

the **CrossFit**
JOURNAL ARTICLES

Best of CrossFit: Russell Greene edition

A mind- and body-strengthening journey into the *real* "Real World"

Russell Greene



Karen and I entered the local R.G. Burger for an epic post-CrossFit Games cheat meal. We had spent the last 48 hours with the most hard-core CrossFitters in the world at the CrossFit Games. I had little skin left on my hands and had difficulty getting out of chairs. Karen had executed 25 reps in the clean and jerk at a weight that a few months earlier had exceeded her max.

We examined the strange people sitting around us in the restaurant. The couple next to us was discussing shopping malls and ice cream vendors. Not a single person in the restaurant looked as if he had ever done a muscle-up. It was as if they were Martians. I turned to Karen and said "We're back in the real world, and I don't like it."

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CrossFit is a Mind Game

To the uninitiated, advanced CrossFitters look like physically imposing athletes performing strange exercises at high speeds. It doesn't seem like there's much of a mental component to the sport.

Nonetheless, success at CrossFit is a mind game. Three main prerequisites for success at CrossFit are intensity, technique, and nutrition. Intensity comes from a deep-seated desire within the athlete to overcome the pain of the present in return for a faster time or heavier lift. Technique begins with learning the movements conceptually and is ingrained through consistent practice. Finally, success with nutrition is primarily contingent upon psychological discipline. All of these components are mostly mental affairs. Combine them in one person and you get athletes like [Nicole Carroll](#), [James Fitzgerald](#), and [Greg Amundson](#).

The philosophy and training of CrossFit changes lives. This psychological transformation is key to our community. It brings us closer to each other and farther apart from most everybody else. In my case, only a few of my friends don't do CrossFit. I'm still working on them.

Pre-CrossFit: Mentally Weak

Physical training is so fundamental to my life now that it's hard to think of who I was before it, or what type of person I would be without it. Whatever the opposite of a natural athlete is, that was me. In elementary school, I was always picked last for any sport we played during recess. During the several years that I played baseball, I'm not sure if I ever hit the ball. I kept my Presidential

Fitness Test results from the 5th grade: 50% percentile, perfectly mediocre. The psychological effects of my weakness were more pernicious than the physical effects. I was an unconfident, self-pitying geek.

At 13 years old, I vowed to rectify this situation. I joined the local YMCA and used all the weight machines there. My upper body strength increased but I made little progress as an athlete.

Mentally, I was still very immature. I was living near New York City when Al Qaeda attacked us on 9/11. I was volunteering at a local hospital at the time and I rushed over to see if they needed help dealing with a sudden influx of patients. From that hospital, I could see the smoke of lower Manhattan. Several dozen people from my town died. While I now consider the terrorist attacks to be the most important moment of my life, I don't remember feeling any deep emotions about it at the time other than shock.

Soon after the attacks, the War on Terror began. Even though I read the *New York Times* every day, it was easier to ignore what was going on in Iraq and Afghanistan than to actually think about what these events meant for my country. I decided that if there ever were a military draft, I would do my best to avoid it since I didn't care about anything other than living a long and easy life. It makes me sick now to think how mentally weak I was back then.

In the Beginning

I first stumbled upon CrossFit.com six years ago, around my 16th birthday in 2002. I remember reading "[What is Fitness](#)" like it was a revelation. I was almost immediately convinced. At the time, the only CrossFit gym in the world was the original HQ in Santa Cruz, so I was doing stuff like high-rep cleans and one-leg squats on my own with only grainy videos as instruction. Given my form, it was not the most effective training, but it taught me a lot about what I could accomplish on my own initiative.

I started before the launch of the current CrossFit site. The old site was a lot uglier. You can still access the [old Workouts of the Day here](#). I recommend reading through those WODs and trying some of them out. Some say that the WODs have gotten harder since then, but those old WODs are scorchers.

You'll notice that there's a quote above most of the workouts. Some of them are from athletes or coaches, but many of them have nothing directly to do with

sports. For example, [this WOD](#) features a quote from John Wesley that is especially appropriate to CrossFit trainers: "Catch on fire with enthusiasm and people will come for miles to watch you burn."

These quotes remind us that from the beginning, CrossFit has been a philosophical movement as well as a fitness program.

Celebrating What Works

Central to CrossFit is its epistemological model. This is a fancy way of describing how we know what we know. CrossFit asserts that meaningful statements about fitness must be based upon performance data. Our performance data is primarily available in the comments section of every Workout of the Day. It has been clear for years that the [WOD comments](#) offered a unique look into the development of elite fitness.

Outside of CrossFit, people usually evaluate each other's statements in a non-scientific matter. The argument by authority is very popular. People turn to institutions or experts for knowledge rather than testing what works on their own. CrossFit's simple, but groundbreaking assertion is that we should evaluate fitness programs according to the performance data of their athletes. This approach is disturbingly uncommon in the non-CrossFit fitness world. Coach Glassman's post on "[Evidence Based Fitness](#)" elaborates on this concept.

A corollary to CrossFit's epistemological model is the realization that one can obtain elite fitness anywhere. As Coach Glassman says, "There is greater potential for serious strength and conditioning in a two-car garage than nearly all commercial health clubs or gyms." Fitness institutions do not have a monopoly on truth or effective programming. In fact, their bureaucratic organizational

structure impedes their efficacy by limiting their experimentation and adaptation.

