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Quality of Life, Not Leisure

Lt. Jason Fernandez believes it's time for members of the military to rethink their definitions of quality of life to include things that really matter—like fitness and health.

By Lt. Jason Fernandez

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What is quality of life?

Ask the average CrossFitter, and you'll probably hear something about being able to walk up the stairs, play with your grandchildren or get off the toilet at the age of 75.

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Now ask the same question of your typical military member, especially one on a lengthy deployment, and you're bound to hear something along the lines of bigger TVs and more comfortable living arrangements.

CrossFit has defined fitness, and I think we as a military fighting force owe it to ourselves to define quality of life. I would contend that we are doing our people a great disservice by not delineating differences between "real" quality of life and the amenities or items of comfort that are generally considered quality-of-life issues. When it comes down to it, if you don't possess the capacity to remove yourself or your teammate from danger, then the size of your TV or the softness of your chair is pretty irrelevant. It's not that the niceties aren't appreciated, but I believe it's time we reassess our needs and decide what's truly important to ourselves and the military as a whole.

Quality of Life: Health or TVs?

"Quality of life" is a phrase that is thrown around so much in the military that it has become misunderstood. As a supply officer in the U.S. Navy, I hear the phrase a lot, and in my opinion it has been bastardized to the point that I give it about as much consideration as I do to washing my vehicle in the middle of the desert!

"We need bigger TVs for the living spaces."

"We need more comfortable chairs to sit in."

"We need nicer equipment."

I deal with things like this on a daily basis, and although the bellyaching varies slightly from command to command, the emphasis remains the same. I should clarify: I am by no means denying that these tangible items are important, but I would argue that their importance—their necessity—has become greatly exaggerated. The luxuries and conveniences undoubtedly improve morale for the troops in stressful environments, but in excess they lead to sloth and complacency.

I want to stress that I take a great deal of pride in filling any and all requests to every customer I work for. I would love to provide everyone with a huge flat-screen TV and a comfortable recliner, but it is my contention that these items do little more than provide a fleeting gratification. In terms of real quality of life, we should be more concerned with diet, mobility, shelter, employment, close friendships, family, leisure and recreational activities, and improving health and fitness. My primary concern is that, as a military, we have lost sight of the true definition of "quality of life." This absence of understanding has arguably made us weaker as a total force and, in turn, weaker as a nation.



Ask a CrossFitter to define "quality of life," and once he catches his breath he'll probably talk to you about functional fitness.

Changing the Military Mentality

For many years I, as well as many others, have witnessed a lack of comprehension of what quality of life really means, so in response I've decided to conduct an experiment to see if I could use CrossFit methodology to re-educate our people.

Ask any supply officer what two questions he or she most often receives, and I'll bet my next paycheck that the answer will be something to the effect of, "How much money do we have?" and "Where are my parts?" Now that my experiment is underway, the questions I am more likely to receive on a regular basis range are very different:

"Why am I off-balance on my overhead squat?"

"What should I be eating?"

"What's the WOD?" This last one is the most common, of course.

CrossFit makes sailors more capable of "doing without" when the situation mandates it, and inevitably it always does.

These questions are not only more entertaining to field, but they also mean people have begun the paradigm shift from TVs to GPP—general physical preparedness.

And I'll let you in on a little secret: if you can keep them worrying about how sore their legs are or get them to realize they can wear their kit more comfortably for longer periods of time, they won't sweat the small stuff as much! It is my experience that CrossFit makes sailors more capable of "doing without" when the situation mandates it, and inevitably it always does. CrossFit not only realigns their priorities but also, as advertised, helps them better prepare for the unknown and unknowable.



What would you choose: a monster TV and a recliner or the ability to squat at 70?



According to Jason Fernandez, a link may exist between quality of life and quality of squat.

When we landed in Iraq, there was a huge amount of space and just enough equipment to get the basics done. I brought my own set of bumper plates and a couple of barbells because I wasn't sure what would be available. I started working out by myself in the high bay, and it took about a week before my "wolf pack of one" became three. I guess the sight of me lying face down in the dirt after a WOD was appealing!

