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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## Mastering the Art of Self-Defense: A Beginner's Guide to Pistol Combatives

E.M. Burton is introduced to firearms over a two-day combative pistol course and learns a lot about weapons, self-defense and fitness.

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By E.M. Burton

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Tyler Northrup

I saw a picture on Facebook the other day of two possible responses a woman has to a violent attack. In one, the woman is cowering in terror, arms above her head in an attempt to shield herself in what we can only guess will be a losing battle.

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In the adjacent image, we see the same woman with a calm demeanor, head high, eyes open and fixed at close range, her hands firmly gripped on a pistol aimed at her threat. Her finger is on the trigger.

Which woman will survive this attack?

Betting folks will go with the gun.

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**The responsible person  
who wants to know what  
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I've awoken in the middle of the night to find an intruder in my darkened home. I managed to utter one word in a firm and low voice: "Leave." I was lucky; he did. Had he not made that choice, I likely would have had to wait out the seemingly interminable minutes it would have taken for help to arrive, if indeed I was able to make the 911 call.

What if I hadn't been so lucky?

**The Gift of the Gun**

"Happy Birthday! Here, have a weapon!"

Working for CrossFit Inc. means there is always something unknown and unknowable around the corner. But nothing prepared me for the staff birthday gift I received this year: a Smith & Wesson Model 340 .357 five-shooter. "Magnum," they call it.

There were options. I could have elected to take a gift certificate for this or that, a camera, perhaps, to equip myself for shooting well on another level. But no, the badass in me decided to say, "Sure. Bring it."

The following week I thanked our fearless leader, Coach Greg Glassman.

"Hey, thanks for the weapon!"

He replied, "You did not take the gun, did you?"

He was probably thinking that only the really cool kids—the likes of Dave Castro, Nicole Carroll, Jeff and Mikki Lee Martin—would take him up on something called Magnum.



All images: E.M. Burton/Tony Blauer

***If someone gives you a gun for your birthday, you better figure out how to use it.***

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Full disclosure: I'd never seen a gun, never touched one.

Now what?

The responsible person who wants to know what the fuck to do with a gun takes a course. A really, really good course. As my decades of post-secondary education should hopefully demonstrate at the very least, I know how to pick a good teacher, and I planned on doing so.

The week after I received the gun, I was on Facebook and saw a photo of Tony Blauer of Blauer Tactical Systems and CrossFit Defense. The photo showed Blauer shooting during a combative pistol course, with a brass shell in mid-air. It was so cool. Lacking all common sense and throwing just about everything to the wind, I commented: "Awesome. Where do I sign up?" or something to that effect.

The die was cast, and the thing had a momentum beyond my control right from the beginning.

As I boast, I can pick a good teacher. And so can Tony Blauer. Trident Concepts is a going concern out of Austin, Texas, owned by a former SEAL by the name of Jeff Gonzales. It's the only "shooting" school I've come across that actually collects data points of its students and tracks performance and progress to be able to assess increasing capacity, noting areas for improvement. Now, what does that sound like? It was a very good fit.

The only thing was that Gonzales trains the best of the best. In hindsight, I think he teaches "level ones" as a sort of community service. The vast majority of his students are top soldiers, elite members of the special-operations community. These people already know the parts of the weapon, its safe handling and operation.

With his first available Combative Pistol Level 1 scheduled for late spring, I engaged the man in a conversation about availability. He suggested and I agreed that given my level of fear (oh, yes, back to that), perhaps a private session would be best anyway. That way, at least—I reasoned quietly to myself—I wouldn't shoot anyone else on the range by mistake.

Certainly interested in taking responsibility for my personal safety, I was still afraid of potential attackers. But I was also afraid of myself with a weapon, in much the same way as someone with a fear of heights is at heart really just afraid that he or she will jump.



***Never having held a gun, the author worried she would miss the target entirely.***

As the days narrowed between the enthusiastic, cocky, "Sure! Let's go shoot some shit!" and the "Oh, God, I have to go hold a gun and shoot something," my anxiety about the whole thing escalated. Even though I live an hour from the shooting range and, as Jeff astutely pointed out, I wouldn't have to deal with the additional stress of flying with my weapon, I was worried about all kinds of things. In retrospect, I think I was mostly worried I wouldn't be able to hit the target.

