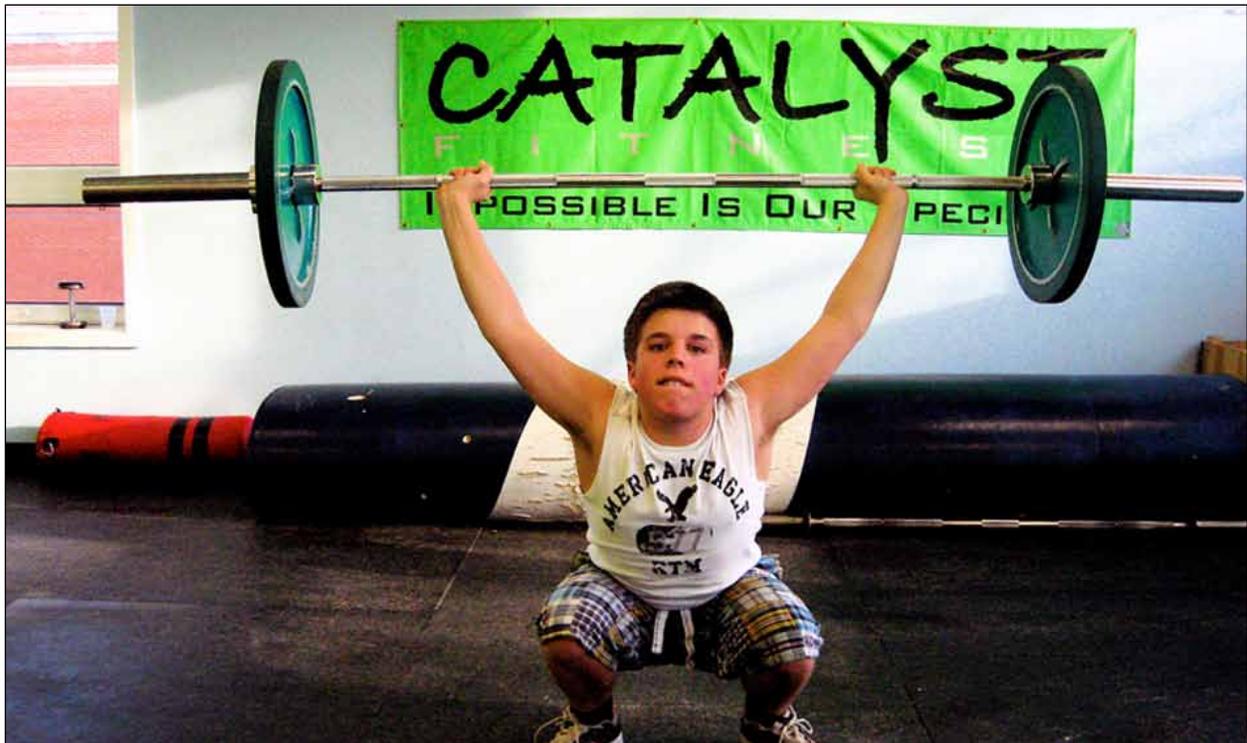


“CrossFit Today!” says Sebastien

How CrossFit’s task-linked physical training is helping make an autistic teenager better socially, verbally, and athletically.

Chris Cooper



Sebastien Wetzel is a star around these parts.

Called ‘Baba’ by his friends, the typical French diminution of his given name, Sebastien has gone from a distracted 12-year-old to a powerhouse athlete in a few short years. He plays football; he plays basketball; he powerlifts. He does CrossFit.

And he’s autistic.

Sebastien and I became friends when he started with Catalyst Fitness (our box), here in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, three years ago. Back then, Catalyst was a non-CrossFit personal-training-only facility, set up on the top floor of a dumpy office building, and Sebastien's verbal skills were limited to one- or two-word questions and requests. "Toilet now" while tugging at my sleeve was a big one. He was also prone to bursting out into laughter, or doing little shrieks as if he were testing his voice, without warning. He was emotionally confused. He'd stop and stare at construction sites when we were on our way to the park to work on balance. Sebastien couldn't coordinate his feet well enough to use a slide board. He couldn't focus long enough to answer questions about his pets. He only wanted to talk about toilets.

