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Countering the Crazy Gene

Ute CrossFit's Bobbie Jo Hackenbruck develops a program to rehab injuries and keep members happy. Emily Beers explains.

By Emily Beers

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All images: Ute CrossFit

You know the crazy gene, right?

The crazy gene is linked to the feeling of intense satisfaction that comes from throwing yourself into an insanely hard, sometimes senseless physical and mental challenge. We aren't talking everyday challenges. We're talking about the extreme challenges, the kind of day or weekend that leaves you pumping dozens of fish-oil capsules into your neurologically fried and depleted body.

This summer, a CrossFit affiliate posted a video of some dude doing 1,000 muscle-ups for time. Challenging? Sure. Great programming for the average athlete? Perhaps not. But every sport, from gymnastics to marathon running to mountain climbing to skiing, has devout members who want to go to the extreme from time to time.

So the 1,000-muscle-up dude was probably just having one of those days where he submitted to the crazy gene, just like when a mountaineer decides to climb Everest. The muscle-up dude is still not as crazy as marathoner Stefaan Engels, who was bitten by the crazy bug over and over for an entire year; this nut job ran one marathon a day, completing 365 marathons in 365 days in 2010.

The point is Engels isn't your average running enthusiast and 1,000 muscle-ups for time isn't your average CrossFit workout. A year of marathons and 1,000 muscle-ups in a day are astounding feats that are not recommended for most of the population, but they do show us what the human body is actually capable of.

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On the flip side, what's becoming more typical in the sport of CrossFit is a movement away from the crazy gene. Instead, a growing number of CrossFit boxes are trying to help members understand that high performance isn't just about endless volume and ceaseless, unbridled intensity. Performance is related to a host of factors including smart programming, mobility, recovery, rest, nutrition, technique and more.

"Back 2 the Basics"

Bobbie Jo Hackenbruck of Ute CrossFit remembers her early CrossFit days.

"When you start, you're so excited. You see tons of results. You get stronger and leaner. It's amazing," she said. "But then you get a nagging injury that sets you back, and that nagging injury doesn't go away," she continued.

Not only was this Hackenbruck's personal experience in the sport, but this has been the trend she has observed with many of her clients in the last few years. They start out raring to go and they see performance gains for a while, but eventually weeks of ignoring mobility issues and the need for rest start to hold them back. And ultimately when you aren't feeling great, it's hard to keep that CrossFit fire quite as bright.

This trend led Hackenbruck to start believing in the concept that sometimes less can be more. Indeed, CrossFit.com schedules a rest day after every three workouts, and

the Level 1 Trainer Course is very clear about how good CrossFit programming is created not by endless volume but by cleverly constructed doses of high-intensity movements. The manual is also clear that rest and recovery are important to success.

"It is also tempting to ignore rest days completely. This may be sustainable in the short term but will likely result in lower overall intensity and potential injury," the manual states.

A few months ago Hackenbruck created an entire program devoted to the concept of training smarter.

Hackenbruck's program is called "Back 2 the Basics." It came about because of a back injury.

"I had a back injury 10 years ago—a herniated disk—and it took me two and a half years to rehab from it," she said.

Last year, Hackenbruck re-injured her back and instantly feared she was in for another long rehab process.

"It made me take a step back and reassess," she said.

She was torn. Hackenbruck desperately wanted to keep CrossFitting, but she knew the high-intensity, high-volume training was too much for her acute back injury at that time.



The CrossFit program calls for intensity in appropriate doses. On some days, "active rest" is the best prescription for your body.

So she started working with a friend, Robert MacDonald, and together they created a rehab program that focused on strengthening her core. The program still included movements found in CrossFit programming—one-legged deadlifts, Turkish get-ups, overhead weighted lunges, narrow-grip overhead squats—but it wasn't about intensity and time. It was about perfecting movements technically and strengthening areas that were weak, which would ultimately allow her to fully recover so she could go back to pursuing her beloved high-intensity training once again.

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—Bobbie Jo Hackenbruck

After eight weeks of active rehab with “Back 2 the Basics,” Hackenbruck couldn't believe her progress.

“It rehabbed my back completely in just eight weeks and helped me realize that I really need to take a step back from heavy lifting and high intensity sometimes,” she said.