Like, at all.

## The Way of the Gun

It turns out that Tony Blauer and Jeff Gonzales are friends of more than 15 years, both of them successful coaches, teachers and business owners in the field of self-defense for decades, which is actually quite a rarity. And, oh yes, they were introduced by Dave Grossman. That's Lt. Col. Dave Grossman to you, for those of you out there who, like me, should be way more intimidated by the company I keep. But that was just the beginning.

Gonzales suggested we invite Blauer along for the two days of shooting. Yes! I was thinking. Not only would Blauer be extremely kind to me and also add incredible knowledge about the relation of CrossFit methodologies to pistol combative training, but another body would also take the focus off me and distract everyone from what I was sure would be an epic fail on my part. Then Blauer suggested we also invite "Cliff." Sure! Let's bring Cliff. As I say, one more person might distract attention from my incredible incapacity. Then I got a brief backgrounder on Cliff that included "Marine" and "LAPD," but I didn't get Cliff's last name. Had I, I likely would have been so freaked out I might have been a no-show.



***Jeff Gonzales says people who are used to complex movements have the biomechanical control and muscle memory necessary for success with a weapon.***

On the drive up to the range, the following thoughts went through my head: *What am I doing? Omigod. I won't be able to do this.* Then I reasoned with myself. Gonzales, a man who is more than thorough in his method and nothing if not kind and courteous, has reassured me that I'll be fine and will have fun. Clearly, he's a coach well suited to my mentalité, so I tell myself to stop being such a wuss and get over it. There are fears and then there are fears. I'm afraid of failing, sure, and I'm afraid of the power of the weapon, but I'm more afraid of the circumstances in which I would find myself in need of such a thing. Enough internal dialogue. I soldier on.

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**Gonzales explained that the majority of students get into firearms without any fitness and then realize they need to be more fit.**

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In the weeks leading up to the course, Gonzales and I had a few telephone conversations.

"Learning how to fire a weapon is like performing a snatch. There are complex movements that, when broken down and put together, lead you to progress toward the end result: being able to perform the movement flawlessly," he said.

We discussed the advantage he's noticed that CrossFitters have over all others during the rigorous and specialized training he offers.

Gonzales explained that the majority of students get into firearms without any fitness and then realize they need to be more fit. Because of CrossFit's popularity and the seemingly increasing danger of the world, he is beginning to see more students who have a greater capacity for success in his courses. These are people with greater muscle memory and sharper biomechanics. With better muscle control, one can follow the commands more effectively, and the incline of progress is steeper.

We also discussed “gun cultures” and “non-gun cultures.” I am derived decidedly from the latter and—so I learn—have generalized fears about the sheer power of weapons, en masse. Most interesting for me was that this was my first real introduction to the warrior mindset. The ultimate act of heroism and courage for me has always been the one in which a person will sign up to take on the responsibility to protect of the lives and freedoms of others, but I’ve never been able to fully comprehend why someone would want to.

I know that the privileges I have had my entire life come at a great price: freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom to pursue a higher education, freedom to say what I think without fear of reprisal or imprisonment, freedom to walk my dog on a balmy June night with the scent of lilac in the air. As with John Adams’ significant thoughts on the matter, I understand the connection between freedom and protection.

“I must study politics and war, that our sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. Our sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history and naval architecture, navigation, commerce and

agriculture in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry and porcelain,” Adams said in a letter to Abigail Adams dated May 12, 1780.

This is the macro concept of security. On a deeper level, I know I’ve suppressed my fears of living without taking responsibility for my personal protection. Never facing my fears, I was, however, always aware of living with them. I am a sheep, but I am an aware sheep. That may be a contradiction—you decide—but bear with me.

