
THE CrossFit LIFE

Strength From Struggle

Just as weightlifting builds strength, difficult experiences build character. Bradley Berlin explores how stress is relative and attitude is everything.

By Bradley Berlin

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One day, standing in line at Chipotle, I overheard the kid next to me talking to his friend. He was wearing an embroidered fanny pack that read “*Twilight’s* biggest fan,” and he was in total distress.

“If I don’t show up to recital it’s because I killed myself while studying so hard for midterms,” he said.

I laughed to myself about the comment, but he seemed rather serious. A bit dramatic, but serious nonetheless. I wanted to say to him, “Calm down, *Twilight*, you’re stressing way too much over some test.”

This “stress” in his life was humorous to me and monumental to him. A few days later, I was talking to an older man who had been drinking and was also in distress. He missed his wife. She was the love of his life and he regretted maybe not letting her know when he still had the chance. She had been dead for 10 years.

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"She shouldn't have died so young. I was the unhealthy one," he told me. This man had also lost two out of his three sons in one year. One to cancer and one to asphyxiation. The son who died of cancer was an Olympic-caliber runner. He ate well, didn't drink or smoke and was very active. His death was unexpected. The other son choked on a hamburger and was brain dead minutes later. Needless to say, it was also unexpected. I did not think this man's stress was humorous.

It's all Relative

My "stress caliber" is somewhere in between the kid with the *Twilight* fanny pack and the old man who lost almost his entire family. Relationships stress me out, both romantic relationships and relationships with family and friends. My job, sport, dreams and guilt all pile up and seem monumental.

Our distress is relative to the character we have developed to combat it. When your maturity is nil, a pop quiz is very stressful. Just like a mile jog would be stressful to someone who is extremely deconditioned.

My grandfather has been blind in one eye since he was a toddler, and 75 percent blind in the other eye for the last five years. He is deaf in one ear and often says with a smile, "And I can't hear out of the other!" He has had extreme asthma caused from asbestosis since his 20s. He ran away from home at the age of 14 because he was tired of being beaten by his father. He did not have parents to guide him after his early teenage years. His brother died young, as did his wife, and he lost two out of three of his sons last year. His life has demanded he develop an amazing pain tolerance and mental fortitude. This is the only way he can deal with stress that would kill most people.



Courtesy of Bradley Berlin

Stress can kill you ... or make you stronger. It's up to you.

I do not care to go through what my grandfather has endured, but I do hope to develop the same toughness. Character comes from adversity, and fitness is developed the same way.

CrossFit has made me a better son, brother, boyfriend, athlete, coach, trainer, uncle, cousin, friend and ambassador of my beliefs because it has shown me a very clear picture of actual progress. Things that go uphill have to be pushed. It has taught me that there are no bad lessons or workouts—just really hard ones. If I want to be stronger, I have to lift heavier weights. If I want to learn how to manage my time better, I take on a second job. If I want to be a better CrossFit athlete, I have to train the things I dislike. If I want to learn how to love with greater capacity, I need to have some children. Strength comes from struggle.

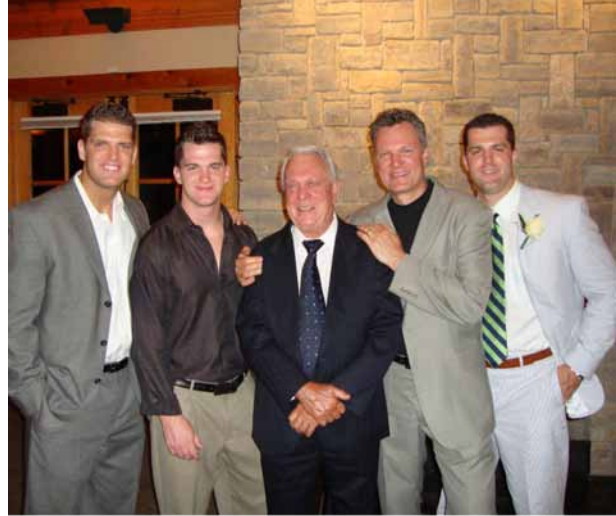
Death by Fran

I started CrossFit roughly a year and a half ago after watching the 2010 CrossFit Games. I was under the impression I could start training for a new sport and it would make me \$25,000 within the next year or two. Great deal, huh? Yes, it would have been, but unfortunately my ego deceived me.