It also helped her realize that although performance gains are important, they don't come simply by running through brick walls every single day. It turns out going back to the basics can be important too.

“And it made me realize that I can still be fit by going back to the basics of movements,” Hackenbruck added.

Not Every Day Is Test Day

Today, Hackenbruck's “Back 2 the Basics” program isn't just about rehabbing injuries.

The program—including mobility exercises from Kelly Starrett and corrective exercises from Paul Chek and the Chek Institute—is something Ute CrossFit puts all its clients through. And it's something from which they're all benefitting.

“We made everyone come in and try one class,” Hackenbruck said. “I explained to them that it can be a one-week program or a six-week program depending on what you need it for. It can be used to rehab an injury or it can be used as a lighter off-season program for one to three weeks. Or it can just be a recovery week for someone who maybe just did Ironman or a big CrossFit competition.”

She insisted that everyone can get something out of it, be it a stronger core and hamstrings or strengthened tendons and ligaments. It also helps refine technique and ultimately leads to a well-rested body.

The results speak for themselves.

Since implementing “Back 2 the Basics,” Hackenbruck said she's noticed a huge attitude shift among her members, as well as a shift to greater client retention.

“In our gym, people used to get caught up with high intensity all the time,” she said.

Since introducing this program, Hackenbruck said her clients realize not every day is test day, and they're staying healthier.

“I really just want our members to respect movements and not just focus on a clock and finishing a workout faster all the time, and this program allows for that,” she added.

“Now people confess things like how their neck had been bugging them for a while. People didn't use to say anything because they wanted to be tough and keep coming to CrossFit. But this program has allowed them to keep coming to the gym and actually recover properly.”

“Now if someone has an injury, they tell us about it and then they come in and do Back 2 the Basics instead of the regular programming.”

—Bobbie Jo Hackenbruck

Prior to the program, Hackenbruck said she found that usually when clients got injured, they would fall off the face of the Earth until they were able to hit it hard again.



You can't do Fran every day, and regular body maintenance and technique work can set you up for PRs in the high-intensity WODs all CrossFitters love.

"People used to send us e-mails saying they were injured and taking time off," she said. "Now if someone has an injury, they tell us about it and then they come in and do Back 2 the Basics instead of the regular programming."

Beyond Ute CrossFit

Hackenbruck's program has been so successful that she has had visitors from other boxes come by to try it out.

"People have called us from Hawaii to Washington, D.C., to ask about it, too," she said.

One of these visitors was 31-year-old Heather Smith, whose real name is being withheld for personal reasons. Smith contacted Hackenbruck a few months ago from the D.C. area.

"I came across Bobbie's blog, and I had a herniated disk, too," Smith said. "I related to her and so I wrote her and begged her for her program."

She said she wanted to make sure she was doing the exercises correctly, so she flew over to Salt Lake City to work directly with Hackenbruck. It was worth her while, so she's back in Salt Lake City this summer for a couple of months to finish rehabbing her herniated disk.

"I'm doing Back 2 the Basics three times a week, and I can hike and run again now," said Smith, who also said she is 80 percent recovered.

Next week, she's planning on introducing some more of what she truly loves to do: high-intensity training.

"We've had clients thank us for this program."

—Bobbie Jo Hackenbruck

"Thanks for Saying Something"

Although it has only been a few months since Hackenbruck started introducing Back 2 the Basics, she said she's thrilled with the results she's seen so far. And more than anything, she's relieved people are buying into the concept that sometimes you have to harness the voice that tells you to keep pushing when your body knows it needs some down time.

"We've had clients thank us for this program. They say, 'Thanks for saying something ... for telling us you don't always have to tough it out and that rest days are OK,'" Hackenbruck said. "People are excited about this."



About the Author

*Emily Beers finished a master's degree in journalism at the University of Western Ontario in the spring of 2009. Upon graduation, she worked as a sportswriter at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games, where she covered figure skating and short-track speed skating. Currently, she hosts **WOD HOG**, a not-always-PG publication of the CrossFit Vancouver School of Fitness. She ruptured her Achilles tendon in December 2010 and served as the Canada West Regional Media Director while recovering from surgery. Beers also competed in the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games on CrossFit Vancouver's team. She finished third at the 2012 Canada West Regional.*