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## A Beginner's Perspective

Warrington Parker offers affiliate owners and coaches tips on how to keep athletes coming back.

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By Warrington Parker

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A little more than two years ago, I attended my first CrossFit class. I had no idea what I was getting myself into. My friend, who suggested I go, called it “boot camp.” He said he loved it because it lasted an hour, there was some stretching, and the workouts were short. That’s all I knew about CrossFit. Nothing more.

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I also knew I needed some form of exercise badly. I was 44 years old. I had played rugby until I was 41. I had barely exercised between the ages of 41 and 44. I had gained enough weight—well, a lot of weight—so I could no longer run without pain. From rugby, my back was so stiff I could barely bend over to pick up things. I felt old. I felt stuck. No team sports. Lifting weights alone would not fix things, and running any long distance was out of the question.

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Today, I find myself thinking about what it was like as a CrossFit beginner and what made me come back time and again. In this article, I share those thoughts in hopes that a view from a “consumer” will help affiliate owners, coaches and other beginners.

One caveat: What I relate are my own views. I happen to be blessed with wonderful coaches at San Francisco CrossFit. Whether consciously—and I believe it is conscious—they have made CrossFit accessible, challenging and fun for beginners to firebreathers. I say that because I don't mean to suggest these are solely my ideas. I do mean to relate my experiences and opinions on how CrossFit can be made available to a wide variety of people.

### **Enter CrossFit—The Beginner's Class**

The first thing that SF CrossFit got right was the beginner's class. It lasted for two weeks—three days each week. It comprised beginners. Not fat beginners. Not uncoordinated beginners. Just beginners.

Why is the beginner's class important, and why do I note its composition? It addresses two issues I believe stand in the beginner's way: pride and pain.

I have read CrossFit articles touting a beginner's class as important to avoiding injuries. That is true. But that is not why I believe the beginner thinks it's important.

When I showed up, I was not thinking, “I am glad they did this because I want to start slowly and build up.” I was there to get in shape. If I had been thrown into a regular class that first day, I would have been delighted. I would have gone at it furiously for the entire first minute of the WOD before I fell to the ground exhausted.

### **Pride**

Pride is an issue from a number of perspectives.

First, there is the fact CrossFit requires new and different skills. For example, I had lifted weights on and off throughout my life. And in rugby, my position was a strength position. But I had never done a snatch. I had never done a pure deadlift. I would never imagine doing a squat with weights—it hurt my knees too badly. That says nothing of just doing a squat—one without weights. For the life of me, I could not get down into a squat. It looked more like I was bending over to look at my feet.

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Second, not only is one learning new things, but one is also learning new things one cannot do well, no matter how hard one tries. As noted above, there were the squats that were not squats. There are other things as well: double-unders, pull-ups, box jumps, wall-ball shots. All were challenging, not to all and not to all in equal measure. But they do take some doing. Double-unders were foreign to me. Pull-ups and box jumps were beyond me. And my wall-ball form took some talking about.

Thirdly, even though badly out of shape and overweight, I did not want to be in some remedial class. I did not want to feel like I had been sent to a fat farm or the “slow” class. Now, I understand there might be some who show up who simply must have individualized attention—they are grossly obese or have some other medical issue preventing them from being thrown into a class, even a beginner's class. But I was not one of those, at least not in my mind.



***Beginners need time to adjust to the pain of CrossFit, a new feeling for many.***

I was a former athlete who needed to work out. I could finish the beginner's-class WODs, even if I was the slowest. So having a class comprising everyone was great for me. Sure, I didn't like coming in last, but that was a reality I had to accept. I did not have to additionally accept that I just was not up to snuff in every other way.

And perhaps most importantly, I did not have to accept that CrossFit, as a form of exercise, had no real place for someone like me.

**Pain**

A beginner's class also allows the beginner to confront and understand a second aspect of CrossFit: pain.

All exercise is painful in some way, shape or form. But CrossFit pain is different. It is a difficult pain for me to describe. It is not like the pain of running. It is not like the pain of lifting weights. The easiest way to describe the pain is that it feels like the pain one experiences in rugby—almost identical. It is an overall pain—one that comes from combining running with lifting with throwing your body around with push-ups or pull-ups.

