
THE CrossFit LIFE

The Little CrossFitter That Could

A year of CrossFit and an astonishing deadlift PR transforms Jessica Tyler from shy wallflower to outgoing leader. Julie Kelly reports.

By Julie Kelly

February 2012



All images: Julie Kelly

We've all heard the saying "you never get a second chance to make a first impression." All it takes is 100 milliseconds, just one-tenth of a second, to make a first impression.

The problem is that sometimes you don't put your best foot forward. You might be nervous and out of your comfort zone, and people might make incorrect assumptions. Don't let this discourage you. If people underestimate you, that gives you a chance to blow their minds when you perform beyond their expectations.

1 of 3



Soon after starting CrossFit, Tyler entered her first powerlifting meet.

Jessica Tyler, a 28-year-old nurse and Navy reservist, first walked into CrossFit San Diego on Jan. 3, 2011. All 5 foot 7 and 120 lb. of her stood just outside the huddle of members while they chatted about each other's kids, exchanged their latest cheat meals, stretched, and worked out the kinks with their PVC pipes, foam rollers and lacrosse balls.

Braided pigtails and thick black glasses swallowed Tyler's face. If anyone made eye contact with her, she would quickly look at the floor. If she spoke at all, her voice was low and muffled.

It took me all of one-tenth of a second to figure out that Jessica Tyler was a nerd.

The Transformation

Before I get tarred and feathered for cyber bullying, let me first say that I have a thing for nerds. I love them. I admire anyone who walks the path less traveled. While it's safe to say that I made this judgment in a tenth of a second, it's taken me nearly a year to find out that Tyler's nerdy roots run deeper than I originally thought—and I love her for that.

When Tyler was in high school, she never went to parties. Instead, she focused on things like Key Club, the Ethnic Alliance and the Future Business Leaders of America club. She doesn't have a background in gymnastics, track and field or any other sport that seems so common to CrossFit athletes.

When I asked about her athletic background, she said, "Ha! What athletic background? My background started the first moment I walked into CrossFit San Diego."

A couple of weeks into her membership, on Jan. 25, 2011, the CrossFit Total came up in programming. Her score? 280. Her back squat was 100 lb., her press 40 lb., and her deadlift 140 lb.

A few months into her membership, Tyler worked up the courage to sign up for a powerlifting meet and pulled a new deadlift PR of 180 lb. After the meet, Tyler decided to start working on strength. She tried 70's Big with much success but has since worked with our strength coach, Sal O'Campo, who programs Wendler modified for CrossFit for a small group of girls who have aspirations to compete.

Tyler attributes much of her success to O'Campo.

"He truly believes in me," she said. "I have gotten so much support from him, as have the other girls who train with me. He's there to show me things I do not see and in many ways has helped me face so many of my fears. He's helped me realize that participating is better than being perfect. Once I realized I can always improve, it lessened my fear of failure."

When asked about her goals when she first started focusing on strength, Tyler replied, "For everything great in life, you need to start with a strong foundation, and as far as my strength went, I had a long way to go."

I am still in awe of Tyler's transformation this past year.

On Jan. 13, 2012, a year after she started CrossFit, Tyler, O'Campo and I met at the gym a few hours before the scheduled classes to do the work Sal had assigned us for the day. The CrossFit Total was programmed for Jess, and she immediately started warming up.

Later, I asked O'Campo what he thought Tyler's new deadlift 1RM might be.

"My expectations were to be around 240 lb., maybe 250 lb. Maybe."

We soon realized that she was hitting multiple reps at 250 lb. Then she hit 270, 280, 290 lb. She then grabbed two 5 lb. plates to make 300 lb., looked at me and said, "Oh my God. Is this really happening?"

After all, she had already knocked some of the firebreathing girls off the whiteboard when she hit 290. If she could hit 300, she would be the only female currently a member who could pull that weight. Three hundred is roughly 2.5 times Tyler's body weight of 127 lb.

Tyler tightened her weight belt, approached the bar, set up, inhaled one giant breath and, in what seemed like an effortless attempt, pulled that weight off the floor and locked out at the top. She did it! A 127-lb. girl whose deadlift one year ago was 140 pulled up 300!

She wasn't done. Tyler stepped away from the bar and walked over to us as we nearly tackled her to the ground.

"I want to do more," she said. "Give me more."

"Good God, Sal, look at the monster you've created," I thought.

A few minutes went by, and she loaded two 2.5-lb. plates to make 305. As she gripped the bar, we screamed "Up! Up! Stand up!"

Once again, she nailed it. Tyler had just hit one of the most jaw-dropping PRs any coach had witnessed.

I am still in awe of Tyler's transformation this past year. Put aside her impressive accomplishments and continuous PRs. This is bigger than that. She has gone from a shy wallflower to a strong and confident woman who now goes out of her way to introduce herself to new members, who screams with enthusiasm when one of her teammates makes a new PR, and who always encourages the new member who gets an unassisted pull-up for the first time. That is the real transformation. That's the good stuff.

You Gotta Want It

A few days after Tyler crushed it, I went into the gym to ask O'Campo some questions about her training, specifically about the factors contributing to her success.

He replied that her success was the result of "consistency, patience and a willingness to learn."

I work out with Jess and I see that she listens and takes direction very well. In other words, she's a coach's dream.

O'Campo continued: "She wanted it, and she kept pushing through and digging deeper. She amazes me. I call her 'the little CrossFitter that could.' One of Jess' greatest strengths is that when people first meet her, they underestimate her. Make no mistake: this girl came to play."



Nerd or powerlifter? Maybe both!

Indeed.

I know I'm not the only one who feels proud to be Tyler's friend. Seeing her put her name at the top of the leaderboard was a pivotal moment in her life, not only as a future competitor but also as a woman.

"Honestly, I didn't think my name would have found a home there, and maybe that's what made it so special," Tyler said. "I am proof that it doesn't matter where you come from, if you have an athletic background or how old you are. All you have to do is want it. The biggest thing I've learned from all of this is that you have to chase your own capacity before chasing the person next to you. It never gets any easier; it just sucks less."

Amen! I'll drink to that.

