
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Living the CrossFit Life

CrossFit has become an integral part of the lives of athletes, coaches and affiliate owners. Dr. Allison Belger interviews CrossFit athletes from different walks of life to find out just how much CrossFit affects us.

By Dr. Allison Belger

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C.J. Rendic

Ever notice that we CrossFitters tend to talk about CrossFitting a lot? Do you ever find yourself wondering what you used to talk about before you started CrossFitting?

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Do you have any friends you've made through CrossFitting about whom you know surprisingly little given the amount of time you spend together? You could probably recite their Fran time and Oly numbers but don't know where they grew up or what they do for a living. Do you ever long for conversations that don't involve CrossFit at all but then somehow tend to find yourself talking about it?

Ever since CrossFit gyms have gained a certain level of notoriety in our communities, I find that, no matter where I am, people end up asking me about CrossFit. Sometimes I make a concerted effort to steer the conversation in different directions, but ultimately it is often steered right back to CrossFit. And, in the end, I'm usually fine with that.

I've thought a lot about the allure of CrossFit as a conversation subject or point of interest from a psychological perspective. I've found myself wondering what it is about CrossFit that makes it so all-consuming at times and so intriguing to those not yet involved. I've pondered what it is about my own CrossFit involvement that keeps me thinking about it so much despite my very full life outside of being a CrossFit athlete and affiliate owner. Clearly there is much about being a serious CrossFitter that allows it to be such a presence in our beings.

I've written before that I think CrossFitting with consistency and intensity both requires and evokes emotional commitment. For many, it is too challenging and transformative to engage in casually. It makes us vulnerable and forces us far beyond our zones of comfort. It makes us reckon with decisions we make about eating and sleeping. It makes us consider all our excuses for not being as fit as we'd like. It gets our competitive juices flowing and encourages us to set higher goals for what our bodies can do.



C.J. Rendic

Marcus helped TJ's Gym to a 33rd-place finish at the 2010 CrossFit Games.

Well, it's no wonder we can't stop talking about it.

I decided to explore some of the psychological aspects of CrossFitting with three athletes who are part of my CrossFit community at TJ's Gym in Northern California. I interviewed these three very different people, asking questions about their experiences as CrossFitters and about how their lives outside of CrossFit connect with their performance in the gym.

Marcus is a 25-year-old single male who completed a year of medical school before deciding that his studies were not leading him down the path he desired. He has since immersed himself into our community as an outstanding coach, athlete and affiliate team member. Margie is a 45-year-old married mother of two young girls and has a full-time job in marketing. She has been coming to TJ's Gym for over three years, starting during its pre-CrossFit days and continuing after our conversion. Kirby is a 17-year-old college-bound athlete who has been coming to the gym for many years, first as part of a teen group and for the past two and a half years on her own as a CrossFit athlete.

Creating the Foundation

Marcus, Margie and Kirby all suggest CrossFit creates the foundation for much of what they do in their lives.

“The amazing thing to me is that one year ago I was struggling to fight my way through medical school so I could hopefully one day, many years down the road, do what I get to do now *each day*.”

—Marcus

Margie explains that the confidence she has gained from CrossFitting makes her more likely to take on new challenges outside the gym. She realizes now that she can tackle obstacles, whether intellectual, physical or relational, with a greater acceptance of herself and an understanding that time and effort will be involved. She has a more effective problem-solving approach and knows how to break down challenges into manageable steps without becoming overwhelmed by the big picture. This is analogous, she says, to the way she breaks down a particularly daunting workout or the way she approaches learning a new CrossFit movement.

Marcus's life outside of the gym has also been significantly affected by his CrossFit pursuits. In the fall of 2009, he was beginning his second year of medical school at the Ohio State University College of Medicine. The vision that had led him to medical school in the first place was of "helping people to reach a higher level of wellness in their bodies and minds." However, after a challenging first year, Marcus found himself struggling to make sense of how the coursework he was studying would actually translate into this provision of health and wellness to the masses once he earned his M.D. Midway through his second year, he decided to take a leave of absence to re-evaluate his goals. It was during this time that Marcus found his calling through CrossFit.