So for me, the pain aspect was less of a consideration. I knew how my body would respond. I knew I was not going to die.

But compare that with someone who is a long-distance runner, a soccer player, a pure weightlifter. These are all marvelous sports, and I envy anyone skilled at these types of things. But the pain of those sports—running or lifting weights—is different. I am not suggesting the pain is less. It is different. A weightlifter is not called on to run after doing back squats. A runner is not asked to do power snatches before a 5K.

And if you are an athlete who shows up at CrossFit, you have to deal with that new experience. This might strike you as slightly strange. But imagine when you are new to something athletic. You wonder whether it should hurt there or whether it should hurt that much there. And, as the pain builds, your mind starts talking back, like on a long run when it screams to you, "I am not getting enough oxygen." After just a short time of running, you know both intellectually and physically that the feeling you are not getting enough oxygen is just something to work through.

But now imagine an athlete who is a fine runner or otherwise superb in some form of fitness. That athlete, for the first time in a while, will be experiencing a different type of pain. That can be hard to deal with. The athlete might not recall that when he first began to run, he had to deal with how the body reacted. These athletes again have to learn that no, this won't kill you; yes, it is fine to feel this way.

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**A beginner's course helps all to adjust to the new experience.**

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A beginner's course helps all to adjust to the new experience. After teaching a new movement, it can be incorporated into a scaled or modified WOD. Sure, you might lose people because they might ask, "Is this all there is to it?" But no one in my beginner's class was asking for more. Instead, we looked around at each other and were grinning that we had gotten it done.

**Graduation—The Regular Class**

When moving from beginner's to a regular class, the same two issues arise: pride and pain. Both have to be managed.

Your beginners have now moved into the main class. Likely they have been watching these fit, muscular folk throwing around weights, pulling themselves up, doing handstand push-ups, running like fiends, and the beginners are feeling like they're not going to top the charts. What to do?

The first thing is to just understand that dynamic. That's how a beginner is going to feel and should feel. This is a challenge. The folks in the regular class have been going at it for longer. Of course they will be better. If they are not in better shape—and likely they are—they have better form. They move more fluidly. Oh well.

Not every beginner can finish a WOD. I recall one time where the coach put up some WOD. It had a woman's name—surprise. The coach capped the time for completion at 20 minutes. The WOD was not literally this, but it might as well have been: 10 push-ups, 10 box jumps, 10 burpees, 10 knees-to-elbows until you reach 1,000.

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**With regard to adjusting a WOD, it does not always have to mean cutting repetitions.**

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I thought to myself, "No point in keeping track of the number of repetitions for each aspect of this WOD. I won't finish. So, for me, this is a 20-minute workout." That took pressure off me. I just did the rotation for 20 minutes. My pride was salvaged. I walked away saying, "I did this for 20 minutes straight."

Now, I did not need the coach to tell me that. I just figured that was how I had to go about it because that was the only way I could. The coach could have said that. Not to me specifically, but to everyone. And even if she had said it to me specifically, I would have been OK with that.

### Individual WODs

In a similar vein, a coach can adjust the WOD on the fly for the beginner by saying something like, "Hey, instead of 10 squats and then a run, do 5 and then a run." It can be a private conversation. The beginner is given "permission" to either try the whole thing or scale down. Sure, this might mean the coach has to make a decision about what to write on the whiteboard, but it helps to ensure the athlete does not feel like he or she is quitting or outright cheating. It helps to ensure the athlete will return the next day, wanting to go at it again.

With regard to adjusting a WOD, it does not always have to mean cutting repetitions. For example, you can tell the athlete to put his or her knees down to do push-ups. It happened to me. I was slightly embarrassed. I was particularly embarrassed when, in the middle of my knees-on-the-ground push-ups, the coach told me I was not doing them correctly because I was not going all the way down. But the coach also came up to me after and told me it was just fine and this was part of improving. My ego was bruised, but only because I needed to get in shape.