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Then he began visiting
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A hallmark of autism is the 'blank' face: The uncaring disconnect of those to whom the world just isn't registering. Even kids at the edge of the autism spectrum routinely show a lack of ability to judge people's responses to their actions. "Will this make mommy sad or happy?" is a question that a child with autism just can't answer.

Three years ago, this was Sebastien: Pulling wallpaper off the entire house, breaking glass, obsessed with toilets.

Then he began visiting Catalyst twice per week for personal training.

I was his trainer and coach. We'd work on "task-linking" activities thought to engender functional learning in autistic people. These involve following (linking) a lengthy set of instructions (tasks) in sequential order, recognizing patterns of movement, and moving through exercises in a linear motion without losing focus. The goal was fitness training that served to help Sebastien function better: socially at first, and eventually in a workplace setting.

This project was all started at the behest of his very forward-thinking parents. When Baba was 8, doctors recommended institutionalization because they didn't think he'd ever speak; nothing coherent came out of his mouth. Of course, Sebastien's father, Dr. Luc Duchesne (a shareholder in Catalyst), didn't pay any heed. As our other gym business partner noted, Sebastien, one of three kids, couldn't have been born into a better family. "Physical activity is the way young boys socialize," says his mom, Dr. Suzanne Wetzel. Not surprisingly, both she and Luc are quite athletic themselves.

The couple started Sebastien in ABA (Applied Behavioral Analysis) therapy. It works on the principles of analyzing behavior based on what comes before, and trying to modify the outcome by looking at its antecedents.

It's a science. It's good teaching. It's a system of reinforcement and less reinforcement. In the old days, it involved punishment, but not anymore. Luc and Suzanne saw the potential to increase Baba's education through physical endeavor and an increased work capacity.

"At the very worst," Suzanne said, "he'll lose his pot belly."

Step 1: Discovering that CrossFit-style Methods Made Exercise Stick

CrossFit didn't enter the picture at Catalyst until 2007.

Our staff was just ending a two-year study on exercise adherence, and we were struggling to make sense of the results. After manipulating variables in different groups, using double-blind procedures at the beginning, and measuring thousands of workouts, we were facing a contradiction. On the one hand, our own research was suggesting that constantly varied, short, intense workouts with a comparison-based scoring system greatly increased adherence to exercise. On the other hand, our collective University degrees (Bachelor and Graduate) all strongly pushed for the "3-sets-of-8 reps-to-near-failure" paradigm.

What started out as a short experiment in workout delivery had morphed into a huge project illustrating the need for constant variety, a higher degree of challenge, comparison to one's peers and one's previous best, and reprimand for missing workouts. We had shifted our average adherence rate from under 50% of people doing

their physical 'homework' to 83%. We were doing complex movements with people we'd never met. We were doing powerlifts and Olympic lifts and Tabata, because that's what kept people exercising. We were doing CrossFit.

We knew about CrossFit as early as 2005. We knew there was a growing fan base. We knew there were full-on disciples and addicts. But we were skeptical from the start. Yet every step of the way, every time our research finished a short phase of manipulating one small variable, we'd be pushed toward a CrossFit-style model.

We kicked a bit. We didn't believe it. We threw a couple of our trainers under the CrossFit bus for a month. Then we threw ten poor souls into the mix. They were all former clients, and we gave them space and minimal coaching for free to try CrossFit for a month. At this point, we were still 50/50 on the idea of bringing CrossFit into our little personal training practice. We used former PT clients so we'd have nothing to lose if they didn't like it. Two weeks in, we had enough requests to form another 'trial' group. After our third 'trial' group, we started the affiliation process. This was March 2008.

Step 2: Putting Sebastien in the CrossFit Mix

Also in March '08, we saw the value of linking complicated patterns together for Sebastien. He had begun to show signs of improvement at linking small patterns together physically, but there was usually a unifying object (for instance, he couldn't put the bar down until he'd cleaned the bar, caught it, stood up, dipped again, exploded upward, and dipped to catch a jerk.) Now we decided to start linking big movements together, and then add the time element.

