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Where I've Trained, What I've Learned

An early adopter of CrossFit, Russell Greene shares lessons from his first decade of training.

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Eric V. CrossFit/Mississauga

As CrossFit has expanded, finding a fully equipped CrossFit gym has become much easier. During our recent honeymoon in Maine, my wife and I found ourselves running into CrossFit gyms by accident. It was a major contrast from when I started CrossFit in 2002.

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Back then there was only one CrossFit gym, and it was 3,000 miles away. I would estimate that I was one of the first people to try the Crossfit.com WODs in a Globo Gym. From this position, I am in awe of the growth CrossFit has seen. I can't help but find myself a little bit jealous of people who can start their first day of training with a full stock of equipment and a CrossFit trainer. These people have staggering potential to improve their fitness when they start in such an environment.

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One of my long-term training partners, Jacob Tsytkin, co-owner of CrossFit Monterey, once observed that the mark of a novice athlete is the belief that physical training is primarily a physical endeavor. While I can't objectively show it to be true, most people I know who train seriously agree that the mental component is the larger part of training. I have also observed that the place a person trains is a main factor in determining how training affects them mentally. There is something different to learn and gain from each different training experience and environment.

As I look back on my training history, I hope that one day no one will have to go through the hassles I have endured in working to improve fitness. As with all difficulties, however, we are strengthened by the challenges that we face in getting our training done in non-supportive environments. In this spirit, I'll examine several places I have trained and share something I learned in each place. It's the story of where I have worked out and how those places have made me who I am today.



Courtesy of Russell Greene

Russell Greene has been CrossFitting since way back in "ought-two."

Summit YMCA: Don't Be Afraid to Look Stupid

The YMCA in Summit, N.J., was my first gym. I started training there just a little before their rules allowed me in: two days before my 13th birthday, on Dec. 19, 1999. The personal trainer, Mark, showed me how to use the Y's machine circuit. The loads he prescribed for me were so light that I remember remarking how easy "strength training" was. I soon grew bored of using 20 lb. on the chest-press machine and started to challenge myself with the loads. Improvement became an obsession, and I began to research different training methods. It was not long until I found CrossFit and started doing some of the WODs.

It's funny how upset people get when you don't do what they expect. While I had drawn the admiration of my fellow gym-goers with my dedication to a bench-press, lat-pulldown and curls routine, as soon as I started to perform full squats, heavy deadlifts and Olympic lifts, that respect was gone.

Every time I worked out, a concerned person would come up to me and warn that I would blow out my knees, pop out a disc or stunt my growth if I kept training that way. As stubborn and confident as your average teenager, I disregarded their advice completely. That does not mean I couldn't have used instruction.



Kimberly Malz

Each different training environment will teach you something. This one might teach you to do your own thing by avoiding the “fitness” classes held in front of the resort’s swim-up bar.

Some of the more technical movements gave me trouble. I remember one day coming into the gym and thinking I was going to overhead squat. I was training with a few of my friends at the time, and I told them I was going to show them this cool new exercise. I took a 45-lb. bar out of the rack, pressed it overhead, and tried to perform my first squat. I immediately fell backwards, with the bar flying in front of me. This was not a graceful dump, and I did not find it as funny as my friends did.

In CrossFit, you can't be afraid to look stupid. We are always learning new skills, and people can look funny when learning a new skill. You also have the issue of training in an environment that's not friendly to CrossFit. By now, CrossFit has made an impact on popular culture. In 2002 and 2003, however, this style of training was unheard of.

People using elliptical machines and E-Z curl bars don't know what to think about someone squatting while holding a bar overhead. They think you're crazy and/or stupid. Obviously, they're misinformed. These exercises really do work, and the training is effective, but at the time it didn't always look like that.

When you fall on yourself in a crowded room while lifting 45 lb., it hurts your ego a lot more than it hurts your body. When everyone is staring at you for doing something different, you have a choice: you can either go back to doing the normal thing that doesn't work as well or you can learn the new, more difficult thing. It's a choice we face all the time, not just with training. How we handle these decisions determines our character.



Clay Crenshaw

Yes, you can do pull-ups anywhere.

Lake Morey: Commitment Blocks Out Pain

The memory gnawed at my conscience. I couldn't think of the Purple Albatross without thinking that I'd quit halfway through the year before. The cold had gotten to me that time, but that wasn't why I had quit. The cold had been bad, but it was manageable enough for a motivated swimmer. I had quit because I didn't care enough to keep going. I had merely entered it on a whim and had no real commitment to finishing. The Purple Albatross is an event as dreadful as its name: a 5-mile swim around the cold waters of Lake Morey, Vt., in the morning when the water is coldest. It's a multi-hour event that tests persistence more than it tests fitness. If you pace yourself, you get very cold. If you swim too fast, you fatigue quickly and threaten your chance of finishing. The only way to succeed is to swim at a high but manageable rate for several hours.

