
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

My CrossFit Journey

With titanium rods in her back, Christina Maragh struggles through workouts and finds an athlete on the other side.

By Christina Maragh

October 2012



All images: Courtesy of Christina Maragh

I've heard all the jokes, the "cult" comments, "the Kool-Aid drinker" jabs.

Even my fellow CrossFitters razz me about the need for my knee-high socks and Converse shoes to match T-shirts with annoying slogans, and about my ever-expanding collection of CrossFit equipment.

All joking aside, why do I CrossFit? What keeps me going back for more?

Before I answer that, I would like to share a little more about my story and why every WOD I finish is a huge deal to me.

A Lifetime of Surgeries

I suffer from chronic and often debilitating pain in my back, shoulders, legs and feet due to a congenital birth defect and curvature of the spine known as congenital fusion of the thoracic vertebrae and abnormal kyphosis. In English: I was hunched over in an S-curve with discs that failed to fuse before I was born.

All of my 20s was spent trying variations of medications and procedures to try to combat and control the pain. I also had three very painful back surgeries. In 1988, doctors implanted rods in my back to correct a curve in my spine. Twelve years later, they removed them because of the pain they caused. In 2002, doctors re-implanted the rods in my spine because my curve had returned. I also had multiple fusions, screws and pins put in to my spine. I don't share a lot of what I went through because I would rather not remember.

Most of my life was consumed by work and sleep, as doing more than that caused me pain.

After surgery No. 3, the pain was so severe it could not be controlled with medication, and I seriously understood why people who have chronic, debilitating, painful diseases want to end their lives. The pain was what I like to call "suicide pain." I knew it wouldn't stay at that level, so I grinned and bore it and hoped every day it would subside to a level with which I could live. After the third surgery, I vowed never to have surgery again on my back and live with whatever the outcome was. I spent the rest of my 20s medicated and having various procedures to manage the pain—from spine blocks and Botox injections in my muscles to nerve cauterization. I tried it all and visited dozens of doctors and specialists. Most of my life was consumed by work and sleep, as doing more than that caused me pain.

When I became pregnant with my son, it was then that I decided I needed off the medication to have any kind of life and be any kind of mother. I made the decision to enter an intense pain-management program at the recommendation of a friend who also struggled from chronic back pain. I spent four weeks in an intensive program to learn how to control pain with such things as alternative therapies, exercise, movement, ice and massage. The biggest lesson I learned while in therapy was the pain medication did nothing but mask the pain and that inactivity made the pain worse. I barely could raise an arm to put a shirt on without muscle cramps.

I kept thinking that I didn't know if they could scale down to my level.

That was in 2007, and after I stopped all the narcotic pain medications, I never went back. I still was very weak from lack of exercise and activity after I gave birth to my son. My pain remained; I just no longer controlled it with the use of medication.

"What Is CrossFit?"

In 2005, I lost my mom in a drunk-driving crash. Because of this I began to volunteer with Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD). Through MADD, I made a very special friend: Heather Geronemus. Heather shares the common loss of a parent at the hands of a drunk driver. Heather and I became very close very quickly. I would frequently see pictures on Facebook of her working out, but it really just looked like she was in a constant state of torture. I thought what a lot of people probably think: "Why, in the hell would anyone want to do that?" Then I thought, "Who the hell takes pictures of you working out?"

After repeatedly asking Heather the famous question, "What is CrossFit?" I explained I really wanted to get into super great shape but was very scared as I had been inactive for so long and my back pain was pretty intense.

"Don't worry, they scale, scale, scale," Heather said.

At her insistence, I e-mailed Steve Bowser, owner of CrossFit Affliction, and cancelled and set up half a dozen appointments of what he called “foundations.” I explained I was concerned about the intensity of CrossFit and the issues I had with my back. He kept saying, “Don’t worry, we will scale, scale, scale.”

I kept thinking that I didn’t know if they could scale down to my level, and then the day came when I met Steve’s wife, Heidi, co-owner of CFA. I will never forget that day: Aug. 29, 2009. It was the start of the change of my life.

When I did sit-ups, they were assisted—with someone literally holding my hand.

I have never been athletic at all. I was the clumsy kid who got in the back of the line for any sport, the one who ducked from the volleyball in gym and the person you never wanted on your team. But after Day 1 at CFA, I was addicted.

The Bowsers and the rest of the CFA coaches worked with me day in and day out, substituting exercises and never handling me with kid gloves or worrying I would break. On my first day, I could not do a sit-up. But that never stopped the coaches from pushing me to be better. I was so accustomed to people who were afraid to push me for fear I might somehow break.

The Journey Begins

My first days at CrossFit were my most challenging. When I did sit-ups, they were assisted—with someone literally holding my hand. My weight was scaled down to the bare minimum. The coaches watched over me, ensuring everything I did was for form first, never for time or weight. Gradually, I added weight to everything I did. No one made me feel intimidated or scared. Instead, they pushed me and helped me want to be better. I never got a free pass because of my back, and I never wanted one.

