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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## Too Cold to Run?

When your affiliate is located in a place with sub-zero temperatures, running outside can be a daunting order. Emily Beers talks to affiliates about how they program for frigid climates and whether there are alternatives.

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By Emily Beers

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All images: CrossFit Kitchener

For most of us, heading to CrossFit doesn't take much prep time.

We throw on tiny Lululemon shorts, knee-high socks and the barefoot shoe of the day; we grab a water bottle and head out the door.

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But for CrossFitters in winter cities that see hypothermic temperatures for months at a time, it's a little more challenging than this.

Their mornings include an additional five layers of clothing and a search for the warmest jacket and mittens they can find before heading out the door into Arctic-like conditions for their first WOD: scraping the car and shoveling the driveway.

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**“We tell people to layer in three layers in the winter—a tank top, a long-sleeved shirt and then a sweatshirt so they can effectively warm up.”**

**—Melissa Gerharter**

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Melissa Gerharter of CrossFit Joust in Ann Arbor, Mich., is all too familiar with the challenges that arise when below-freezing temperatures arrive each November.

“Just keeping our industrial space warm is hard,” she said. “We keep our box at 50 degrees, which leads to cold Olympic-lifting bars and kettlebells. We tell people to layer in three layers in the winter—a tank top, a long-sleeved shirt and then a sweatshirt so they can effectively warm up.”

Like Gerharter in Michigan, “Fun” Bobby Kwasny of CrossFit SubZero in Thunder Bay, Ont., trains in conditions that freeze his nose hairs the second he steps out the door.

Kwasny, who grew up in the northern Ontario city, admits that he avoids being outside in the winter months as much as possible.

“I’m actually—and I’m serious here—allergic to the cold, and it seems to be getting worse as I age,” he said.

What Kwasny is referring to is a very real condition called cold urticaria, an allergy from exposure to a cold stimulus that causes hives or large red welts on the skin.

And the challenge doesn’t end there for Kwasny or the other freeze-your-ass-off affiliates. Once they deal with their welts and warm up their boxes and bodies enough to train, they’re presented with a CrossFit-specific dilemma: running.



*Next challenge: building a snowman for time.*

No matter how you slice it, running is one of the most functional movements in the world. It's crucial to CrossFit, not just as a movement, but also for improving cardiovascular endurance and stamina.

But what if your running terrain is covered with ice and snow for five months of the year and the air is so cold your lungs hurt when you take a deep breath?

### **Suck It Up**

When I started CrossFit in London, Ont., three years ago, I was unaware that running was a CrossFit movement. With icy roads and a foot of snow in the trails, running didn't seem like a pleasant pastime for much of the year.

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**“I remember being close to tears on some of my long runs because my hips and calves ached so bad.”**

**—Joanne Mittelholtz**

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When the snow melted in April, my coach programmed Helen. Much to my disappointment, I found myself running for the first time in five months.

Joanne Mittelholtz is the owner of CrossFit Kitchener, about an hour away from London, Ont. From November until the end of March, Kitchener has snow on the ground and sees below-freezing temperatures. But this doesn't stop her from running or from getting her clients to hit the wintery streets on foot.

“Us northern folks are tough,” Mittelholtz said. “We run all year ... but it's definitely the conditions—not the cold—that would keep us from running.”

Mittelholtz is a true runner. She trained for the Boston marathon in 2008 and 2009 in -30 C and in some horribly icy conditions.

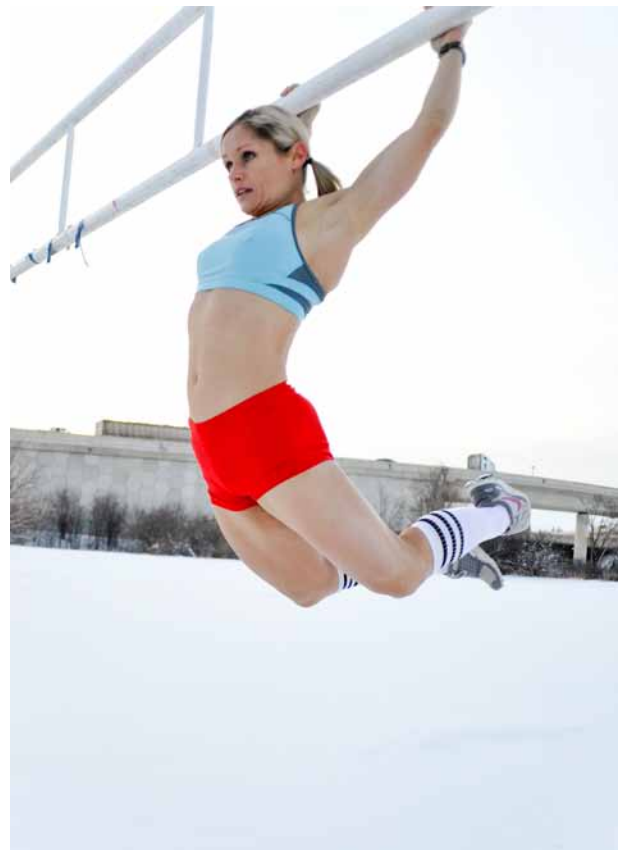
“I remember being close to tears on some of my long runs because my hips and calves ached so bad,” she said. “So whenever members whine about running 400s and 800s in a winter WOD, I tell them to suck it up.”

