
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Saved by the Barbell

A group of women find strength of body and mind in CrossFit, giving writer Emily Beers the courage to tell her own story of self-doubt.

By Emily Beers CrossFit Vancouver

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Courtesy of Kelsey Nagel

Seattle native Kelsey Nagel stands close to 6 feet and weighs in at 175 lb.

She's Greek-god-like in stature, and when you throw her gorgeous hair and smile into the equation, she's difficult to ignore.

At least, that's what the people who were watching the recent Gorilla Games in Bellevue, Wash., said when they saw Nagel compete.

"I can't stop looking at her. She's gorgeous," said a fan who had just witnessed Nagel bust out six 275-lb. speed deadlifts in the 10-second time limit during a lift-off to break a tie on the second event of the day.

Nagel, who went on to win the Gorilla Games competition, has always been a bit of an Amazonian type of athlete. Today, at the age of 26, she is able to embrace this fact. But it wasn't always so easy.

"Growing up, my brother's friends used to make fun of me all the time. They would call me things like 'whale,'" Nagel said. "It forced me to develop thick skin at an early age."

"It's great being around people who think having a 300-lb. deadlift is hot and sexy."

—Kelsey Nagel

Accepting her size was something Nagel found easier when she went to college. A varsity soccer player on a Division I scholarship in California, Nagel was surrounded by others just like her.

"All of a sudden there were 7-foot-tall volleyball and basketball men walking around campus. I was in heaven," she said.

But on the soccer field, Nagel's size continued to set her apart.

"Other team's fans would call me 'Shrek,' 'Beast' or 'Helmet Boy,'" said Nagel, who had to wear a full helmet throughout her career to avoid concussions.

"I remember one team's fans calling me 'Balco.' I didn't understand the name at first, and I had to Google it. Apparently, there was some steroid scandal, and the steroid company's name was 'Balco,'" laughed Nagel.

She added: "I was actually pretty entertained by it. I thought it was a pretty creative name."

When she graduated, Nagel was hesitant to try CrossFit, fearing she would bulk up in her upper body—the last thing she wanted.

"I already scared the shit out of people, so I figured if I got even bigger I'd never get a guy," Nagel said.

But when she found her legs out of commission after hip surgery in 2008, she decided to give CrossFit a go. And to her surprise, her new community not only accepted her size they also embraced it.

"It's great being around people who think having a 300-lb. deadlift is hot and sexy," said Nagel, who is 10 lb. heavier today than when she started CrossFit.

"Now when guys come up to me in a bar and say, 'Holy shit, you're a beast,' I'm able to say, 'Thank you,'" Nagel said with a laugh.

Despite the lifelong name-calling Nagel has endured, she managed to avoid major body-image eating disorders and depression.

She is one of the lucky ones.

The Power of One

Dec. 9, 2011.

Something happened that day and in the days that immediately followed—something more powerful than any CrossFit competition.

The pain that crept into the three women's minds was undeniable. But there was another feeling present that morning: a feeling of comfort.

It was Friday morning. Twenty-five-year-old Mandy Gill, a radio anchor and minor celebrity in Vancouver, was overcome by a surge of pain. She couldn't control the tears that started streaming down her face as she found herself thinking about her battle with anorexia in her late teens. She was brought back to the days when all she could think about was food, when she weighed just 80 lb., when she stopped menstruating and her hair fell out in clumps.

The same morning, on the other end of the city, 23-year-old Martha Woodruff wiped tears from her eyes. Woodruff has been overweight her whole life. That day, she started thinking about her childhood—about the grade-school days when she was bullied so hard she stopped going to school. She vividly remembered the pain of having no self-esteem, the pain of feeling worthless.

On the other side of the country, in Ontario, Jenna Scott was hit with her own painful memories as she ate breakfast. She thought about her life at the age of 14, when she diligently measured herself every week. Suicide often crept into her mind. That Friday, Scott's mind went back to the days before CrossFit and Paleo eating, to a time when she followed an obsessive vegan diet that left her constantly stressed about food. In those days, she avoided social situations involving food and battled constant digestive problems along with a host of other health concerns.

“I have witnessed the quest to be strong save a life and I believe it can save many more.”

—Chris Schaalo

The pain that crept into the three women's minds was undeniable. But there was another feeling present that morning: a feeling of comfort.

The emotions—both painful and hopeful—were initiated by a simple post on the [Old Country Strong blog](#).

The title of the blog post: “The Flower that Blooms in Adversity is the most Rare and Beautiful of all...”

The post, written by Chris Schaalo of CrossFit Taranis, told the story of a young woman close to him, the story of two-time individual CrossFit Games competitor Alicia Connors.

“I have witnessed the quest to be strong save a life and I believe it can save many more,” wrote Schaalo, who went on to reveal that Connors, a girl idolized in the community as being one of the best CrossFitters in the world, attempted suicide a few years ago after a long battle with depression, anxiety and eating disorders.

It was a simple post. It couldn't have been more than 1,000 words. But there was something about the honesty and genuine love in the words, something so raw about the way Schaalo told the story, that not only made girls across the CrossFit community feel understood but also gave them the courage to share their own pain—some of them for the first time.