My first deadlift was somewhere around 75 lb. I don’t remember ever being afraid of the Olympic lifts at CrossFit. I took to them immediately and they are one of my favorite parts of CrossFit. They make me feel empowered. The movements with which I struggle most are body-weight movements and anything requiring a rounded back. I am unable to keep my hands closed very long, so I struggle with repetitive pull-ups and constantly drop off the bar. I am terrified to jump up to the bar, so I always need to use a box.

Movements such as knees-to-elbows and toes-to-bars I have to kip pretty hard for, and they frustrate me and probably always will. Workouts that include high reps of these movements usually take me a while. I was unable to do AbMat mat sit-ups until recently. Being very stubborn, I didn’t give up, and now I can do them. Push-ups are also difficult for me—they irritate my lower back because of the screw placement there. I did scaled push-ups for quite a while, but no more!

Now for the two things that give me the most trouble. To be honest, I loathe them both: wall-balls and running! Wall-balls irritate my lower back because of the screws, so I take them very slowly; they take forever. Steve often teases me that he is programming wall-balls just for me. As for running, well, I have a mild case of tachycardia, which just means my resting heart rate is high. Running shoots it right up, making me feel like I am going to pass out. And I am a terrible runner because of the pain in my feet. Again, I just plain don’t like it!



When she started CrossFit, Maragh could only deadlift 75 lb.

It has been almost two years since that first day. Some say I might be a little addicted, but you know what? I will take that as a compliment. I have never been in better shape, I have never felt this good about myself, and this gym and these workouts have gotten me through the toughest couple of years in my life. When things get really tough, I don't go less; I go more because for that hour or however long the WOD is, nothing else matters. I can't think about the stresses of my life; all I can think about is me conquering that workout. That hour is for me and for the moment nothing else matters.

CrossFit made me something I never thought I would call myself: an athlete!

I also have never been this active in my life. I have had personal trainers, I have worked out in gyms, and I have tried many other things to stay active. I would usually get discouraged at some point and quit because I wasn't

seeing results, I was unable to keep up or I was too exhausted. CrossFit is never boring. It never gets repetitive and it's fun. CrossFit made me something I never thought I would call myself: an athlete!

I have made some of the best friends I have ever had in my life, and, mark my words, if I don't show up to work out, someone is calling me to make sure everything is OK. I have never competed in anything but a spelling bee, and this year I have competed in three CrossFit competitions and completed the Spartan Race. The first competition was in January, and when it was finished I felt such a sense of accomplishment. I can't explain what that felt like to be able to represent my gym side by side with some of the best athletes I know. To see my coaches and fellow athletes cheer me on as I ran with a 95-lb. barbell on my back was such a wonderful feeling. They were the same people who have watched me progress from Day 1!

Before that first competition, I was a nervous wreck, thinking, "I can't do this. Who am I kidding? I am going to make a fool of myself and disappoint my coaches and gym." My nerves were through the roof. When it was all said and done, I felt such a sense of accomplishment. It was my first athletic competition in my entire life



He ain't heavy, he's my partner.

In February I competed in a partner competition, and the last WOD required that I carry my partner. When they posted that WOD, I was ready to switch to scaled, which required sandbag runs instead, thinking there was no way I could carry a 185-lb. man on my back. I am not that strong—or so I thought.

Well, I am kind of stubborn, so I went up to the gym a few days before the competition and practiced the partner carry, and I was bound and determined to compete as RX'd or not at all. I competed as RX'd and I carried my partner the whole way (OK, I did drop him once).

Better Every Day

So why do I CrossFit?

There isn't one reason. There are so many reasons. Why wouldn't I?

I am not the strongest athlete, and I am not anywhere near the best, but I always give it 100 percent effort, and every day I learn something new, and I hope to better myself with every workout and skill.

My pain will never go away. It is something I have to live with daily at a steady level of seven. The metal irritates the surrounding soft tissues, and there is very little I can do about it aside from having an additional surgery to remove the rods once again. I also suffer from nerve damage and other side effects caused by the previous surgeries.

I often get asked, "Does your doctor know you do all this?" or "Are you allowed to do all this?" My initial answer is, "Well, the doctor really didn't help me too much before, so I never asked his permission."

All kidding aside, I am no longer under my surgeon's care, but I go every few years for X-rays to ensure the rods are where they should be because over time they can break or become dislodged. Many years ago, my surgeon told me I was not restricted from anything athletic aside from contact sports like football and ones requiring a lot of flexibility like gymnastics (I plan on proving him wrong there). In other words, no I am not going to break or damage the titanium rods in my back doing CrossFit! The damage is already done, and I have to live with the side effects.

I know I always will face challenges at CrossFit. The rods limit my flexibility and bending, and the nerve and tissue damage causes issues with my grip and severe pain in my hands and feet. I work to be my personal best, and my struggles make me want to push harder.



About the Author

Christina Maragh, a senior systems analyst at Miami Children's Hospital, has been working out at [CrossFit Affliction](#) in Davie, Fla., and [CrossFit Ft. Lauderdale](#) in Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., since August 2009. Christina also has completed the CrossFit Level 1 and CrossFit Gymnastics seminars. She is a single mom and lives in Ft. Lauderdale with her son, Sebastian. She would like to thank all her coaches who have helped and pushed her from the start.