"When Sebastien first started with me, the goal of his parents was to unleash the use of force," says Tyler Belanger, a personal trainer at Catalyst, and Sebastien's coach. "We started with drills like pushing over a heavy bag, pushing a box on rubber flooring and throwing med balls to different heights. We wanted him to be able to lift weight that was 'too heavy,' as Sebastien put it. Once Sebastien really started using some force, we started introducing him to CrossFit workouts.



"Workouts that take a beginner CrossFitter seven minutes to finish would take Sebastien 30-40 minutes," continues Belanger. "He had difficulty focusing when moving to another exercise and would take frequent breaks when he visibly was not tired. He loved working out—that was obvious. So we started to use the white board and wrote down the WOD. After he completed it, he was allowed to erase it.

"At that point, we started to see Sebastien really start to approach the workout as a task to be completed. CrossFit felt like sport to him, and that really helped."

At first, external rewards were necessary; we had a system of tokens to earn and prizes for good behavior. One morning a few weeks ago, for instance, Sebastien's first comment to his mom was, "CrossFit today!"

Today, Sebastien's a long way from that kid who walked in the Catalyst door three years ago. Now, at 5-foot-9 and 180 pounds, Baba is nearly as wide-shouldered as his CrossFitting father; and he's 20 pounds heavier than his brother, who's two years older. In his first powerlifting meet, a push/pull at our monthly Virtualmeet in January, he had a 115-pound bench press and 235-pound deadlift. He's no longer frightened by fast-moving footballs; he can throw a pattern or receive; he can stick a snatch or survive a closely-judged bench press. He says he'd like to compete in the Special Olympics someday.

And here's the real kicker: he CARES. [Watch the video of him at the Virtualmeet](#) (password: CATALYST) and you'll see, as the weight goes up, the beaming rays of pride pierce through the fog of autism. In his mom Suzanne's words: "It's given him something to be proud of. Every kid needs a strong skill like that, something to take pride in."

Sebastian's progress, as hoped, shows big gains in social and verbal function. Now he speaks in staccato sentences. "Chris-can-I-go-to-the-bathroom-NOW?" is typical. The emphasis may be on the wrong word, but he's not just memorizing text; he's putting it together. I imagine this is how I sound speaking French, which I took until the 10th grade.

Tyler is trying to get him to showboat a bit with the football like other guys his age (until now, he'd make a brilliant over-the-shoulder catch in the gym, and then drop the ball and go look out the window, or he'd rip through Fran and say, "Tyler-can-we-play-footBALL?")

without pausing for breath.) So he'll do something cool, then climb up on the wrestling mat, flex his pipes, and say, "You-can't-handle-THIS." It sounds funny, but braggadocio is part of the 15-year-old's social makeup, and Baba has none. We're trying to instill a sense of pride in accomplishment, and this is the first step. It's working: look at the end of the bench press video, and he clearly 'gets it.' This wouldn't have happened a few months ago.

A few weeks ago, my wife Robin and I took Sebastien out to a hockey game. We had a box for the game, and he came in, hung up his coat, looked at me, and said, "Hi-Chris-nice-hair-CUT," clearly trying to rib me over my messy hair. I started laughing. Robin, said, "Hey!" pretending to take offense. Baba grinned his way to the seats up front of the box. We went to sit in front of him. He rubbed my head and said, "Nice-hair-CUT." I shook my fist at him, and he chuckled until his popcorn arrived.

Just like a normal 15-year-old.



About the Author

Chris Cooper is President of Catalyst Fitness in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. Split between two facilities—a private personal training centre, and a CrossFit Box—Catalyst Fitness is engaged in research, athletic development, and the pursuit of all things fitness. Chris has two small kids, a 14-hour workday; a 2:51 Diane; a 520-pound deadlift PR; an incredible staff of trainers, therapists, and coaches; a probable case of mild ADD; and a VERY patient wife. Reach him at catalystfitness@yahoo.ca or check out [Catalyst Fitness on-line](#).