseparable. However, over the course of Kokoro I realized that although a leader may reach a state where leading from the front is no longer physically possible, maintaining a positive example for others to follow always is.

### **An Attitude of Leadership**

In my experiences in the military and law enforcement, being a “leader” was often associated with a position or title. During Kokoro, for example, Jimi and I were initially appointed as “class leaders.” What I learned during the camp, however, was that position and title had very little to do with an individual’s ability to lead. Instead, the camp solidified what I call a “Leader-Fit” style of influencing, inspiring and ultimately guiding self and others.

I observed during the camp that the candidates who were able to consistently rise above the difficulty of any challenge possessed certain mental and physical attributes. In the early stages of the camp, and like many of the previous challenges I had faced, I attempted to use only my physical fitness to succeed. In Kokoro, however, I found that each of the 10 physical skills I would call upon had a mental component as well. It was this realization and my reliance upon these mental attributes that ultimately made the difference in my ability to complete the camp.

When I made the realization that each of the 10 general physical skills of CrossFit also pertained to a mental, emotional and “Leader-Fit” trait, it was extremely empowering. As my body began to wear down toward the end of the camp, I had to turn inward and focus on the intangible qualities of my fitness and leadership ability. Although I may have lacked the physical capacity to produce power, I maintained the mental attribute of power, through a conscious choice, to encourage myself and others in the pursuit of the completion of the camp. My physical stamina and endurance, along with every other general physical skill, were to be tested to their limit and beyond.

## **MENTAL ATTRIBUTES OF ELITE LEADERSHIP**

### **Endurance**

Mental skill: The ability to maintain belief in self and others.

### **Stamina**

Mental skill: The ability to create and maintain intense mental effort, focus and resilience.

### **Strength**

Mental skill: The ability to maintain resolve of decision.

### **Flexibility**

Mental skill: (1) The ability to independently choose an emotional reaction to a wide range of external circumstances. (2) The ability to apply versatile methods to the accomplishment of a fixed goal.

### **Power**

Mental skill: (1) The ability to encourage self and others in the pursuit of a worthy goal. (2) The ability to immediately generate an intense state of motivation and positive expectancy.

### **Speed**

Mental skill: The ability to make immediate command decisions in the face of opposition, challenge and uncertainty.

### **Coordination**

Mental skill: The ability to invoke the most productive emotional response at a given time and place.

### **Agility**

Mental skill: (1) The ability to support the needs of others while ensuring personal goals and challenges are fulfilled. (2) The ability to respond to environment and circumstance with deliberate attitudes and beliefs so as to achieve a desired end state.

### **Balance**

Mental skill: (1) The ability to maintain individual physical, mental and emotional wellness. (2) The ability to maintain a state of mind or attitude regardless of external stimuli.

### **Accuracy**

Mental skill: (1) The ability to set and achieve specific and concise goals. (2) The ability to listen and correctly identify internal thoughts, emotions and energies.

### Micro-Goal—One Step at a Time

With less than 10 hours remaining in the camp, the candidates were divided into two groups: an assault element and a support group. Mark told the candidates this was the time for an honest self-assessment of physical ability: only those candidates who believed they were able to athletically perform at a relatively high level were advised to volunteer for the assault element.

Mikko, Tommy and I were among the CrossFit athletes who volunteered for the assault element, along with five future Navy SEALs. After a brief warning order by Mark, our assault element left the Kokoro compound and ran to the beach. Once there, we continued at a blistering pace south through the soft sand toward a distant lifeguard tower. Our direction from Mark was to “take the tower,” which meant every candidate on the assault element needed to climb onto the tower—without using the ladder.

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This proved to be a very challenging task, as the tower was over eight feet off the ground. To accomplish the assault, we collectively hoisted one of the lighter candidates up onto the tower. We then took turns being lifted on each other’s shoulders until we could grab the bottom railing of the lifeguard tower and clamber upward, being assisted by those already on the landing.

