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Barrel Boy

No longer “the fat boy,” Rick Martinez talks about teaching children the value of activity and nutrition.

By Rick Martinez

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All images: Rick Martinez

“Hello, my name is Rick, and I’m overweight.”

“Hello, Rick!”

Seems that nowadays there are groups for everybody—drinkers, gamblers, drug addicts, and, yes, overeaters. Seems like nowadays we try to blame someone else for our woes and then join a group to learn how to accept and move on.

Try telling that to a 9-year-old.

The Fat Kid

I was the chubby kid in school. I was the kid who had to shop in the “husky” section at Sears. I was the kid who ate my little brother’s leftovers, and I was the kid who got teased. Even had a teacher call me “the little barrel.” My seventh-grade science teacher. That was back in the 1970s, when “PC” didn’t exist, so if I was fat, then the kids called me exactly that: “fat.” Nowadays we say “hormonally challenged” or “over-loved.”

Nope. I was fat.

Here’s the thing, though: I was also very active. Sounds crazy, but it’s the truth. I played soccer and baseball. I ran track and long distance. I rode my bike all over the neighborhood. One might think, “Well, heck, how come this kid’s so chubby then?” Well, here’s why: because I ate like I was taught.

But let me clarify and qualify that. I’m a born and bred American, but my ancestry is Mexican. In fact, English is my mom’s second language. So of course that meant kick-ass Mexican food and a culture that is surrounded by food I know now is not the best. Of course I mean refried beans and homemade tortillas, flour and corn. Everything deep-fried in corn oil or any other not-so-good-for-you oil. And then throw into that mix *pan dulce* (sweet bread), Coke at most meals, and good ole Kool-Aid.

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chubby, chunky, fat.**

I might also add that around this age, my parents started to earn a measure of success, so of course we added Twinkies and Ho-Hos. We frequently ate out, and I always had dessert. We had a stock of Froot Loops and Sugar Corn Pops. You get the picture. We essentially ate the way our culture dictated, and as we grew up, we ate what the USDA said was good for us.

And I was chubby, chunky, fat. I think I even remember reading a physical where a physician described me as obese. Not cool.

I never knew the difference.

My parents love my brothers and me. Of that there is no doubt. They wanted and still want the best for us. I know now that the problem was that we just didn’t know what we didn’t know. We didn’t understand, nor was it taught, the power of food and of balancing protein, carbs and good fats. “The Zone” was a football term and “Paleo” brought visions of a T-rex, not good food. So we just didn’t know what we didn’t know. And this continued throughout my childhood. In fact, it continued up until I discovered CrossFit many years ago.

Losing the Barrel

In a nutshell (maybe macadamia), that was my childhood. I don’t feel scarred, and I’m not about to write a memoir about my chubby-boy existence. I was and am happy. I love life ... and food. I love exercise ... and sleep. But I am also empowered now with knowledge gained through CrossFit—the exercise modalities and, more importantly, the dietary teachings. I have learned how to effectively exercise and to coach. I have learned the importance of real, whole food. Not only do I eat this way, but so does my family, and we teach and preach it every day at our gym, Alamo CrossFit.



Caption

Our gym has grown tremendously since we opened in 2007, but the thing that's even more important was the founding and growth of our CrossFit Kids program. Watching some of the kids exercise and listening to our CrossFit Kids coaches talk to them reminds me of the things I wish I had heard when I was a kid. No, not the caring, compassion, and love a parent has, because all these kids have that, but the knowledge and the ability to take charge of one's health and well-being from a very young age. And we ask the parents to stay for class too. It becomes a time for families to learn together.

How do we teach not only the kids, but also the parents, the virtue and value of eating “healthy”?

But I suppose the burning question nowadays is how do we stop the cycle? How do we teach not only the kids, but also the parents, the virtue and value of eating “healthy”? Sure *us* coaches get it, and our own kids get it, but the challenge for us now lies with helping our young CrossFitters get it. And furthermore, we must present it in a fashion that does not strike mom and dad as food heresy or some crazy granola cruncher-fad.

So we involve the parents from the get-go. For our under-12 kiddos, we ask the parents to remain for the first few sessions. We start each class reviewing what they had for dinner last night or breakfast that morning. We use words like “protein” and ask questions like “what does ‘protein’ mean?” and “what kinds of things do you eat that are protein?” We also stress to the kids that they should be eating protein at every meal, a serving about as big as their fist. We discuss healthy snacks too, because if kids are eating healthy, maybe their friends will be more likely to try that food as well, or vice versa.

Skeptical parents? We haven't really experienced a resistant parent because from the onset we offer adults nutrition information that provides data supporting the nutrition regimen we discuss at a simplistic level with the kids. This gives the parent the ability to have a more in-depth discussion with us to better understand our position but also to share our philosophy at home with their families.

Now that's power.

Take it from me, the chubby kid.



About the Author

Rick Martinez is a registered nurse of over 15 years and the founder of Alamo CrossFit in San Antonio, Texas. He loves most doing his darnedest to make sure there are as few chubby kids out there as possible. He can be reached at rick@alamocrossfit.com.