

CrossFit in the Ashram

When an aid worker brought the WOD to an orphanage in India, new worlds opened—for her and her kids

Rashmi Cole



The chaos, the exotic scents, the wild monkeys roaming about, the occasional elephant, the laborers stooped in the fields, planting and harvesting, and far in the distance, poking through the mists, the Himalayas. Here, in one of the poorest, least-literate places in the world—the northern India state of Uttarakhand, where the nearby village, Shyampur, didn't get electricity until the year 2000—are the 16 acres of rural farmland upon which sits [Sri Ram Ashram](#)

Sri Ram Ashram is an orphanage for 65 destitute and orphaned children, a school for 550 children, and a charitable medical clinic. The ashram, which literally translates as “home” in Hindi, was founded in 1984, inspired by Baba Hari Dass, a Mauni Sadhu (“silent monk”) who has dedicated his life to the service of humanity. Now, every day at 6 a.m. in front of the ashram's main building, while most of the ashram children participate in a daily exercise and yoga class, a small group of older boys start to do something never before seen in this part of the world: CrossFit.

I am a middle-aged American female from California. In the early 1990s I began spending ten months of the year in India to help run the ashram. Sri Ram Ashram is my passion and a wonderful project, but it hasn't been kind to my health. In 2005 I dabbled in CrossFit, having the good fortune to work briefly with Coach Glassman and his wife Lauren. In 2006, I took a year's sabbatical to concentrate on improving my health. CrossFit became the centerpiece of this effort.

When I first returned to India in August 2007, I valiantly tried to keep up my program. I purchased one of the two Concept 2 rowers available in Delhi, lugging it back to our ashram through torrential monsoons and landslides. I did okay, but cranking out the Workout of the Day (WOD) day-in and day-out can be a long and lonely process. Back in the US for the summer of '08, I voraciously visited CrossFit Santa Cruz Central, trying to pound myself into a routine that would carry me through another year in India.

When I returned to India, I was determined to figure out a way to keep up the WODs. One afternoon I discovered our older boys, age 16-18, buffing their biceps in our tiny gym and challenged them to join me in the WOD, a combination of running, thrusters, and shoulder presses. They smiled, accepted the challenge, smoked me, and were utterly exhausted. Shocked and intrigued (and motivated by getting out of regular PT and yoga, required of everyone beginning at kindergarten), four of them came back the next day for more. Since that day, we have followed the CrossFit protocol religiously.

The four boys who showed up for the first official day of CrossFit—Gautam, an athletic non-exerciser; Vijai Raj, the fitness freak; Arvind, an occasional weight lifter; and Uttam, a runner—were all shocked to discover that they could barely do a sit-up. When they saw me whip out sit-ups while they had to anchor their feet and flail their arms, they almost fell over. The same thing happened the first time we did the plank. It was a turning point when they realized their 50-year-old Didi (the name they call me) could out-exercise them. It's never happened again, but in that moment they realized the importance of overall fitness.

In the beginning we spent most of each morning on skills, which often felt disappointing to the boys. They couldn't understand why we weren't pumping iron and often I would catch them doing bicep curls after our workouts. At the end of one early skills session I told them we would close with a seven-minute workout. In Indian culture, younger people can't really say much to elders, so in spite of being incredulous, they remained quietly amused. By the end of one minute of max pull-ups, five minutes of





burpees, and one minute of pull-ups, they looked dazed. When I mentioned how long five minutes can feel, Vijai said, "One minute is a long time." Who among us hasn't felt the wrath of a CrossFit minute?

Getting By on Less Equipment

The beauty of CrossFit is that so much can be done with little equipment. The boys and I have become very creative in recreating the WODs. We have been known to tear apart the furniture to find the perfect ab mat. One day the ashram looked on in amusement as we collected doormats so our dumbbells wouldn't roll during man-makers. After much trial and error, the boys determined a woolen muffler works best for weighted pull-ups. For pushups, supermans, and sit-ups we hit the deck, whether it's on grass, brick or cement. The low wall that surrounds the courtyard is perfect for box jumps, and, with adjustments, works for bench presses.

We have lots of room to run, and have carefully measured various distances. Our driveway is a convenient 109 meters; a loop around the building is just about 400 meters (sprinting past the funky septic, gas tanks, and trash area). We often have to negotiate who gets which dumbbell, and I always pull rank for the one Abmat.

To navigate the one pull up bar we may start a WOD incrementally. We have one rower, which is located in the girl's section, an area forbidden to boys—a sacred rule we have now broken. When we need individual timers, I round up the staff's cell phones. Figuring out how to navigate our many obstacles has been fun and creative. It's taught us to just do it.

The biggest problem has been with the bars, and with plates. Besides the daily chore of mixing and matching kilograms and pounds, the plates are small in diameter and the collars are often broken or don't fit certain bars, making them time-consuming and dangerous. We use the bars cautiously as the plates can easily come flying off. On one bar we tie the plates on with rope or our trusty muffler. Stepping up the weight requires carefully choreographed, coordinated bar management. There are five to seven of us on any given day and sometimes we run three different workouts due to lack of equipment. It's all great and it all works.

We are slowly building our gym. Recently, with a generous donation, we purchased our first two Olympic bars and bumper plates. They look huge compared to what we had been working with, and the boys are thrilled; their testosterone levels skyrocketed when we unpacked them.