This time, I was determined to swim the full 5 miles. I had thought about the swim many times over the past year, and my quitting had two friends swimming with me. More importantly, I was determined. I took off at a steady pace and only stopped for a quick breather and some Fig Newtons halfway through. The thought of quitting at the halfway point, or at any other point, never even entered my mind.

**In CrossFit,
effort yields results
every time.**

As I turned the final corner of the lake and started swimming for the docks, I realized that, far from being an impossible task, the Purple Albatross was well within my potential. I could have swum much further and faster.

The strange truth was that my second attempt at the Purple Albatross was easier than the first, even though it was at a faster pace and the swim was twice as long. We're accustomed to think that doing better requires more suffering. It often does. But what I noticed this time was that having a clearly defined objective in my mind made the cold less bothersome and the distance a little less daunting. It was as if knowing why I was doing it made the physical challenge feel less painful.

While quitting may be a sign of weakness, it does not last forever. When we imagine that our failures are permanent, we downplay the transformational potential of physical training. Furthermore, we ignore the fact that it is our determination more than our immunity to pain that drives us forward. Training will always hurt. If we are committed to success, however, our motivation will make the pain seem smaller than the magnitude of persevering through adversity.

Training in a Playground: You Can Always Get Better

I was fortunate enough to train in well-equipped facilities such as CrossFit Monterey and Balance Gym for most of the period between 2006 and 2009. In addition, I trained with several different motivated partners who pushed me to new levels of strength and conditioning. For my

programming, I alternated between following the .com WOD's and making up my own programming. I made great progress in my fitness. With graduation from college, and then becoming engaged, my life became a lot more complicated. I suddenly had a whole bunch of things to deal with that were way more important than getting perfect workouts in.

Without a car or a CrossFit gym within walking distance, it became much more difficult to get typical CrossFit-style training in. Inspired by Blair Morrison's blog, [Anywherefit](#), I started surveying the neighborhood for nearby places to train. First of all, I lived on a very steep hill, so running up the hill was a given. I also found a playground that had a place to do box jumps of various heights, dips, pull-ups and bar muscle-ups, and it had a pole I could climb like a rope. My only equipment during this period was a pair of gymnastics rings that hung from a tree. While my training would adapt to the environment, it was not going to cease, and that was great news.

Clearly, without most basic training equipment, I was going to lose part of my fitness during this period. Barbells and dumbbells were a rare luxury when I found the means to get to a gym, and I did not have any odd objects to lift that were anywhere near a reasonable training load. For a while, I was obsessed about what was going to happen to things like my max clean and my Elizabeth time.

I realized something important at this time. I don't train for a heavier clean or faster Elizabeth. Don't get me wrong: it's cool to lift a lot of weight and to tear through circuits in blazingly fast times. That's just not my underlying motivation.

I train because I can always get better at what I work on. As a generalist, there isn't a single area of fitness in which I couldn't make significant progress—from flexibility to stamina to strength. And I know that as long as I put the time in, I will improve in these areas.



Jae

Yes, the hotel's gym is ready for one-arm snatches.



Wang

FYI: "CrossFit" is one word, not two.

Outside of training, the connection between effort and impact is often murky. The world is a complex place, and there are many intervening variables. I have worked really hard on things and obtained no results. On the other hand, I've sometimes been rewarded for doing less than I was capable of. It does not work that way with training. Within myself, I can control enough that there is always at least one aspect of fitness I can get better at. Even if I'm injured or working with minimal equipment, there's always something that I can still do, something that I can improve at. The habit of hard work is important enough that we should take care to reinforce it even when its worldly benefits are unclear. CrossFit training is an excellent means to reinforce this lesson. In CrossFit, effort yields results every time.

Lessons Learned

After years of CrossFit training, some spent in boxes and some not, I think it's a mistake to think of end points in training. This is not to say that goals are bad. Goals are useful, sure, but they usually turn out to be anticlimactic. By the time you've achieved a goal, it never seems as impressive or important as it did when you first created the goal. By the time you can do Fran in four minutes, you're already thinking about going under three minutes. Goals are more like landmarks you see along the way than actual destinations.

Rather than thinking of it as a way to get somewhere, I think of training as a way to live. Training is not a full belief system, or in itself a full life, and it's a mistake to treat it as such. I've certainly made that mistake before. Man needs more than just workouts, sleep and food. Nonetheless, I think we should look at physical training as a valuable component to life. It teaches us lessons that carry over to other aspects of our lives.

Consider the three ideas that I highlighted above: not being afraid to look stupid, using commitment to block out pain, and the fact that there is always something you can get better at. I'd bet you can think of several examples in your life that these points apply to. I'd also bet you can think of several different lessons you've learned from physical training in general and CrossFit specifically—wherever you were working out. Because of its ability to affect us in so many ways, we should value CrossFit as a way to make us better human beings just as much as, if not more than, we value it as a way to make us fitter athletes.



Courtesy of Russell Greene

About the Author:

Russ Greene has trained CrossFit for the past eight years and plans to continue CrossFitting for the next 80 years. He trains out of Monterey, Calif., and writes for Insurgentconsciousness.typepad.com.