
THE CrossFit LIFE

It's Mom's Turn

For the last eight years, Julie Olson put everyone else's needs first. Then she found CrossFit—and herself.

By Julie Olson

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All images: Douglas Moore

After six months of CrossFit (right), Olson's smile is a bit wider, her eyes a bit brighter, and her clothes a lot looser.

I'm not a CrossFit trainer, a competitive runner or even an accomplished athlete. I am a suburban mom of three little kids who has spent the last eight years putting everyone else first, who wolfed down Lean Cuisines at the kitchen counter at 8:30 at night, who guzzled Diet Cokes and thought every single day, "I know I should work out, but I'm tired, it's too expensive and I just don't have time."

I'm a 39-year-old woman who is slowly but surely making some pretty life-changing discoveries about myself, my views about fitness and nutrition, and the future I want for myself and my family. CrossFit has profoundly and irreversibly altered my life, and I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Marcela Perea of [CrossFit 100 by MPower Total Fitness](#) in Glendale, Wis.

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Feeling the burn in a functional way.

The mere idea of exercise always made me uncomfortable. I'm not naturally athletic, and I always told myself I was more of a book person, not a sports person. Don't get me wrong: like every other college girl on Earth, I went to aerobics in the dorms with my girlfriends, but mostly we snuck sips of Diet Coke and adjusted our scrunchies during class. There wasn't any real exercise happening. That was 20 years ago. After my oldest child was born, I joined one of those strip-mall 30-minute-workout places. I half-heartedly did the exercises but quit because I was frustrated when a six-pack didn't magically appear after two weeks.

That was seven years ago. Then, last summer, I met Marcela Perea at our local community pool. I'd recently lost 20 lb. and was pretty pleased about it. I was eager to share my accomplishment with pretty much anyone who would listen. Marcela congratulated me and asked what I was doing for fitness. I shook my head, made a joke (that's what I do when I'm nervous) and changed the subject. I firmly held the belief that I could just count points with Weight Watchers and somehow the pounds would melt away and

I'd have a firm, toned body without any exercise. But then our kids' swimming lessons ended, the summer faded into autumn, and I hadn't seen Marcela in some time.

In October I bumped into Marcela, and she invited me to attend one of her classes. I smiled and said, "Sure, sure. Maybe I'll see you there tomorrow morning." I really had no intention of going, to be honest. But the more I thought about it, the more I wanted to go and see what it was all about. The morning of the class, I was insanely nervous, so I ate a huge breakfast and finished my kids' breakfasts, too (that's also what I do when I'm nervous). I walked into class and was pleasantly greeted by Marcela's other clients, and Marcela warmly welcomed me into the class.

Needless to say, I could barely do the workout (I thought the warm-up was the workout), nearly fainted three times during class and vomited beside my minivan after class. My legs were so shaky I thought twice about driving home. The next day I couldn't move—literally. My 3-year-old patted my head as I lay on the couch feeling sorry for myself. I realized it was time to make some changes.

By all rights, and given my history of exercise, it would have been reasonable for me to quit right then and there. I could have said it wasn't for me, it was too hard, everyone else was so fit that it was intimidating—all the excuses I'd used in the past to avoid stepping outside my comfort zone. But there was something about Marcela that made me want to go back. Not only did I not want her to think I was a quitter, but I also wanted to show her and my classmates that I could try. She was encouraging without being bossy and pushed us all to go faster, lift more and make every second count.

I couldn't do a sit-up. I couldn't jog around the block. I couldn't do a push-up or an inchworm, and I couldn't hold a plank pose for more than five seconds. Marcela had to bring a 3-inch base for me to do box jumps onto because I couldn't jump up onto the shortest box. But I could try to do those things. I could hear Marcela telling me that I was already ahead of the person still sitting on the sofa. And that kept me going back.

I grew accustomed to dropping my youngest son off at preschool and heading to Marcela's studio every Tuesday and Thursday morning. I got so hooked that when one of my boys needed minor surgery and they called to schedule it on Thursday morning, I asked if it could be later in the day because I didn't want to miss CrossFit. I know: that did kind of cross a line.

When I first started attending class, I assumed (wrongly) that I had nothing in common with the other women in my class. I assumed they'd think I was a flabby loser and wouldn't want to talk to me. But one cold and grey morning while we were doing laps, a classmate lapped me and high-fived me as she went past. She yelled, "Go, Julie! You can do it!"

You know what? It made me start running again. It made me see that we are all in this journey together; we're just in different places along that journey. The encouragement, support, laughter and fun at every class made me feel like I belonged there. And Marcela empowered me, helped me get stronger both physically and emotionally, and gave me back my life after I'd spent so long just being a mom, a wife, a chauffeur, a maid, a cook and a bedtime-story reader.

Marcela and CrossFit have given me back me.

So now it's been 6 months since I started at CrossFit. I've met some of my favorite people in my classes, and I look forward to the workouts, the laughter and the sense of community. I find that CrossFit makes me calmer, happier and more patient with my children. I feel better about myself and can be better to those around me.

Marcela is teaching me so much about nutrition, and I'm almost ashamed to think about what I used to feed my husband, my kids and myself. My children understand the joy of running till their legs shake, doing wall-walks and planks, and jumping rope as fast as they can. As a family, we've eliminated most processed foods and eat more vegetables and fresh fruit, and when another mom cheerfully asked my 5-year-old son if he'd like to have McDonald's for lunch, he solemnly said, "I can't eat that. My family doesn't eat garbage food." (I'm not sure he'll ever be invited back, but whatever.)

I can now rock 50 sit-ups while holding an 8-kg weight above my head. I can run around the block and do kettlebell swings with the 12-kg kettlebell. I can do box jumps! And I am almost incredulous that I, Julie Olson, am training for a 150-mile bike ride for charity this summer. I have collarbones (who knew?) and muscles I didn't even know existed! I still get a little twinge of pride and accomplishment when someone asks me where I work out and I get to say "with Marcela Perea at CrossFit 100." I beamed (and couldn't stop smiling all day) when the bike-shop guy said, "Oh, you probably don't need interval training or spinning. You're way ahead of the game if you're doing CrossFit. Those are some serious workouts."



Don't let the smile fool you—this woman won't let anything get in the way of her CrossFit workouts.

Marcela recently mentioned we'll be learning rope climbing, and that nervous, nagging little voice in my head told me that I could never do that And then I heard Marcela's voice telling me that something is only impossible until you do it.

Quite simply, CrossFit and Marcela Perea have changed my life. I have come a long way, and while I still have a long way to go, I know I can do it.

And for that I would like to say thank you.