Marcus had been introduced to CrossFit during the summer of 2007, after graduating from college, when a friend had told him about the classes he was taking at San Francisco CrossFit. Marcus, a Gold's Gym member at the time, gave it whirl and was intrigued by his trial class. He incorporated aspects of CrossFit into his routine at Gold's and soon after embarked on a four-month trip to Asia, where he did what he could to keep up his fitness with body-weight met-cons. During his first year of medical school, Marcus educated himself via online videos and the main site, and he spent the following summer taking classes at our gyms. Once he made the decision to leave medical school, there was no turning back.

Marcus earned his Level 1 Certification in January 2010 and began coaching full time, both as a class coach and with private clients. He has since attended Olympic Lifting and Mobility and Recovery certifications and has plans to continue his CrossFit education. He also has aspirations of competing in the CrossFit Games as an individual. While he qualified for the Southwest Regional via the NorCal Sectional this year, injuries prompted him to choose to participate on our affiliate team instead.



Courtesy of Dr. Allison Belger

Marcus competed in the Northern California Sectional and finished 10th.

Ultimately, the more Marcus immersed himself in CrossFit and the TJ's Gym community, the more he became convinced that his mission of providing tools for people to live healthier and more fulfilling lives was not one he would accomplish as a physician, but rather as a practitioner of CrossFit:

"The amazing thing to me is that one year ago I was struggling to fight my way through medical school so I could hopefully one day, many years down the road, do what I get to do now *each day*," he says.

Kirby has had the benefit of navigating her early adolescence with CrossFit behind her. While she has, of course, experienced many of the ups and downs that all teens face, she has also maintained a level-headedness and sense of calm that come from her CrossFitting practice and her roots in a larger community with a shared passion, focus and grounding.

"I sincerely believe that everything I do in my life is better because of my CrossFitting," Kirby states. "I am a happier person all day when I have worked out, which helps me do school better and just plain everything better . . . I have also made more responsible decisions throughout high school because of my CrossFitting. I do choose not to drink or party on the same level as most of my friends, because many nights out, though I am having fun in the moment, I am always thinking of the WOD I will do in the morning. Most of my friends don't really understand this part of my life, but I am happy that CrossFit has helped me to make good decisions in high school, and I am confident it will help me to make the same good decisions in college."

Commitment and Passion

Most dedicated CrossFitters know that feeling of gratitude for being able to CrossFit and for the many positive changes it brings to life. However, being so committed to a personal pursuit can pose challenges in one's relationships with those whose goals are different or whose lives do not involve CrossFit, or fitness in any form for that matter. Margie has to deal with this unfortunate reality every day.

Margie's husband does not do CrossFit. She credits him for being extremely tolerant of her dedication but also acknowledges the struggles that can come with one partner's commitment. She acknowledges that her husband must find it difficult to put up with her attention to nutrition, her obsession with going to bed early, and her need to read the TJ's Gym blog every night before going

to bed so she knows the WOD for the following morning. She doesn't fault her husband or other non-CrossFitters in her life for the shakes of their heads or the rolls of their eyes when she enthusiastically recounts a workout. Margie realizes that she and her CrossFit companions can "come across as cultish to someone who does not do CrossFit—we have a crazy enthusiasm for CrossFit, use a different language and, when together, want to talk about it a lot."

In a somewhat reciprocal way, Marcus acknowledges that it is he who does the judging of those who do not do CrossFit or at least lead lives involving movement and the pursuit of health. His commitment to health and wellness and his personal investment in his own fitness and athletic endeavors have made it very difficult for him to accept the ways some of his friends and family members treat their bodies. The more committed he becomes, the greater the



Courtesy of Dr. Allison Belger

Margie, a mother of two, finds herself checking the WOD online every night before bed.

“We have a crazy enthusiasm for CrossFit, use a different language, and when together, want to talk about it a lot.”