Lauren McClintock, who lives in the Yukon Territory in Canada, can attest to the “northern folk” strength. Last year, McClintock moved to the Yukon from a much milder part of British Columbia and still is adapting to the cold climate.

“You either come here and you love it or you hate it,” said McClintock, who admitted it has been a challenge trying to CrossFit outside in the winter. “But the locals are out there running, even in the coldest of days. There's even a crazy ultra-marathon race here every year in February.”

People in the Yukon are “just extreme,” McClintock added.

“Even CrossFitters keep running in the winter. They just throw YakTrax on their shoes, and cyclists throw winter tires on their bikes. I even have a co-worker who bikes to work every day, all winter,” she said.



***Polar bear Joanne Mittelholtz is one affiliate owner who doesn't let the weather determine her programming.***





#### **Snow tires?**

"You have to find a way to keep exercising outside up here during the winter or else you get depressed."

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**"There is no chance anyone is doing running WODs outside at CrossFit SubZero in the winter."**

**—Bobby Kwasny**

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McClintock said she isn't ready to run in mid-December, but she picked up cross-country skiing this winter to give her some much-needed fresh air.

Although she has enjoyed her foray into skiing so far, she does crave the milder weather sometimes.

"I do miss having those garage doors open all year round, and to be able to drop a weight and fly out the door and run," she said.

#### **Running Substitutes**

Unlike the run-all-year-round folks in Kitchener and the Yukon, many CrossFit affiliates in cold-winter cities have found other ways to maintain their cardiovascular endurance and stamina without freezing on the icy streets.

Kwasny, whose mascot at CrossFit SubZero is a jacked-up snowman named Marion, doesn't bother trying to fight the frigid temperatures that come his way each year.

"There is no chance anyone is doing running WODs outside at CrossFit SubZero in the winter," he said. "There are people—mostly the crazy-ass Finns that live here—that run year round, but they don't have to come inside, knock off 20 chins and 10 heavy deadlifts, then re-bundle themselves and go smoke another 400 meters."

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**"We use the winter months  
to build as much horsepower  
as possible."**

**—Bobby Kwasny**

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Both Kwasny and Gerharter program a lot of rowing and burpees during the winter months to maintain aerobic fitness. And, of course, they do a lot of double-unders. It's obviously not the same as running, but Kwasny and Gerharter agree it's better than nothing.

Alex Cibiri, of Element CrossFit in Mississauga, Ont., said he doesn't think burpees and rowing are adequate substitutes for running. He has two treadmills in his box. One of them is a more challenging self-powered treadmill that "really sucks ... in a good way," he said.

"Lots of people wonder why we bother with treadmills, but to me cutting out all running during the winter months isn't an option for my running clients," he said. "I want to be able to facilitate training various types of clients, even if I hate running myself."

But with only two treadmills for 200 clients, it's impossible to keep them all running all the time, so like the other affiliates, he resorts to double-unders, burpees and burpee box jumps to provide aerobic conditioning.

### **A Time to Strength Train**

For Kwasny's Thunder Bay crew, when the cold comes, it's simply a time to work on other important elements of CrossFit.

"In our gym, our motto is, 'There is no substitute for strength,'" he said. "It doesn't matter how cold and shitty it is outside. It is 60 degrees and sunny in the gym and the 335 lb. on the bar is still 335 lb., and it doesn't give two shits that you had to shovel your driveway and your car didn't start."

In a way, the winter has created a sort of forced periodization for Kwasny's programming, which he said has benefited his athletes.

"I learned a long time ago that any obstacle can be an opportunity, so yeah it sucks that we can't be outside for five months of the year, but we use the winter months to build as much horsepower as possible," he said.

Those who make it through the winter become "strong as fuck," Kwasny said.

"So in the spring, when we start running 400-meter repeats and tossing kegs around, you see guys that couldn't lift the 135-lb. keg last year tossing it up like it's the 90-lb. keg this year, and athletes that couldn't break 1:30 in the 400 meter last year running six sub-1:20 repeats first time out."

And the truth is, despite his allergy to the cold, Kwasny said he loves living in Thunder Bay. He has adjusted to the -40 C way of life the same way the average CrossFitter has adapted to busting out 100 squats a few times a week.

"Weather is like life: if you are prepared, you can deal with anything," he said. "So if you plug in your car, pay the kid up the street to shovel your driveway, bundle up and don't be a fucking pansy, winter can be pretty manageable."



### **About the Author**

*Emily Beers is a **CrossFit Journal** staff writer and editor who finished a master's degree in journalism at the University of Western Ontario in the spring of 2009. Upon graduation, she worked as a sportswriter at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games, where she covered figure skating and short-track speed skating. Currently, she hosts **WOD HOG**, a not-always-PG publication of the CrossFit Vancouver School of Fitness. She ruptured her Achilles tendon in December 2010 and served as the Canada West Regional Media Director while recovering from surgery. Beers also competed in the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games on CrossFit Vancouver's team. She finished third at the Canada West Regional in 2012.*