As Gonzales explained—and this is not the metaphor humans have used for millennia—this is a natural phenomenon. The wolf/sheep diagram goes like this: Envision concentric circles of sheep. The youngest are in the very center of the circle. The oldest are on the outside of the sheep circle, protecting the entire group from the wolves in the night. Eventually, human beings observed that dogs act as protectors for the sheep, vulnerable all, vouchsafing what really amounts to the quite incapable sheep inside the circle against the wolves. Dave Grossman as written on these concepts in great detail in [On Sheep, Wolves, and Sheepdogs](#).



*The author overcoming her fear of guns.*

This makes sense to me. It's the beginning of my greater understanding. As I say, I am a sheep. I'm not naïve about it, but I haven't prepared for "the wolf at the door" as an eventuality, either.

### Gone Shootin'

The morning came of Training Day 1. Of the course in general, I will tell you this much: It is not as easy as it looks. None of it. It is hot, tiring, mentally and physically demanding, and it's an easy day. We don't have to wear body armor.

We begin with, and constantly reinforce throughout the entire class, weapon safety.

The five safety rules are as follows:

1. Always assume the gun is loaded.
2. Never point the muzzle anywhere in a direction you don't want to shoot.
3. Don't ever place your finger on the trigger until you have made a conscious decision to shoot, with all that entails, and are ready to fire.
4. Manipulate all the firearm safeties (check them and check them again).
5. Know your target and what's beyond it with 100 percent certainty.

In fact, Cliff and Gonzales assure me gun-safety training for children begins with the five safety rules. Gonzales and Cliff, both Texans, started shooting when they were "around four," so basically, before anything else they can remember. Blauer, a Canadian by birth (but we don't hold it against him), took his first shot in his 20s.

Gonzales is not too sure my Magnum is the best choice for me, and who I am I to doubt him? So we start my training off with a Glock 17. The weapon most commonly used by police forces, it was the first pistol designed by the Austrian Gaston Glock, who had no experience with firearms when he designed it in the late '70s (let's hear it for beginners).

### Grip Integrity

You've got a strong hand and a weak hand. The strong hand for me is my right hand, which first grips the weapon, and the index finger of which pulls the trigger. The weak hand wraps around the strong hand to support it, but it has to be in a very specific position, with the thumb on the point I can only imagine is called the "thumb point"

because it mirrors the index point on the other side. Like "two dogs humping," they all say in nodding agreement. You've gotta love masculine environments. My real problem is that I've been holding a golf club from before I can remember, and I'm not teeing off with this thing, but that grip is hard to unlearn.

We then began basic marksmanship drills, which have a five-step progression:

1. Dry fire, sight alignment.
2. Dry fire, follow-through.
3. Live fire, sight alignment.
4. Live fire, trigger management (Level 1).
5. Live fire, trigger management (Level 2).

### Trigger Management

For me this was the hardest aspect to master. "Caressing the trigger" seems at odds with the action required to pull and release it, but once I did get it, it was utterly satisfying. Like the grip, once it's learned, you can't unlearn it. Pull, click, pull some more, release, hear the click but don't go too far, depending, pull again, back and forth for as many times as you want the weapon to fire, plus one. You can screw up and forget it, sure, but you can go back and repeat your success if you focus on technique. The other day I was explaining to my five-year-old how to take a good picture, and to my surprise I found myself explaining to her in exactly the same way: hold it after the picture is taken, as if you're going to take another.



***Trigger manipulation requires finesse and practice for best accuracy.***

Dry-fire sight alignment involves the use of a SIRT training tool; it looks a great deal like the Glock, but it focuses you on trigger management. It emits a red laser point on your ostensible target when you make contact with the trigger, then a green one when the trigger is depressed. As Gonzales notes, "The training tool allows me to establish the correct neural pathways for trigger management: trigger prep, the squeeze and the release."

There are three things to focus on immediately: your target, the front sight on the weapon, and the rear sight on the weapon—but with an emphasis on the front sight. They all line up. We practice getting the sights in our aim (well, I practice this). My hands start to shake.