—Margie

number of close relationships he has with people who also CrossFit. Still, he concedes that his family members, those with the least CrossFit understanding, often have to bear the burden of his CrossFit experiences, both good and bad. Aches and pains, fatigue or frustration while learning a new skill, these manifestations are noticed and felt by those closest to him. The overall experience for Marcus, though, much as it is for Margie, is of having found a community of people whose goals and desires are consistent with his own, and whose understanding of what he does is a given.

Likewise, Kirby acknowledges the role that the TJ's Gym community and the larger experience of CrossFit have had in her life. She knows that most of her friends and family members would consider her "obsessed" with CrossFit.



Courtesy of Dr. Allison Belger

Kirby has a CrossFitting mother, and the two push each other to new heights in workouts.

While she used to feel self-conscious about her passion, she is now more comfortable with the level of importance of CrossFit in her life, and she no longer feels ashamed.

Kirby and her mom work out together, which has added an entirely different component to their relationship, and they are closer for having this shared passion. While people such as Margie can't yet share their passion with CrossFitting family members, Kirby has strong support from her mother. She feels that they push each other harder than most workout partners because they know each other so well.

Although Kirby has become open with most of her other family members and friends about her level of commitment to CrossFit, she still feels that she connects most with other CrossFitters. Only they can truly understand her drive and appreciate what she does. This shared bond is, overwhelmingly, the most powerful part about CrossFitting within a thriving gym community, and it appears to be a driving force for all three athletes, much as it is for CrossFitters around the world.

Dreams of CrossFit

Have you ever dreamed about CrossFit? CrossFit is such a part of our waking lives that it often haunts our dreams.

Margie has had recurrent dreams about rushing to a WOD and knowing she's going to be too late. She has also lain in bed agonizing over whether Fran would be the workout the next day or whether she would be able to do ring dips in a competition. While Margie says she doesn't spend all that much mental energy thinking about CrossFit outside of the gym most of the time, she does have that addiction to the TJ's Gym blog. If the workout is posted unusually late, she will get up in the middle of the night to check the blog on her cell phone. This, she says, is "my only example of CF insanity."

She continues: "If there is something I cannot do that is really important to me—for example when I was first learning pull-ups, and now I'm trying to get ring dips—I think about it a lot. I obsess over getting it, think about it at the gym, look up content online sometimes about how to do it, think about it as I fall asleep."

Marcus says that he doesn't dream much about CrossFit as far as he knows, but he has definitely lost sleep over aspects of it. He recalls the night before coaching his first class as being sleepless. He anticipated teaching the snatch to the early-morning advanced crew at our gym,

worrying about filling the role of coach for our old-timers. He has also lost sleep on the nights before competitions, be they local throwdowns or more serious competitions like the NorCal Sectional and the Southwest Regional.

Typically, though, Marcus says he doesn't think much about his workouts once they are done. While there are occasionally performances that stand out in his mind, he tends to leave behind the particulars of a workout. However, with regard to educating himself about CrossFit and immersing himself in the larger community, he says it is "embarrassing how much time I spend ... thinking about CrossFit. I'm on the main site, *Journal*, Games site, affiliate sites, and more every day, multiple times a day Goals I have right now in life are to find more outlets that have nothing to do with CrossFit.

"However, it doesn't bother me at all that I spend as much time with the subject as I do. I've always felt like my life, work, passions and relationships would be built around a common purpose or thing. I'm grateful that I found something to guide much of my life, and the constant pursuit of excellence in what I do is appropriate in my book."

Kirby has two kinds of CrossFit dreams.

"In the first, all my WODs are unbroken, I can do every workout in record time, and I am an amazing CrossFitter," she says. "In the second, the clock starts, and for some reason I cannot do anything, whether it be pick up a bar or begin pull-upping. Obviously, I like the first dream much better. I never have trouble falling to sleep because of CrossFit, or anything for that matter!"

