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Define Yourself

John Doole takes a philosophical look at the things that make us who we are.

By John Doole

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All images: Courtesy of John Doole

Changing the timing of when I was pulling the bar in a clean was incredibly difficult.

Cleans, like golf swings, are difficult to perform consistently well. Lats engaged, butt up, load the hamstrings, move the bar past the knees, slight re-bend, explode with the hips, shrug and bend the arms to move your body under the bar, elbows through, catch, and recover.

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If you bend early, you're robbing the bar of momentum and cheating yourself out of a new PR. I guess. Or so I'm told.

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Cleans are a great example of something we could all spend a lifetime trying to master but few of us will perfect. Getting better means practice, good coaching, lots of video and a willingness to change. I've only been in CrossFit for about a year and a half now, but I've seen a lot of important changes in my workout abilities, in the athletes around me and within the greater CrossFit community. Some positive changes, others not so much.



No, it's not a fashion statement. It's a brain-surgery scar.

CrossFit training promises nothing to the athlete and expects everything in return. The only immediate deliverable of CrossFit is the freedom to confront ourselves, to find out who we are at our core—exposed, raw, uncensored. It's during this time of confrontation when we can seize the opportunity to change. It comes at a cost, as change is not easy and it's always painful. How painful depends on how much we want to change.

One Life Ends, Another Begins

I spent July Fourth, 2011, in the same manner I had for the past five years—celebrating the birth of this country and mourning the death of my cerebellum. On July 2, 2006, I suffered a massive embolic stroke that lasted 18-plus hours, resulting in emergency brain surgery and removal of half of my cerebellum. I was 29 years old. My prognosis was poor to quite poor. Before the surgery, the surgeon told my father that if I survived, I would not be able to walk or talk very well. That's tough news for any parent to hear.

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Luckily, I survived and I am able to walk and talk very well. In fact, if it weren't for the perfectly straight vertical scar in the back of my head, you probably wouldn't know that such an event occurred. Sometimes, I curse the brain surgeon for making such a straight line. Do you know how many times I've had to answer the question, "Do you shave that line in your head on purpose?" It's so straight. I guess if I could ask for something, I'd ask for it to be a little more jagged so people would say, "Something happened and it's not a haircut design!" I'm kidding. I do feel like—and resemble to some degree—Harry Potter, except my scar is in the back of the head. Oh, and I don't have an owl and no wizards are trying to kill me. I can, however, do magic. Just ask the ladies. Just kidding. Kind of.

Anyway, back to the story.

After I was discharged from the hospital on July 11, 2006, I found out the reason I had a stroke at such a young age was because I previously had an undiagnosed patent foramen ovale, or PFO—a hole in my atrial septum in my heart (congenital) that allowed the embolism to slip through and up to my brain. I had heart surgery in September 2007 to implant a device to close the hole. After having brain then heart surgery, I started my long road to recovery.

My recovery included physical, mental and emotional rehabilitation. I met the surgeon who performed the life-saving brain surgery in 2008. I couldn't thank him enough. I was reduced to tears. Speechless. The only thing that came out was "thank you" over and over again. I was much more composed with the heart surgeon, though just as thankful, for if not for his hands I would not enjoy the liberties I have today.

I spent another year recovering from the heart surgery before I was cleared to do physical activity again. After two years of inactivity, I needed to get back into a gym. I have been an athlete all my life and was a regular at my Globo Gym before the stroke, so it had been difficult to remain dormant for so long.

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In 2008, I went back to some light lifting at the Globo. I was scared to go heavy, so I spent more time running. I started running 5Ks and set a goal to run the Boston Marathon in 2010 for Tedy's Team for the American Stroke Association.

Tedy Bruschi, a retired New England Patriots linebacker, suffered a stroke secondary to a PFO when he was 31, three days after winning the Super Bowl in 2004. It was during my training for the marathon that a great woman, Linda Winfield of CrossFit Boston, introduced me to CrossFit. I was immediately hooked but had to wait to start full time because I was on a conventional marathon training program. I ran the race in April 2010. It was my



The author (right) with fellow stroke survivor and former New England Patriots linebacker Tedy Bruschi.

second Boston Marathon, and I PR'd by 10 minutes at 4:28. My first Boston Marathon, in 2005, was pre-stroke. The race was more than a marathon to me. I had something to prove to myself. I also needed closure on the last three and a half years of my life. Finishing the race was the start of my new life.

Defining Me

I have a background as a clinical pharmacist and have worked in intensive-care units in Boston hospitals, so I was familiar with caring for stroke patients. It is a different feeling being on the other side of the coin. I was constantly reading and being told by friends and colleagues what to expect as far as my limitations. Here are a few relative to working out:

- Loss of coordination of motor movement.
- Inability to judge distance and when to stop.
- Inability to perform rapid alternating movements.
- Poor balance.
- Weak muscles.
- Neil Diamond-type sex appeal.

OK, I made up the last one. After I started at CrossFit New England full time in June 2010, I constantly had to prove that I was not the person defined by the above characteristics—that I was capable, that I was not weak. Running the marathon was a step in the right direction but didn't answer all the questions about how much the stroke really changed me. It's kind of pompous I'd ask the questions in the first place. Who did I think I was? I certainly didn't



A successful lift requires holding onto the bar while letting go of your doubts.

think I was above anyone, especially other stroke survivors. I didn't want to believe I was limited. But I had my doubts.

I never used my "expected limitations" as an excuse for why a workout didn't go the way I wanted. But I would look at a WOD and place expectations on what I would struggle with because of my "disadvantage" and be able to explain it away to myself.

This was a mistake.