Firearm-manipulation drills are up next. We load bullets into a magazine. If you've got very strong fingers (like you can hold your body weight with no problem on two curled fingers off the edge of a rock face while eating lunch), this is pretty easy. We then insert a fully loaded magazine



Tyler Northrup

**CrossFit affiliate owner Christmas Abbott with her Kimber .45.**

into the weapon, and release it. You have to set it, not smack it. Obviously they do it harder than they need to in the movies—dramatic effect, and all that. I practice this a lot. Loading, unloading and safety check to make sure the weapon is safely cleared (empty of bullets). It never gets less frightening. Not yet. But I appreciate the major emphasis on safety, which never lets up.

The "index point" on the weapon is where your finger should rest at every moment when it's not on the trigger and ready to fire. During fight-or-flight conditions you have a startle reflex with a flinching component, and you could fire the weapon inadvertently, negligently. Keeping your trigger finger on the index point helps mitigate this.

### The Fighting Stance

The stance felt weird to me at first, so I must have looked really stupid. It's a combat stance, one that Blauer knows very well, but one I've never experienced or practiced. Leaning quite far forward, with both legs bent, actively engaged, you point the weapon forward as well. Yet at the same time you bring the scapulae together, allowing your skeleton to form a strong, focused stance to take the force of the recoil. This is Blauer's stance; he's been doing this and teaching it to others for decades. He's at home in it. As soon as I figured out I'd done it in yoga practice, it was second nature, but I still had to remind myself of it each time during the drills.

I admit I had to bite my tongue to avoid saying, "Hey, Cliff's not leaning as much as you want me to lean," but Cliff doesn't need to lean like me. This is a guy whose body could more than take the force of the blow, I imagine, even if he was leaning backwards. His stance renders immediately apparent his decades of jiu-jitsu training, and then some.

### Going Live

Finally, we get there: live fire.

Our target is an image of a "bad guy," a slightly less than 2 x 3-foot paper stapled to cardboard and hung off a metal rack designed for this purpose. At three yards' distance, with me aligning the sights, in the fighting stance, weapon ready with my finger on the trigger, Gonzales instructs me to fire at the left target; he'll do the final trigger pulling. There is so much to think about and I'm not even in any real danger. But nothing happens. At a certain point, Gonzales says, "Left. Left. Left." And then, "OK, in America, it's the other left."

I'm aiming at the wrong target, a circle of four-inch diameter to the right of the image of bad guy's head.

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**I experience recoil for the first time. It's like a blowback of force, but one that is also astoundingly loud.**

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Firing my first live round, I experience recoil for the first time. It's like a blowback of force, but one that is also astoundingly loud. If you don't kill your target, you will certainly deafen him. The first time for everything having to do with the body at high speed, however, is always utterly thrilling—imagine a first motorcycle ride—but this is such compression of speed into time that the force of the blow on the body isn't easily described.

Here is where something starts to feel familiar, and CrossFit analogies again come into play. Without having first experienced the recoil, the stance is hard to figure out, mentally. But the whole exercise is like doing overhead squats with a PVC pipe: it doesn't quite feel right until you're doing it with a loaded barbell. I remember what Gonzales said about the snatch, and the fighting stance starts to make sense.

I open my eyes and see to my astonishment that I hit the target; the correct one. I repeat this success with every shot. So much for the fear of not hitting the target frame. I'm knocking them back in swift order. My confidence increases.

But then we switch from shooting the dot on the left to shooting the image of the bad guy in the face, and this was much more difficult for me. It took a great deal, actually, not of courage but of something else, some deliberate shutting off of some part of the mind. But I overcame it. I told myself something I'd learned from CrossFit: you've got to keep going because quitting is not an option. In retrospect, for me this was the hardest moment of the two days. It's one thing shooting at a dot, it's another thing to aim at a human, even an image of one, even one who is, as Blauer wryly pointed out, already "stapled."

Gonzales and I practice drills for the rest of the day, at different distances, the greatest of which is 25 yards. I still manage to hit the target, and not too badly. Blauer and Cliff work on close-contact and step-back drills. As

Gonzales explains, "Firing from ultra-close contact can be a bit unsettling and requires some inoculation. It also requires some muscle memory so the firing position is consistent and you are able to put good rounds on board. The drill starts with close-contact shots, then progresses to getting off the 'X' all while continuing to engage the threat." It is very fun to watch Blauer and Cliff, who are clearly expert at this. I can't imagine being closer to this kind of action anytime soon.