While Kirby spends a great deal of time researching and thinking about CrossFit, she has been limited in this regard by the other important things in her life, including spending time with friends, doing school work and getting ready for college. She has found a good balance and has some concerns about how she will continue to keep up with it all during her freshman year in college. Determined to make CrossFitting a priority, Kirby has already scoped out a CrossFit gym near school, and she plans to come back to TJ's Gym during vacations.



Courtesy of Dr. Allison Belger

Margie has a passion for learning new skills and will spend extra time online searching for instructional videos and information that will help her succeed.

Sense of Self

All three athletes have clearly experienced great change in their lives as a result of their pursuit of fitness in our CrossFit community. All three have developed a sense of themselves that is influenced by what they can do in the gym and how they manage the challenges of a workout.

As a middle-aged woman, Margie appears to be most changed in the way she views her body and what it is capable of doing. Although she is realistic and knows she is slower and has to work harder to recover than the athletes who are much younger than she is, she also knows she gets stronger with every workout.

"I compete every day against people who are 10, 20, 25 years younger than I am," she says. "Since starting CrossFit I have just worked hard and believed that as long as I kept working hard, I could do well, regardless of how old I was. I am going to continue to do so until someone gives me a very good reason not to. At that same time, I'm not unrealistic about what I can accomplish. I know that my body will get slower. I will need to be more careful. I'm working now on developing an appreciation for what I can do, and to always do better—regardless of what others around me are doing."

Margie is also proud and driven to be a role model of strength and health for her two young daughters.

About 10 years older than Margie's daughters, Kirby embodies just what Margie hopes for her own daughters when they grow up. Kirby notes, "Physically, I am happier and I have a better body image because of CrossFit. I am strong, and I look strong. At school, I am known as the girl who can lift logs over her head, and though I am sometimes self-conscious about my strength, I have learned to love it.

Every day when I do CrossFit, it is the hardest part of my day. I can do anything after a WOD, which is an amazing feeling!"

Marcus also finds great inner peace and an enthusiasm for each day through his CrossFit experiences. Much like Kirby's navigation through adolescence, Marcus has benefited from CrossFit and a larger community at a time of transition: "I found myself at TJ's Gym at just the right time in my life. I found myself surrounded by the right blend of people to motivate me back to my pursuit of health and wellness."



Courtesy of Dr. Allison Belger

**We may not always be better
wives, husbands, children or
parents, and we may not be
better at every aspect of our jobs,
but then again, we just might.**

***Kirby says challenging CrossFit workouts
help her believe she can accomplish anything.***

The CrossFit Life

While CrossFit is neither a cure-all for emotional struggles nor a panacea for relationship issues, it seems abundantly clear to those of us who live it that this thing we do has significant positive implications for other aspects of our lives. We may not always be better wives, husbands, children or parents, and we may not be better at every aspect of our jobs, but then again, we just might.

We might access that inner confidence that comes from having tackled a difficult workout alongside our friends at the gym. We might be able to think through problems in ways we never would have if we hadn't broken down a workout into manageable steps. We just might be able to dream bigger dreams and approach life with a greater sense of self. So why wouldn't we talk about CrossFit all the time?

Indeed, why shouldn't we?



Courtesy of Dr. Allison Belger

About the Author

Allison Belger lives with her husband, TJ, and their two young daughters in Marin County, Calif. They own and operate *TJ's Gym*, with three CrossFit affiliates: *CrossFit San Rafael*, *Corte Madera* and *CrossFit Novato*. Allison is a clinical psychologist specializing in assessments of children, adolescents and young adults. She juggles management of the family business, her private psychology practice and her role as mom. Although Allison recently began fitness coaching after finding CrossFit in 2008, she has a long history of involvement in athletics, as both a player and a coach. Allison played soccer at the Division I level in college and has since coached a number of youth soccer teams in the Bay Area. Allison has a bachelor's degree from Dartmouth College, a master's in learning disabilities from Northwestern University, and a doctorate in clinical psychology from the Wright Institute in Berkeley, Calif.