I walked into CrossFit Nasti/Cincinnati Strength and Conditioning and introduced myself to the owner, Stephen Flamm. I told Flamm I was interested in competing in CrossFit. I had recently transitioned from the sport of strongman. I was pretty successful in the teen class and then open lightweight. I wanted to join my friend and training partner, Jen Osborn, on her last foundations class. Flamm said it wouldn't be a problem and asked a few more questions about my background, current training protocol and goals as a CrossFit athlete.

I told him my goals were to go to the Games that year and win them the following year. I can imagine it was hard to hear my answers over the sound of my ego. I went through the third foundations class with Osborn and did not learn anything. My capacity to learn was turned off because I already knew everything there was to know. At this point, Flamm told Osborn and I that he had a special workout for us.

Most people would not be ready for this at their third foundations class, but Flamm said Osborn and I could handle it. Osborn was a successful collegiate track athlete and I was going to win the Games soon. The workout was



Courtesy of Bradley Berlin

The author (second from the left) and his brothers, father and grandfather.

21, 15 and 9 reps of 95-lb. thrusters (not even warm-up weight for me) and pull-ups. We went over the standards for a few minutes and then geared up to go. I asked what the record time was for their gym, and I remember thinking that it was going to change.

It did not change that day, but I did.

I did the first 21 thrusters faster than they had ever seen. Then I attacked about 15 near strict pull-ups, came off the bar and immediately felt like I was both very drunk and very hung over simultaneously. The next few minutes of my life were a painful blur. I finished Fran in 5:48, and Osborn finished about 10 seconds after. As soon as I finished I ran to the bathroom so I did not shit my pants. As I was going the bathroom I began to vomit as well. I was sitting on the toilet, with diarrhea, as I vomited both on and between my legs so hard that my nose began to bleed. Osborn and Flamm later told me I was in the bathroom for about 45 minutes.

When I came out I told Osborn, "We have to go." Something wasn't right. I needed to go see my brother, who is a chiropractor. I was under the impression that I had messed something up and was maybe dying.

I should have been wearing a fanny pack like my *Twilight* friend. Osborn told me to go out to the car and she would be out in a second. I came in several minutes later because I was so dazed I could not find the car.

When I got home, my brother checked me out. He advised me to take a cold shower, drink lots of water and go to sleep. I did exactly that. After drinking about a gallon of water in a cold shower, I got in bed at about 5 p.m. I woke up the following morning at 10 a.m., after roughly 16 hours of sleep, feeling great and wondering how I could improve my Fran time.

Character Building

I have always enjoyed success. I think everyone does. As a child, I enjoyed being able to climb trees higher than my brothers because they kicked my ass in all the normal sports. Although this did not always happen, I loved the feeling of working hard on a project for school and getting an A. I enjoyed training for strongman contests and winning. I now enjoy training for CrossFit and getting new PRs. I love having athletes or mothers come to me and thank me for how well they did at their meet or how much weight they have lost. All these things have made me smile and given me some sense of self-fulfillment, but they have done little to develop my character.

What has developed my character is my family never letting me win. I built character when I came home from school after turning in a half-assed project and hearing my dad say, "Brad, you're smarter than C's. I know that you are! C's are average, and you're just not average."

I built character after training hard for a strongman contest only to injure myself cleaning a dumbbell rack at work just days before the competition. I became a stronger person after being so focused and dedicated last year in my Games training only to have to pull out of Regionals after three workouts because of severe shoulder pain.

We work harder for food when we are hungry. We care more about warm-ups and mobility when we are injured. We love with greater commitment only after having lost loved ones. Adversity builds character. Losing motivates. And fire purifies.

CrossFit, thank you. You have given me a platform to teach and exemplify the things I am most passionate about. Coach Glassman, you started something that is changing the world for the better. Thank you for your commitment to the mission and truth. All the coaches, trainers, friends and athletes along the way, thank you for all that you have done to develop my capacity as a coach, athlete and human being.

As the sport of CrossFit grows, I want to embody the principles that make our sport great. I want to continue to teach the world about health, fitness and progress. The struggles in your life will make you stronger.

Embrace adversity, accept the challenge and choose to become great.