During the first day, we discuss various significant issues of owning a weapon. We discuss the theories of John Lott, as outlined in *More Guns, Less Crime*; statistically there is less crime per capita in U.S. states in which more citizens own weapons. One of the more interesting points for me is the concealed handgun license. In some states, it's extremely easy to obtain one, and in others it's much harder, with more restrictions as to who can and cannot hold one, some of which seem rather nebulous. As it happens, I wear my rigger's belt, holster and magazine pouches to lunch—mostly because I'm using it all to hold up my pants—but the looks I get are great. I wasn't concealing anything, right? But the power suggested by the empty holster is an awesome thing to sport for a little while. And my girlfriends were right; there is something very sexy about the power afforded by the weapon. It starts to occur to me that this is, indeed, fun. Fear is slowly slipping away.



***The target, the front sight and the rear sight need to be in alignment, and a smooth trigger pull will put the round in the right place.***



Twice it enters my head during the first day that if my left hand is in the wrong place and I fire, I could shoot off a finger. It takes a few moments to recover from the thought. The same thing happens when I imagine shooting off a toe when placing the gun back in its holster. I overthink things, I know. But Gonzales reassures me and says, "You wouldn't really notice that until it was over." I think he means it as a comfort. I vow to try and remember the index point, always.

By the end of the day, I am exhausted. But I am aware of a shift: confidence is slowly replacing the space occupied by fear.

### Training Day 2

On the second day we review everything, beginning with dry-fire practice drills. Live-fire drills are next, but this time we emphasize the element of time in the equation. These practice drills aim to bring it all together. After we practice firing live rounds, we move up to diagnostic drills, and then later to timed exercises that really force you to bring together everything into a seamless movement.



***The target—if not killed then severely incapacitated.***

By shooting with cadence in mind, keeping a metronomic and even shooting rhythm shot after shot, we work up to five rounds in five seconds. This means drawing the weapon from the holster, aligning the sights, prepping the trigger, and taking five even shots, all in five seconds. Nothing to those who've been practicing since they were four years old, it forces the rest of us to put all the movements together. A loaded bar for those overhead squats, as it were. Blauer blows me out of the water.

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**I'm not upset at having failed; the thing is ... the bad guy is at the very least on the floor and incapacitated while I dial 911.**

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It occurs to me that actors take classes like this in preparation for their roles. That makes me think there's a certain aspect to this of how you appear doing it. Sure, the stance is better apprehended when you think of the body in space, but if you imagine you're an awesomely cool sharpshooter like Cliff, you almost become one. Note, please, that I said "almost." But there's an aspect to being fierce in fighting off an assailant that has to do with the appearance of confidence. It's an attitude.

Last up: the test. Test? What did I think? Of course there's a test. The bar is set very high here. It's the Level 2 test, and I fail. But in lieu of a certificate, I get a baseball cap and T-shirt that look way cooler than a certificate would, so I'm pretty happy. And I'm happy with my results, which speak for themselves.

TriCon has extremely high standards. There's no you-did-good passing grade if you haven't, and evidently some attendees are miffed at this. The bottom line is there's getting the job done or not. I'm not upset at having failed; the thing is, and if you look at my final test result you will have to agree, the bad guy is at the very least on the floor and incapacitated while I dial 911. And even though my expectations of myself were set rather low ("Dear God, please let me hit the target") I am rather surprised to see that, damn, I'm pretty good at this!

My strong hand hurts in ways I hadn't noticed throughout the training. I probably fired about 500 rounds, and that's a lot of absorbed shock. But it's a good hurt, the way it feels when you're smiling and sweaty, lying on the ground, and your hands are bleeding. You know what I mean.

As for my training partners? I hope they enjoyed themselves as much as I did. Blauer is a professional coach and contact athlete. Gonzales notes that training him is "like molding clay," in that he's a dedicated athlete, but with little exposure to firearms.

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**“Having an athletic background at first exposure was invaluable, because you have the ability to maintain and sustain a certain stamina throughout the training.”**

**—Jeff Gonzales**

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“Watching him progress was a pleasure,” Gonzales says. “He developed correctly because of his finely tuned motor skills.”