I can guarantee we have the only set in the entire village. The collars that came with the bars are still pathetic, but a friend brought a set from America that fit perfectly. We also ordered "soft" medicine balls from Delhi and added a dip bar in the playground. We are discussing with a local welder how to make our own squat racks. On a recent trip to America I brought back three sets of rings and some quality jump ropes. Our exercise/TV/study room is a wild jumble of assorted equipment.

A Social and Educational Spillover

While the physical benefits of CrossFit are tremendous, it's the unexpected "other" benefits that have been the biggest reward: improved relationships, camaraderie, confidence, fortitude, and resourcefulness. The boys now look people in the eye, and speak English with guests. They have learned to navigate the Internet in their search for WODs and technique. Their grades have improved and they are the center of awe and respect from their peers. They appreciate teamwork and understand the importance of keeping the workouts safe. In the beginning they scoffed at rest days; now they appreciate them. They no longer ask for bicep curls and they better understand the concept of all-around fitness and performance.

All the children now want to exercise, but I don't have the time or expertise to work with so many children of different ages and levels of fitness. The boys I exercise with are strong and athletic and I have always felt comfortable training with them. However, when Ravi showed up one morning I didn't have the heart to turn him away. Ravi is one of the few overweight children of the ashram. He has always been the odd boy out, the only one in his age group who isn't on the field hockey team, the one whom the other children tend to tease. Since he started exercising, his transformation has been remarkable. For the first time he joins the Frisbee games. He holds himself differently and has a sense of body awareness. His teachers marvel at his transformed behavior in school. Best of all, he now has a relationship with the older boys and respect from the younger children. He is thrilled and I can sense his pride.

A Woman Leading Boys

I use an Indian first name when in India. Rashmi means "ray of sunlight." While being a female ray of light leading boys in exercise has not been an issue within the confines of our ashram, it certainly helps to be a senior staff member. In most other places in India there could be resistance, but we are a village unto itself, and the people here are used to having foreigners do crazy and unusual things. Our



home is a global experiment. We hope to blend the best of several cultures; our main goal is to provide unconditional love to children who wouldn't have love otherwise. At this point people just shrug when we break social norms.

A few years ago, I tried working out in traditional Indian dress, but last year I finally switched to loose workout clothes. After receiving at least one comment from every child, they quickly got used to seeing my new attire. The staff had a harder time adapting. Some staff are day laborers, others live on the property. Some are literate, while others have never been to school. We employ both Muslims and Hindus. The local region is primarily rural farming; planting, protecting and harvesting the crop are the main sources of local exercise. It took the staff a while to understand what was happening with kids, CrossFit, and me. Each morning as the cowman walks past us carrying fresh milk, he absolutely gawks at what we choose to do. The gateman has run after us shooing away monkeys; staff members offer to carry my dumbbells during the "farmer's walks." Their duty is to serve me, a female and their "boss," not watch me suffer. I have had to explain that I am, in fact, choosing to carry the weights.

The boys in the ashram have been very accepting of me leading them, partly because the culture demands respect for elders, and partly because they have grown to love CrossFit. It has been a huge boon for them, and they know it.

CrossFit is Here to Stay

What started as a solitary quest for fitness has turned into so much more. We've had guests—most recently a fire fighter from Canada whose unit trains with CrossFit led the WOD—and we've had bonding. There have been many special moments and memorable CrossFit workouts.

After only a few weeks of exercising together, we celebrated my 50th birthday with a rousing rendition of Filthy Fifties. Even though we started extra early to finish in time for school at 7:30 a.m., it was incredibly hot and humid (we don't have air conditioning). The other children excitedly tracked our progress as they got ready for school. It was our first long exercise together, and it made us closer.

We followed that a couple of months later with our first attempt at 'Fran.' At least 35 children cheered us on by screaming out the number of reps with all their hearts.

CrossFit has transformed my relationship with the boys, which hadn't always been smooth; there is now a solidarity between us that never existed before. They are wonderful exercise partners, gracious and eager. They keep me honest by showing up bright-eyed every morning. In the true spirit of CrossFit, well after they have lapped me, stretched and cooled down, they are waiting to cheer me on as I reach for the finish line. We have become closer in our three months of CrossFit than we have in the past ten years.

About two months into our CrossFit odyssey, we took a tour of the gyms in the nearby city of Haridwar. The boys had never seen a gym and I was curious about what equipment other gyms had. The first gym we visited was about 25 feet by 25 feet and specifically designed for heavy lifting and posing competitions. There was an older man, the guru of the gym, guiding about eight to ten men in various lifts. The gym was pure grit; no women, no shoes, all benches hand-made with notches axed into them to hold bars. After getting permission for a woman (me) to enter, the guru gave us a tour complete with demonstrations of various squats and lifts, and a brief posing session by the gym's star. When the boys had first started exercising they wanted that young poser's body. As we left, after two months of CrossFit under their belts, I heard them say, "Yeah, but can he do a 10-minute Helen?" That's when I realized CrossFit was here to stay.



About The Author

Rashmi Cole a middle-aged American female from California, who in the early 1990s began spending ten months of the year in India to help run Sri Ram Ashram, an orphanage, school, and medical clinic near the city of Haridwar. She started CrossFit in 2005, and had the good fortune to work briefly with Coach Glassman and his wife Lauren in Santa Cruz.