### Team WODs

Now, what I have just described works when the WOD has to be completed by each athlete. What to do when there are group WODs? These come in a number of flavors, and how a coach handles them depends on the WOD. Let's take the one I dread most: the WOD where one athlete must do a task—e.g., push-ups or burpees—until the other athlete completes another task—e.g., 10 power snatches or deadlifts.

Why do I dread this the most? Because someone suffers until you finish. Talking to yourself over a barbell might be fine and good when it is an individual WOD. But trying to convince your inner soul to get back at it takes on new meaning when someone is tasked with push-ups until you're done.



***Give beginners permission to scale their workouts so they are challenged but can still finish.***

So what do you do? The easiest solution is for the coach to pair athletes based on their caliber of fitness.

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Is that the only solution? No. Every CrossFit box has firebreathers. Every CrossFit box has the man or woman who wants the lowest time. The two are not necessarily the same. In my experience, firebreathers are not the ones with whom I am most afraid to be paired. Those in the best shape can do those extra push-ups or burpees, and they always have enough energy to goad, cajole and encourage.



***In team WODs, it usually works well to pair a firebreather with a beginner because the experienced athlete can handle the extra work.***

To speak in some generalities, the ones I am always most worried about are those who are just below firebreather. The “almost folks.” They are fit. But they just aren’t yet at the top. These are the folks who most likely to let form go, who don’t do the full squat, for example, so they can post a fast time. These are the folks who don’t have any energy to spare to push you along. And these are the folks I think coaches should ensure aren’t paired with the newbie.

The impulse to post the best time is good. I don’t want to suggest otherwise. But it is that athlete’s natural desire to do his or her best that can be most corrosive to a beginner, even if completely unintentional. The relationship can become one where an athlete feels like his or her partner held him or her back.

### **Chippers and Station WODs**

That leaves things like chippers or rotation workouts, where each person is at a station and rotates when others have completed their station. Some of these things work themselves out naturally because you can pair athletes up by the amount of weight each group will be lifting. For example, Group 1 is going to put 200 lb. on the bar for the deadlift portion of the chipper or rotation; Group 2 will use 160 lb. This tends to sort groups in such a way that not all beginners are together.

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For chippers, this is particularly important because a group of beginners will be chipping away for a long time, which can be disheartening. But again, one can always adjust the WOD on the fly. For rotation workouts, this is less important because a group of beginners simply does fewer rotations.

Moreover, and focusing again on chippers, it is good to have a mix of athletes. Again, the better shape you are in, the more of each task you can complete. It means the workout is more difficult for those who can handle the more difficult workouts.

And again, there is that person who just wants to post a fast time and damn all else. That is the athlete who bears the most watching for two reasons. First, you don't want to have a beginner paired up with that person. Second, that person might be posting that time by cutting corners.

### The Shout-Out

Finally, and I am a little embarrassed to admit this, it is just nice to have a coach acknowledge your progress—however small it might be. I am embarrassed because I am far too old to look for that type of encouragement. But I do. The harder the workout, the more I push myself, the more it means when a coach says, “Nice job!” or “Keep it up!” or “You are coming along.”

It means something beyond the simple praise. It means something because I have found that progress is not always as obvious to the athlete. Part of this is due, in my opinion, to the fact that progress in CrossFit is different. One thing I love about CrossFit is that every day is different—different movements and different workouts. That also can mean that progress on any particular movement or workout is not always clear to the athlete.

CrossFit is not like another sport where one does a set number of things at each practice and the progress is obvious. To be sure, the wonderful thing about CrossFit is that it trains the entire body so every workout does influence every other workout. But I can say from personal experience that is not obvious at all. Sometimes, the praise is praise. Sometimes, it is perspective.



### About the Author

*Warrington Parker is a 47-year-old lawyer in San Francisco who still does far too much sitting. April will mark his third year as a CrossFitter. He and his two teenage daughters work out at [San Francisco CrossFit](#). All that is left is to convince his lovely wife to join him. CrossFit continues to humble Parker, provide perspective and keep him healthy—all good things in his book.*