
THE CrossFit LIFE

Lost Boy Found

A young man finds passion, purpose and a way out of the dark with CrossFit. Rosemary Campbell reports.

By Rosemary Campbell

May 2012



All images: Craig Johnston

Paris Edward Little walked into CrossFit St Kilda (CFSK) in Melbourne, Australia, nearly two years ago. It was a weekend, and we were doing the CrossFit Total.

1 of 4



At one point, street fights were Paris Little's only form of physical expression.

Little timidly introduced himself and progressed through the back squat, strict press and deadlift. He chatted quietly, gently assisting and encouraging the others as he did. He lifted well, and even though he didn't post the highest score of the day, we all stood around wondering who the sweet boy was after he left with a polite "Goodbye," and "Thank you for having me."

Soon, Little became a regular at the 7 a.m. class. He would jog down the driveway into the gym, rosy cheeked, hair tussled, straight out of bed. He would smile and politely greet everyone. His boyish good looks and impeccable manners were a direct hit to our hearts, and we loved him instantly. As the weeks passed, we gathered snippets of information about him: he was 20 years old, he had recently returned to Australia, he worked part time at a call center. He usually diverted conversation away from himself and ended up chatting about the WOD and training, then he'd jog off back down the driveway.

As Little trained more at CFSK, we saw his talent for gymnastics develop. He devoured everything the coaches said, every cue and tip, practicing long after the session had ended, always asking me if he was in the way as I

vacuumed around him. His strength developed and his endurance increased. His dedication to his training was palpable, and he soaked up CrossFit knowledge wherever he could. Soon he was able to answer any CrossFit question and was well versed on the stats, times, weights and bios of the elite CrossFit athletes.

In an attempt to alter his diet, he organized a nutrition consultation with Bjorn Albrecht-Walker, our coach and in-house nutritionist. Albrecht-Walker became a mentor to Little, and in the consultation Little confided his desire to one day become a CrossFit coach. Little asked me if he could exchange cleaning and general maintenance work for the chance to become a CrossFit coach intern. I couldn't have been more pleased. It was then that I began to learn his story.

When Little was 8 years old, his family left sunny Australia for Bedfordshire, England. Little had loved his life in Melbourne, and with his long, blond, curly hair, Australian accent and the name of Paris, he was instantly laughed at and bullied by the local kids. The social groups at school were well established. They were suspicious and protective of their turf and intolerant of difference of any kind.

Life in Bedfordshire was tough. The community was small and parochial. Little soon learned to fight back and worked out that his life was more bearable when he was the bully and not the bullied. He shaved his head, assumed their culture and survived as best he could. His parents were working long hours trying to establish themselves, and Little was bored with school, so it wasn't long before he found himself part of a gang. He skipped school, drank, smoked and got into frequent and often fierce fights. He was continually hiding from the police and social workers. He recalls most fights were to protect a friend or to stop a perceived injustice. Fighting made him feel good and made him feel that he was doing something, achieving something, defending some misguided honour.

At age 14, Little was asked to leave school. His parents tried to find him work as a laborer. The work was physically hard, tedious and often dangerous. After some time, he just stopped going and was quickly absorbed back into the streets.

Little's body reveals hints of what his life was like; the lower part of his left ear is missing—bitten off in a fight. He has a scar on his top lip, permanent marks and scars on the backs of his hands, and a tooth missing on his left jaw. Stretch marks on his skin reveal a history of being overweight from a bad diet and binge drinking.

Finally caught by the local welfare department, Little was sent to Grey's Education Centre, a special school for kids like him who had been kicked out of a number of institutions. Of course, being with like-minded kids only made things worse. However, it was at this school that Little was introduced to weightlifting and fitness training.

After Little finished school, he was at a loss as to what to do next. A family member suggested he try the military, and he signed up for the preparatory course, which he loved. The training, the discipline and the camaraderie all suited him well, and he felt he finally he could be happy somewhere. Unfortunately, due to his police record and lack of formal education, the rules of entry required he wait another year before joining. With utter despair, knowing he couldn't survive another year with nothing to do, he returned to Australia.

Little found that things in Australia were not as he had left them as a boy. Many of his friends had moved, and nothing was how he remembered it to be. Going back to school was not an option, and before long he joined a gang. Their nights were spent drinking and looking for fights, and their days were spent finding ways to pay for alcohol and drugs.



Little's run-in with the law almost cost him his freedom, but his potential earned him a second chance at life.

"I would wake up and the first thing on my mind would be, where will we be drinking today?" Little recalls.

Hoping for a new start, Little moved in with an old family friend affectionately known as "Nan." She welcomed Little warmly and offered him a tiny room in her apartment. But Nan was busy working and assumed Little was big enough to take care of himself. Things didn't come together as quickly as he would have liked. Many of his old friends had moved on. Soon, Little was wandering the parks and streets of Melbourne. The days passed into weeks with nothing to do. Fighting was the only form physical expression he knew.

One day, Little was drunk on a train with his crew. A guy, a junkie, started harassing the girlfriend of his mate, asking for cigarettes, putting his hands on her, being persistent and annoying. Little pushed the junkie away, telling him to back off. Little's mate pulled out a knife and plunged it into the abdomen of the junkie, and together they pushed him off the train. The train sped on. Injured, the victim was left to get off the tracks on his own. It could have been fatal.

Little was summoned to court, facing very serious charges of intention to cause harm and reckless conduct to endanger life. He was placed on parole in the custody of Nan. The terms of his parole were a daily curfew between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. Little was required to attend a course in drug and alcohol rehabilitation, and he had to find a job. The enormity of these conditions was exacerbated by the fact that he didn't drive.



With life turned around, Little is now the head coach at CrossFit St Kilda.

No longer able to spend his days drinking in the park, Little had a lot of free time. He went to the local community gym and started training again. Looking for different tips and training techniques online, he stumbled upon a website where workouts were posted every day. He started picking through the site, finding workouts he could do with the little equipment he had.

Little had found CrossFit. After following CrossFit.com for a couple of weeks, he realized there was a CrossFit affiliate in Melbourne. As luck would have it, Little inherited a small amount of money from a much-loved grandfather. He spent it all to get his CrossFit Level 1 Certificate. At 19 years old, Little found a job at a call center and moved into a small apartment in St Kilda.

This was when we met him. This was why we only saw him in the mornings and why he didn't talk much about himself. It was during this time his court case came up.

It was up to the judge to determine if Little would go to juvenile prison or adult prison. By some great chance, the judge saw all the goodness and potential in Little, and he understood that a boy could get caught up in all the wrong circumstances. Little received a suspended sentence with many restricting factors and a commitment to continue with the changes he had made, which the police would monitor. With sheer relief and amazement, Little went home.

Little, now 22 years old, is the head coach at CFSK. He has completed many CrossFit certificate courses, including Olympic Lifting, the Coach's Prep Course and CrossFit Kids. Little manages the website and programs for the kids, who adore and aspire to be like him. He follows a strict Paleo diet, trains hard and rests sensibly. Little monitors trends in CrossFit and stays current with debates and theories surrounding his profession.

But Little is more than his history and achievements. He represents what a community can do for an individual. CrossFit offered him a fresh start, a daily challenge where he could see and monitor his own progress and equally enjoy the success of others. Every day, he was in contact with people who valued him for what he could do and what he offered them. He became respected and part of a team. He was surrounded with solid male role models and a CrossFit community in which achieving and winning are shared experiences.

It's about trying, where failing is success and satisfaction at the same time, where the last one struggling to finish is the hero, and where incremental growth and change result not in perfection but in a desire to continue to grow.