Coach Glassman's father, Jeff, has written extensively on the subject of scientific epistemology. I highly recommend his CrossFit Journal interview and article on the subject for those interested in a deeper look at this philosophy: [Science and the Rest Day Discussions](#) and [Conjecture, Hypothesis, Theory, Law: The Basis of Rational Argument](#). I consider Jeff Glassman's concepts here to be the philosophical backbone of CrossFit. One of his main points should be familiar to most serious CrossFitters: "Science is never about voting, the popularity of a belief, or even beliefs themselves. Models are never validated by consensus, but by facts satisfying predictions."

CrossFitting Your Life

The CrossFit philosophy is not exclusive to fitness. Applying the CrossFit philosophy to the rest of my life has led me to some unsettling conclusions. For example, this May I will graduate from Georgetown University. This education has come at an extraordinary opportunity cost: four years of my life and roughly \$180,000. Most people would say that a Georgetown education is worth such a sacrifice. Georgetown is "a good school," they claim. Yet just as with CrossFit, I could have achieved a better education more quickly and much more cheaply out of my own house. Unfortunately, I didn't realize this until the spring of my junior year.

The books that we read are all available on Amazon at very low rates if you buy them used. Most students don't do the readings very carefully anyway, since, unlike CrossFit, there is rarely any day-to-day accountability for poor performance. Georgetown is supposed to have a top Arabic language program, but I have learned



far more Arabic from independent research and free websites than I have from my classes. We are expected to learn from classroom discussions with our peers, yet I have found a higher standard of debate in many of the CrossFit rest day discussions.

This experience has left me extraordinarily skeptical of institutions in general. What use are these hierarchical academic institutions in the age of open-source information? Just as you can achieve elite fitness in a garage gym, you can get an elite education in many subjects from your home. Of course, most of us don't go to college to get an education; we go there to acquire pieces of paper. I hope that in time people will realize that a college diploma is often just as useless as an ACE accreditation.

Conclusion: Valuing real results, not appearances, develops the character we need

I still am far from where I plan to be. My discipline on the Zone Diet is far from Greg's or Nicole's. I still have workouts where I realize afterwards that I could have pushed harder. None of my PR's are impressive when compared to a Chris Spealler or Jason Khalipa. But when I compare myself to where I was six years ago, I barely recognize the person I once was.

CrossFit has taught me to be a skeptic towards establishment thinking. If so many successful and educated people could be so wrong about fitness, then I could no longer rest comfortably with any of the other assumptions that we classify as common knowledge. I do not automatically assume such beliefs to be wrong but rather do not assume them to be right. My standard is the same evaluating a statement about foreign policy as it is about fitness: I want to see logical, data-based arguments. When evaluating arguments I care about little else. This approach requires much more critical thinking than the alternative; it also goes counter to what many other people tend to do.

Contrary to CrossFit, American society is more concerned with *appearing* a certain way than with being that way. It is image-oriented rather than performance-oriented. This approach doesn't cut it with CrossFit.

The most important change from CrossFit for me is that my mental strength is miles ahead of where it was in 2002. Repeatedly pushing your body to its limits is psychologically rewarding in a way that few other activities are. Our obsession with performance data provides an unusual rigor to our efforts. Because we measure our

performance data, we know almost immediately if what we are doing is effective. Furthermore, our performance is ultimately our own responsibility as individuals. It is up to us how hard we push ourselves, how high we hold the standard for form, and what we eat. This experience teaches lessons that can be applied to the rest of life.

CrossFit caused a marked change in my outlook on life. Whereas I previously cared for little other than my personal security and happiness, such a worldview is anathema to me now. Though I cannot entirely ascribe this change to CrossFit, it played a very large role.

The examples of other members of the CrossFit community have made a big impression on me. There are few other communities where the sacrifices and achievements of members of the U.S. military are valued as much as within CrossFit. It is amazing how easy it is to grow up in certain parts of the U.S. completely isolated from our nation's military. At Georgetown, where I study international politics, the American SOF units are almost never mentioned in my classes, even in those focusing on the War on Terror. People who graduate from Georgetown become investment bankers, consultants, lobbyists, or lawyers; they rarely serve in the military. It's no surprise that they only want to talk about the U.N. and international law; what could be stranger to them than the idea of a special operations team?

The contrast with CrossFit is remarkable. Our social hierarchy is reversed from the environment that I grew up in. We hold Green Berets and SEALs in the highest regard. I remember first seeing the hero [WOD Murph](#) come up on the main site and reading about Operation Redwing. The story is tragic, yet at the same time it is inspiring in that it shows the level of sacrifice that the human spirit is capable of.

CrossFit has shown us that a small group of passionate people can change the world. Similarly, the War on Terror is largely based upon small groups of highly motivated men. Compared to the U.S., Al Qaeda is materially weak. But it consists of small groups of men who are willing to fight and die for its cause. On September 11th we saw that 19 men who are willing to die can do large-scale damage to the most powerful nation-state in the world. But, as long as our operators capture and kill aspiring terrorists before they get a chance to act, we will be safe from their attacks.

What we are doing with CrossFit goes much deeper than physical fitness. The war against Al Qaeda and

their ilk is a test of our national character. There are two questions that we must answer as a country. The first is whether we will have the political will for this long war. The second question is whether we will be able to consistently produce enough of the type of men that find and kill terrorists.

My experience suggests that CrossFit develops the quality of character we need to win this war.



About the Author

Russ Greene is a Level One Certified CrossFit trainer who is graduating this May from Georgetown University with a major in International Politics and foreign language proficiency in Arabic and Spanish. Russ competed in both the 2007 and 2008 CrossFit games, coming in 53rd place in 2008.

He writes for the blog insurgentconsciousness.typepad.com which focuses on criminal and terrorist networks.