I think we all look at WODs and pick out our goats or strengths and maybe game it a little. After we've been CrossFitting for a while, I think we all have an idea about how things might go. I was doing something entirely different, something even more hurtful. I was deciding how the workout was going to go before even lacing up. Instead of being conscious and living in the now, I was living in the future and placing expectations on what should occur based on what's written in textbooks and told to me by experts. This is not a knock on medicine or clinicians. Obviously I would not be here if it were not for the amazing care I received.

To progress in CrossFit, you must live in the now to be able to make it through the WODs. This is one of the most attractive qualities of CrossFit. We turn down the noise outside, focus on what's inside and, remarkably, 20 minutes become an eternity. Exhilaration turns to pride, but not for long because the next WOD that's debilitating and humbling is right around the corner.

How do we change our mental approach to a workout? I don't know. Here's something that is helpful to me. Maybe it will be useful to you.

Here's an abstract, overly elaborate but hopefully useful illustration:

Zeno's dichotomy paradox: Suppose Kevin Daigle wants to do Fran. Before he can finish, he must get halfway there. Before he can get halfway there, he must get a quarter of the way there. Before getting a quarter, he must get an eighth; before an eighth, a 16th; then a 32nd ... to infinity. Yet, we know Daigle has a sub-3-minute Fran. How is this possible?

Stop.

Really think about the paradox.

Take out a piece of paper if you need to, but make sure you understand what is being proposed before you continue. This is purely brain candy and probably annoying to think about if you're not into philosophy, but stick with me for a second.

With Zeno's dichotomy paradox, you have to come to one of two conclusions:

1. You accept that the way we think about movement and the way we experience it are two different things.
2. You accept that motion is, in fact, an illusion.

If you can come to a third conclusion, that would be amazing. Please post it in the comments for this article!

I have yet to meet someone who really believes the second reason to be true, but it certainly would be an interesting conversation. And, no, this is not *The Matrix*.

My point is we can all change the way we think about anything or, like a good movie, suspend our beliefs for the time while we are at the gym. Think about the first conclusion in the context of doing a movement at the gym.

Your brain talks you through what you think you are doing while your coach is witnessing something entirely different. We think about the motion one way but experience it in a different way. What if there is any truth to the second conclusion? It's incredibly liberating to think about that when you feel overwhelmed by something as complex as an Olympic lift. Motion is something we rarely (consciously) think about but yet obsess about every day at the gym. Get more depth, move under the bar, move your feet faster, chest touches the ground, so on and so forth. We all think about CrossFit movements, but when was the last time you thought about what motion is and how we experience it?

CrossFit tests your physical, emotional and psychological condition. It took me a while to realize that.

Physical Freedom

Of the many alluring traits of CrossFit is the refreshing autonomy the athlete experiences when learning the ropes, literally and figuratively. Take a moment to reflect on your first experiences in a CrossFit gym. Think of how great it felt to not be constricted by a machine, to not be confined by the same rep schema, workout rotation. Being placed in a more natural, demanding environment that CrossFit provides, we realize that most of us are bound by something, whether it's physical or mental, age or inexperience. No one should be judged for his or her limitations, but some are judged for how they confront them. Obstacles can occur at any point in our lives in and out of CrossFit and can be temporary or lifelong.

If you have been around CrossFit long enough, you have seen the many inspirational videos and stories of veterans who might have been handicapped or others who might have been born with a congenital defect that physically or mentally put them at a disadvantage. Yet, they persevere and achieve amazing physical feats. Not every story of courage and inspiration has to come from dramatic physical impairments—for example, Mel



Discussing strategy and which is a more impressive fashion statement: a singlet or plaid shorts.

Ockerby's incredibly inspiring performance at the 2011 North East Regional. Mel experienced extreme, bloody hand rips while doing pull-ups. All of CFNE was so proud of her for continuing through the rest of the events with wrecked hands.

Passion drives all athletes, especially those with either a permanent or temporary impairment. What happens when passion isn't enough? You want it so bad, but there's something still standing in your way. CrossFit tests your physical, emotional and psychological condition. It took me a while to realize that. I really wanted to progress in the sport but wasn't cognizant that I had created a mental model of what I was physically capable of doing.

With a combination of physical training, re-training my mind, amazing friends and coaches, I am not limited by any of those characteristics I thought I was. The only real limitation I had was the space between my ears. Changing my mindset was the crux to my development as a CrossFit athlete and is still a work in progress. I am by no means declaring I am an enlightened athlete and everything is sunshine and lollipops. I certainly still have my struggles.

Training the Mind

We are blessed to live in a country where we are born with the freedom to think, act and choose who we are or how we want to experience life. We are free to change as a person, and when we do, it has an effect on those around us. As we change as a group, we affect the larger community. Results in each setting have a sensitive dependence on the original conditions. CrossFit breeds metamorphosis. We as CrossFitters encourage it and are empowered by it.

We all go through personal change. In my case, I was moved by change. I had no choice. I resisted and denied the powerful transformation in my life. I tried to be the person I was before the stroke, which was impossible as it was an event in the past over which I had no control.

Forgive the semantics, but once I learned to move with change, I was able to regain some control over my life.

Forgive the semantics, but once I learned to move with change, I was able to regain some control over my life. I was conscious of the present and not focused on the past. When confronted with something new, we can refuse, get run over, or work with what we have and re-sculpt or re-direct the outcome.



About the Author

John Doole is a doctor of pharmacy who works at Partners Healthcare as a clinical informatician and at Massachusetts General Hospital as a pharmacist. He also serves as adjunct clinical professor at Northeastern University. He trains regularly at CrossFit New England and competes in local throwdowns. He enjoys steak, Guinness, chess, snowboarding, surfing and bacon. He lives with his two cats, Wilson and Chairman Mao, in Natick, Mass.