After the assault of the tower, we continued our run south to a fast-moving river that flowed into the ocean. Our brief was simple and direct: cross the river, secure a rock that



*The rock represents his will, so Greg chose a big one.*

represented our “will” and return to the other side. We cautiously swam across the river and each selected a rock. Not knowing what we would do with the rock once we reached the other side, we chose rocks that were imposing in weight and shape yet manageable in the event we were tasked with carrying them any significant distance. I would estimate that each of our rocks was in the neighborhood of 35 to 40 lb.

On the return side of the river, we were told to follow Mark and the instructors, while carrying our rocks, on a run north through the soft sand. Because the rocks represented our “will,” we could not drop or otherwise allow our rock to touch the ground. As we started our run, I immediately fell to the back of the group. Physically, I had reached my limit—my ability to perform with any amount of intensity or competitiveness was nearly gone. I had entered the stage of what Mark eloquently called the “micro-goal,” and I was forced to find landmarks in the near distance that I could achieve.

“Just to the next staircase,” I would tell myself. Once there and when directed to climb the stairs, I would say, “Just to the top,” and then, “Just to the bottom.”

The accomplishment of each micro-goal had more to do with my ability to utilize the mental attributes of athleticism than the physical. I had to remain flexible in my mind, even though my body was rigid tight. I had to harness my mental stamina and endurance even though physically I was nearly tripping over my own feet. As we climbed over cement pillars while carrying our rocks, I called upon my mental ability to be powerful, have balance, coordination and accuracy. Although running at the back of the pack, I retained speed in my mind, sprinting through positive



self-talk and mantras. It was during this final evolution that I realized long after CrossFit athletes begin to lose optimum capacity in the 10 general physical skills of elite fitness, we retain our mental ability to draw upon these same skills and apply them to personal leadership, motivation and ultimately the accomplishment of any worthy goal or challenge.

After non-stop movement for over an hour with our rocks, we raced down a steep hill to a clearing in the sand, where the support group was being tormented with ocean exposure and calisthenics. Mark told the assault element to take a knee in the sand while holding our rocks close to our heart. He then said the rock no longer represented our external will, because during the grueling evolution we had internalized our will—the experience was now forever part of our very essence. Mark said we could each put down the rock. Without saying a word or coordinating the event, we collectively laid our rocks down as a single unit, a team. Kokoro was drawing to a close.

### **After-Action Report**

In 1999, I attended a California Reserve Law Enforcement Academy. One day during defensive-tactics training, the chief instructor asked how many repetitions of a technique a student needed to perform in order to achieve muscle memory. Our class collectively concluded at least 1,000 repetitions would be needed. With that, the instructor called for a “classroom huddle” and asked me to step inside the circle and close my eyes. Suddenly he shouted, “Open!” and when I opened my eyes, the instructor was standing in front of me with a training handgun pointed only inches from my face. Almost instinctively, I moved my head out of the line of fire, grabbed the muzzle of the threatening handgun while simultaneously drawing my own training handgun and “shot” the instructor.

“Do you think he needs another 999 repetitions to remember what he just did?” the instructor asked. He then looked at me and said, “Greg, you just had an accelerated learning experience.”



*Whatever your mind believes, you can achieve.*





***With an iron will, you can overcome any obstacle.***

When people ask for my impressions on the Kokoro Camp, the best I can say is that it was the most incredible accelerated learning experience of my lifetime. When speaking with friends I made during Kokoro, we agree two of the most rewarding lessons were the power of putting the needs of others before our own and the importance of effective teamwork. It would simply be impossible to succeed in Kokoro as an individual. At one time or another, there came a time during the camp when each candidate was in need of a word of encouragement, a warm embrace, a laugh or cheer or a shoulder to lean on.

Every time I felt overwhelmed by the totality of the looming hours ahead, the weight of a log on my shoulder or the bitter cold of the ocean, I was lifted up physically and emotionally by Rob, Mikko, Tommy, Kristan, Caity, Jimi and all the other great athletes of Kokoro Camp No. 12. Together, we triumphed by feeding the Dog of Courage one bite at a time.



#### **About the Author**



*Referred to by his peers as the "Original Firebreather," Greg has been training CrossFit for over nine years. He works in law enforcement while concurrently serving in the Army National Guard as an Instructor of CrossFit and leadership at the California Army National Guard Officer Candidate School (OCS).*