
THE CrossFit LIFE

The Guy at the Back

Ever wondered what the guy at the back is thinking?
Gary Jeffress gives his perspective from the back of the box.

By Gary Jeffress

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All images: Courtesy of Gary Jeffress

What's the guy at the back doin'?

Yes, that's me. I'm the guy at the back of the CrossFit class struggling to keep up. At times frustrated and other times annoyed and self-conscious that I can't compete. What are they thinking? When will I get fitter? Can I ever beat anyone through a full WOD?

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The author at a local competition hosted by Coastal CrossFit.

What's the guy at the back doin'?

As I bring up the rear, I'm justifying why I shouldn't be doing this exercise shit. In 1999, while driving for work, I was nudged into the path of an oncoming truck and spent one week in a coma, one month in the ICU, two months in the brain-injury unit and 11 months off work. I received a brain injury, a broken nose, two broken cheekbones, a broken ankle that was not repaired, a compound fracture of my right arm, a punctured lung, a broken knee, a detached ear and broken teeth.

Lucky to survive, I had to learn to walk again and left the hospital weighing 91 kg (about 200 lb.). It became my life to search for some resemblance of who I was before my accident. I was playing cricket in Brisbane at the time and hold a couple of club records still.

One month short of two years to the day after my accident, I dropped my kids off at the bus station to school. As I was driving home, a driver fell asleep at the wheel and crashed head-on into my car.

Are you kidding? Not again! I broke the same arm again, had multiple fractured ribs and a broken sternum, and the opposite knee was broken. I was in the hospital for three weeks and off work another two months.

What's the guy at the back doin'?

As I jog along at the back of the pack, I wonder why I started CrossFit at all. Whenever I run it hurts. I'm nearly 50 years old. I hate not keeping up and hate that I am 123.3 kg (about 270 lb.). I wonder if it's worth it. I have four plates and 15 screws in my arm and wrist, two abused knees, and a left ankle that was broken and never repaired and will never be any good. All these moving parts get to cart around my 123-kilo body with any movement I do.

And here I go, pissed off I can't do a double-under yet, or a burpee correctly, or a pull-up or a handstand push-up. And I *always* come last.

What's the guy at the back doin'?

While I'm lagging behind in the warm-up, I'm in awe of the people who show up every day and attend these challenging sessions. I admire that there are young men and women with all sorts of different issues dealing with their own self-talk and trying to better themselves. I admire that they respect themselves enough to offer their bodies the pain it takes to get fitter, be better, think straighter and act cleverly in a society that increasingly accepts mediocrity as standard. I'm admiring the owners of the boxes and the sacrifices each one makes to help others and be successful for his or her family. I am jealous of the competitive athletes who push themselves and each other to improve so they can compete on a bigger stage. And I'm incredibly thankful that the community that is CrossFit Gold Coast encourages the guy at the back without expectation or contempt.

What's the guy at the back doin'?

As I begin another 800-meter run, I reflect on how and why I have given myself no respect or opportunity to be fit and healthy in the last decade. My unfortunate lack of knowledge about nutrition contributed to my 32-kg (70 lb.) weight gain. I think about the events over the past six months that have brought me to a unique bunch of positive, friendly people. The guy at the back is immensely grateful for the path that has taken me to CrossFit Gold Coast. When you work out, no one knows, no one cares and no one asks about your problems. There is no compromise in training. That is powerful.



Jeffress' car after his second major car accident in two years.



The guy at the back—showing up, working hard and getting better.

What's the guy at the back doin'?

As I'm hunched over trying to catch my breath, sure, I'm slower than you but trying just as hard. Like you, I want to be better, fitter, stronger and quicker. My bones are aching and I really have other things to do. But the guy at the back is inspired by you, my fellow CrossFitters. I admire that you support me without being obnoxious and help me with advice when I ask. I admire that you don't mind if I partner up with you and that we all have great respect for our coach. The guy at the back is older, slower and bigger, but he soaks up your positive energy and hopes to contribute to others as much as they contribute to me.

What's the guy at the back doin'?

The guy at the back is saying thanks and letting you know that you make a difference in his life.

The guy at the back is me!