Courtesy of Mandy Gill

CrossFit helped Mandy Gill focus on skill and strength, not on the number she saw on the scale.

Suddenly girls started to talk, to reach out to each other, creating a dialogue between strangers.

“This is the first time I've really spoken about these things openly,” Scott said.

I was one of the women who read Connors' story on Dec. 9. I read it. And I re-read it. Again. And again. Tears flowed with each read.

And for the first time, I feel ready to share a story or two of my own.

When Big Wasn't Beautiful

When I was about 10 years old, my grandmother said to me, “I never believed big was beautiful.”

I nodded in agreement.

“Big isn't beautiful,” I repeated.

This wasn't just a belief. In my 10-year-old mind, it was a fact that small was attractive. And conversely, it was a fact that big was not.



Kim Bellevance

In the world of competitive gymnastics, smaller is better—a lesson a young Emily Beers learned too well.

I was a gymnast for many years. I trained every day with Kate Richardson, my lifelong friend who went on to compete at two Olympic Games for Canada. Today, at the age of 27, Kate is 5 feet tall and 110 lb. Back then she couldn't have weighed more than 50 lb.

When I read Connors' story, I subconsciously found myself back in that place—to a day I had blocked out for years.

By the time we were 9, Kate could do things with her body I'd never be able to do. Coaches' eyes lit up when they saw her. The gymnastics world adored her.

To a certain degree, I had accepted the fact I was the biggest gymnast in the group, and I started to find other ways to get noticed. I was the one who told the stories, who made everyone laugh, who brought comedy to training. Generally, I was happy there and still have tons of great gymnastics memories.

**Then I decide to try it:
I cautiously stick my finger
down my throat for the first
time. To my surprise, it works.
I throw up.**

But I never stopped believing smaller was better. When you were small, coaches gave you more attention and gymnastics was easier. It seemed even the judges handed out "cutesy" points to Kate. Although, in hindsight, this was probably more due to the fact that Kate's feet were so tiny that nobody noticed when they weren't pointed, whereas I had flippers at the end of my ankles, a recipe for deductions, not to mention an eyesore to the sport of gymnastics.

When I was 10, my coach started bringing a scale to the gym. He weighed us on Saturday mornings. If we gained weight, we would have to stand in front of the mirror to make sure we hadn't gained any of what he referred to as "negative weight."

I remember the day he first brought the scale to the gym.

When I read Connors' story, I subconsciously found myself back in that place—to a day I had blocked out for years.

All of a sudden, I am 10 again.

I see the scale under his arm; I know what it's for.

I rush to the bathroom, panicked. I look at myself in the mirror and see terror in my own eyes.

Then I decide to try it: I cautiously stick my finger down my throat for the first time. To my surprise, it works. I throw up.

I don't feel any better. I know that I'm still about to be exposed on the scale as the heaviest girl there. There's no way out of this.

I leave the bathroom shaking and join my training mates in a line.

One by one, girls step onto the scale.

Finally, it's my turn.

Heart pounding, red-faced, I cautiously mount the scale.

I try to put all my weight on my left leg, hoping it will make me lighter.

I'm terrified of the number that's about to appear on the screen.

My coach sees what I'm trying to do.

"Emily," he said. "The point of this isn't to stand on one leg to make yourself as light as possible."

Everyone laughs.

I get back on the scale. It spits out a number. I weigh 96 lb., a solid 30 lb. more than Kate, Desiree, Carly, Carla and Megan.

I am horrified.

Old Country Strong

Zach Filer, from Seattle, started the Old Country Strong blog in March 2010. It was meant to be a place where his community could talk not just about CrossFit but also about life.

"Having women shy away from lifting because of some myth broke my heart."

—Marissa Luchau

One of his athletes, 23-year-old Marissa Luchau, came up with the idea of posting stories about how strong is beautiful. Her idea was to dedicate one week each year to this concept.

Luchau was tired of women who avoid strength training and lifting for fear of bulking up.



Courtesy of Kelsey Nagel

Kelsey Nagel (left), winner of the recent Gorilla Games competition.

"Having women shy away from lifting because of some myth broke my heart. And to hear men around me tell females they shouldn't lift because having muscles isn't attractive ... quite honestly crossed a line with me, and I didn't want to sit around anymore and hear these myths," she explained.

Luchau said she wanted people to see how the barbell, and the desire to be strong, can change lives. It changed hers.

She was a javelin thrower and aspired to throw in college. Then she blew out her shoulder.

"Throwing in college was my dream and all of the sudden that was taken away. I coped by turning to food and not working out, and before I knew it I had put on 30 lb.," Luchau said.

Then she discovered CrossFit.

"I found that the longer I was there, the more I believed in myself. And the stronger I became physically, the stronger I became mentally and emotionally," she said.

When Luchau heard Connors' story, she knew it was the kind of post that would inspire, that could save women from their demons.

"I didn't sleep the Thursday night the blog had gone up because I couldn't help but be overwhelmed," Luchau said.

What overwhelmed her was how big the idea she had a year ago had become. Overnight, the blog spread like a virus. The next morning, it seemed everyone was reading it.