Blauer has taken a few shooting classes before this—including the one immortalized in that cool Facebook image—and his years of unarmed training transfer well when he's equipped with a weapon.

“He's got a fighter mentality, combat skills, proper stance,” Gonzales explains. “He's an analytical athlete. He knows what he's doing. He may not be able to correct himself yet in real time, but immediately after he knows what he did wrong, which is critical to the process—being self-correcting.”

If Blauer was clay due to his incredible physical preparedness, I was a sponge. Thankfully, this didn't refer to my level of fitness but that I hadn't picked up any bad shooting habits along the way, golf grip notwithstanding.

And Cliff? Cliff Byerly, a member of the Marine Corps for over 20 years, 12 of those on active duty with the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion, has taught shooting to the

same special-forces people as Gonzales. He's a former police officer with the LAPD, a CrossFit coach, and now he works with Blauer.

In training terms, I am a “blank slate,” an appellation I much prefer, by the way, over “sponge.” But as a blank slate I am holding onto those preconceived notions, anxieties, myths and fears. There is a saturation point, however; my experience of the course, my progress, and what I'm able to take away from it have limits. I believe I'd have been better able to deal with my initial fears had I done one of Blauer's SPEAR or CrossFit Defense courses first. Personal readiness through fear management would have allowed me to progress faster.

Gonzales tells me professional soldiers deal with fear, as well. One of their biggest fears is letting their teammates down. When he was on active duty, one of his fears was not having enough ammo. Hardcore trigger pullers, evidently, have recurrent dreams of running out of ammo.

I completed the program, though, and even Gonzales acknowledged I was “able to do quite well.” The majority of his students are “hardcore trigger pullers,” but everyone starts somewhere. Perhaps you have an advantage if you're four years old. But Gonzales finds that those who think they're rock stars when they start his course still have to check their egos at the door. These types don't like the feeling of failure.



**“When guns are outlawed, only the government will have guns. The government, and a few outlaws. If that happens, you can count me among the outlaws.”**

**—Edward Abbey**



**Preparing for the unknown means training at close range too.**

His students who are CrossFitters, however, don't have this problem, as they can overcome the weakness that ego engenders. Given the opportunity, these people will succeed. Gonzales points out something I hadn't noticed before: the Naval Special Warfare insignia is an eagle with its head bowed, signifying humility. He notices this quality in the members of the CrossFit community that he teaches.

"They are willing to check their egos, go out, and better themselves and their results. They get hurt? They go back."

It's part of the mental training that you give yourself through CrossFit training.

### **Fit and Ready to Fight**

I discovered certain things about myself during the course. While it's physically and mentally challenging, I'm actually pretty good at shooting. It's absolutely an art—a lot of things have to come together—but I am more confident, and it is empowering. I still need to work on fear management and would benefit greatly from hand-to-hand combat training, but I now have a better chance of defending myself.

According to Gonzales, "Having an athletic background at first exposure was invaluable, because you have the ability to maintain and sustain a certain stamina throughout the training that allows you to take in more material and retain what you've learned to a greater degree. You'll improve

faster and you'll lose less of it over longer periods of time."

However, in order to retain what you learn, the beginner needs to practice to sustain technique proficiency.

"Then you'll see improvement over time. If you don't, you'll see exponential depreciation of proficiency over time," Gonzales explains.

It was also an unexpected pleasure to discover that there is a great deal us sheep can learn from the dogs. So now I practice. This experience reinforced something I already knew: facing fears, the ability to have courage and being prepared all come down to having a great trainer—and to practice. All my life I'd thought that my chance for survival in a dangerous situation was up to the Fates, but now it's not up to chance.

If you've got my child and you're gripping her at the throat, you're gonna go down.



### **About the Author**

*E.M. Burton is a **CrossFit Journal** staff writer. She wishes to acknowledge with gratitude the significant contributions to this story of Jeff Gonzales, Tony Blauer, Cliff Byerly, Christmas Abbott and Tyler Northrup.*