Our first "group WOD" consisted of me and Nick Matics, my co-conspirator and another long-time CrossFitter, convincing our contemporaries and superiors that doing Fight Gone Bad would be a great way to bid farewell to a transferring operations officer. "Hail and Farewells" are a long-standing tradition in the Navy and are usually informal gatherings to send off shipmates and welcome new ones. Fight Gone Bad has become, unofficially, our unit's Hail and Farewell. It's kind of like saying, "Sorry to see you go ... welcome to the group. This is what we are about. 3,2,1... Go!"

After that WOD, we sat down with the brass and discussed making CrossFit a bigger operation for the command, as well as the feasibility of continuing the program upon returning home. The return on investment for the equipment was obvious, but the intrigue that was spawned by the group workouts was the true selling point.

Luckily, we had Navy Seabees (Construction Battalions) at our disposal, and their talents are limitless. I drew up some plans (that looked very similar to some of the Christmas cards we got from a very nice kindergarten class), and in four weeks we had a 750-square-foot box. (Don't ever underestimate the benefit of having even just one Seabee; they are an invaluable asset to any naval command.)

We scrounged up some rubber flooring that was being thrown out, found a few guys who could weld some pull-up bars, and we were in business. We purchased more equipment, spending less than \$3,000, and we had everything you would find in a gym back home. The leadership immediately saw what this could bring to the unit.

Within 30 days, we reached critical mass for the amount of equipment we had and were forced to split the class in two. We now have more than 25 people showing up every day. Our athletes range from contractors to operators to support personnel, with all branches of military service represented. In short, we have seen all the typical gains that come with CrossFit: increased work capacity and self-esteem, reduction in injuries, improved attitudes, more strength, more endurance, etc.

Real Quality of Life, CrossFit-Style

You may think this is going to lead into a “CrossFit saved my life” story, but it isn’t. As CrossFit disciples, we already know that story all too well, so I won’t belabor it further. This is about improving general quality of life in a war zone.

After about two months of WODs, the atmosphere here was amazing. People were working harder, not only in the gym, but at everything else as well. If one person told me he or she felt better at work and got more done, they all did. People you wouldn’t typically find socializing were doing just that, and the importance of this team atmosphere can never be overstated.

Quality of life is any activity or asset that enables you to perform your duties in a manner that contributes to the greater good of your unit/group.

Some guys are making plans to have their spouses and children start CrossFitting when we get back. Some have mentioned moving in order to be closer to a gym. One junior officer plans to run 30 miles on his 30th birthday, and another is halfway through a “deployment burpee challenge”: over 16,000 burpees in six months. These goals are a far cry from what we might have heard before our CrossFit revolution. In our efforts to mesh how the CrossFit community and military view quality of life, we’ve unintentionally created a significantly improved command climate. We successfully forged the “culture of fitness” the Navy promotes but doesn’t follow through on. Physical readiness tests on elliptical machines? Come on!

There are moments when you know you have a good thing going. Those moments would include the skipper encouraging a junior sailor through his last minutes of Cindy—or vice versa—because they both understand what it feels like.



In just two months, Jason Fernandez and his men had created a CrossFit community in Iraq.

I would be lying if I told you this all started with my humble devotion to teaching the sport of fitness to others. While I absolutely love training other people, this whole thing was without a doubt spawned from my selfish desire to qualify for the 2010 CrossFit Games. I didn't want to "go without" in my training regiment and, in short, I justified this project as quality of life for myself. This is the only instance that I can remember where my selfish intentions benefitted the greater good of the group.

In closing, if I were to try to sum up what true quality of life is, it would be something like this: quality of life is any activity or asset that enables you to perform your duties in a manner that contributes to the greater good of your unit/group. Somehow I don't see TVs and video games falling under that definition, but feel free to disagree with me on this one.



About the Author

Jason Fernandez graduated from the United States Naval Academy in 2004 and is currently deployed to Iraq supporting EOD operations. He trains at GSS CrossFit in Virginia Beach, Va., and has the following CrossFit certifications: Level 1, Endurance and Nutrition.