Kim Bellevance

Through CrossFit, Emily Beers began to accept that big can be beautiful.

Gill read the story at work and started crying her eyes out right before she was supposed to go on air. Reading the story made her feel less alone.

“I’m so impressed with Alicia’s accomplishments. Knowing where she came from and what she’s been able to achieve is truly inspirational.”

—Lisa Bridges-Makofa

“It only goes to show that we’re all human,” said Gill, who said she considers Connors her CrossFit idol.

Lisa Bridges-Makofa, a CrossFitter from Calgary, was relaxing with her family and cruising Facebook when she saw Connors’ status update thanking people for their support. Curious, she dug a little bit deeper and found the blog.

“I’m so impressed with Alicia’s accomplishments. Knowing where she came from and what she’s been able to achieve is truly inspirational,” said Bridges-Makofa, who said she was never insecure about her body until she gained weight during two pregnancies.

Like Connors and Luchau, Bridges-Makofa was saved by gaining physical strength.

“In the first four months of CrossFit, I regained my health, my marriage and my life. The barbell truly saved me and has changed me in more ways than just physically,” she said.

Woodruff added: “There are so many things I want to say about the barbell and what it’s done for me, but I’m finding it hard to put it into words.”

Even girls and women who haven't been consumed by body-image issues found themselves identifying with Connors' story.

“This is a message that needs to be heard, and it needs to be more than just a message; it needs to be a movement.”

—Marissa Luchau

Annie Tasaka from North Vancouver is one.

“I was just so touched by Alicia’s willingness to share her story,” Tasaka said. “It never ceases to amaze me how empowering strength and power are, and I wish every woman could pick up a barbell. I will make sure my daughter picks one up.”

As for Luchau, she said she couldn’t be more pleased with the response to the idea she came up with in 2010.

“This is a message that needs to be heard, and it needs to be more than just a message; it needs to be a movement. And I truly believe that this is the start of something amazing,” she said.

If I Knew What I Know

When I read Connors’ story, my jaw dropped.

It was as if someone had literally injected inspiration into my body. And in the process, her courage to reveal, to initiate a dialogue, immediately helped me to better understand my own issues.

While I’ve never been depressed or suicidal, I’ve had my own demons, demons that CrossFit has helped me battle.

I only wish I had known what I know now when I was growing up.

If I knew what I know now, I would have told 10-year-old Emily that it’s OK that she weighs 96 lb.

If I knew what I know now, I never would have cried myself to sleep when a guy I was dating, a guy I wasn’t even into, broke up with me because he didn’t think he could ever get over how big I was.

If I knew at 17 that big could be beautiful, I wouldn’t have weighed myself five times every day, each time feeling more discouraged than the last.

Knowing what I know today, I’m able to embrace who I am. I will never be a little girl, and at least in theory I’m OK with this.

Today, I’m able to react to situations differently than I would have prior to CrossFit.

Life With CrossFit

August 2010

Someone decides my nickname should be “Hulkamania.” My first instinct is to be horrified I have just been named after a 1990s male WWE star.

But just for a moment.

Because I have CrossFit in my life, I find a way to turn that around and embrace the cause. I go online and order a Hulkamania costume to wear on Halloween.

“I’m going to be the sexiest Hulkamania you’ve ever seen,” I announce.



Kim Bellevance

Embracing her “Hulkamania” nickname, Beers dressed up as a sexy Hulk Hogan for Halloween.

July 2011

I receive a text message from one of my client's sisters. It says, "I don't like what CrossFit is doing to my sister's body. She is getting too muscular."

"Too muscular for what?" I write back.

She doesn't reply.

"You should consider taking that picture down. Men like their women to look like women. Not men. Just trying to help."

—Plenty of Fish male user

November 2011

I'm in the car with a group of CrossFitters, driving back from Seattle from the Gorilla Games.

We're talking about online dating, and I tell my friends about a message I received on Plenty of Fish just a couple of minutes after I posted a picture of myself in a sports bra doing a thruster.

It said, "You should consider taking that picture down. Men like their women to look like women. Not men. Just trying to help." The message was followed up with a smiley face.

I tell my friends that three years ago I would have listened to the strange man's advice and taken the picture down. But today I'm able to laugh at the message and become even more confident about the picture I posted, a picture that shows who I really am.

"Speaking of Plenty of Fish, let's check out what the old inbox has for me today," I say with a laugh, pulling out my BlackBerry.

"Read your messages to us," my friend says. "I want to hear what kind of things men say on that site."

"OK, let's see," I begin. "Supersonic22 says, 'Wow, muscle girl! When can we start pounding meat together?'"

We break into a fit of laughter.

Dan Fontaine, the one male in the car, smiles and reassures me and my two friends that he isn't attracted to skinny girls.

Then we start talking about how hot Kelsey Nagel is.

"I want to be able to deadlift like her," I say.

"I'm still intrigued by what she would look like naked," Dan says. "She would dominate me."

He pauses before adding, "And I'd be OK with that."

I smile to myself. In this moment, at least, I believe that big can be beautiful.



Courtesy of Emily Beers

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 Achilles surgery, and she competed in the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games with CrossFit Vancouver.