

CrossFit Goes To College

Dedicated student CrossFitters are battling for legitimacy
at the University of North Carolina

Juan Hernandez



The best part of my day starts the second that sweat from my chin splatters onto the gym floor, and the guys on Cybex machines shoot me nasty stares.

Is it because I'm a 5-foot-5 freshman here at UNC—the University of North Carolina—fabled home to athletic legends like Michael Jordan, and I can throw around more weight than most of them can ever conceive of? Or is it because my workouts involve stuff they've never seen before—like throwing medicine balls up against the wall and swinging dumbbells high up in the air and down through my legs as if I'm chopping wood? I don't know for sure, and don't really care.

I've been pretty strong since the 8th grade, when I was a little fat boy and started lifting to get in shape. Growing up the oldest son in a Mexican family back home in Asheville, 3-1/2 hours away, I built myself up to 170 pounds with 11% body fat, played linebacker and offensive line on the football team, threw the shot, and have been doing a 300-pound bench and 500-pound squat for years. Now 18, no longer on a sports team, I spend most of my day studying Spanish and History—and keep working out to hold off extra weight. But I'm not just "staying in shape" anymore. Since I started doing CrossFit in August, I'm stronger than ever. My 5k time dropped from 31 minutes to 28. My arms and shoulders are cut like they've never been. My traps have gotten really big. And my back, my god! I never thought I'd have a ripped back. Never even thought about doing a pull-up before. Now I can do 20 in a row.

So stare all you want, gym rats. I'm getting fitter than I've ever been. Muscles taut from the workout, I leave the gym in full strut, my head up from the feeling of victory that I get whenever I finish the Workout of the Day.

And I am not alone.



University of North Carolina CrossFit activists (from left) Eugenio "Junior" Valdez, David Blumberg, and author-leader Juan Hernandez pose at The Well, a UNC landmark.

I heard about CrossFit over the summer from a buddy doing it at a YMCA back home, and started the workouts here at UNC during orientation week. At first it was only me, reveling solo in the pain like a monk in a monastery. After about a month, I ran into David Blumberg, a 6-foot-4 Sophomore, who's already pretty cut because he's been CrossFitting for about a year, and Eugenio "Junior" Valdez, who graduated from my high school the year before me; he started CrossFit this summer and the results were instantaneous: his shoulders immediately started exploding. Together, we pushed the pace, embarking on the fight to better ourselves, and, as the adage goes, to make ourselves all that we could be. The workouts became more and more intense as we tried to be the first to finish. Others in the gym began to take notice.

As time went on, we'd run across more and more people performing the WOD on their own. In conversations with them, the recurring theme was how to do the workouts faster, better, easier. The answer, of course, was to build motivation by working out together, helping one another, competing. Knowing that there had to be lots of other CrossFitters out there who would also enjoy hooking up with partners, we started a Facebook CrossFit group. In mid-September, we had 10 to 12 CrossFitters. By early November, after we'd initiated a regular workout time and invited anybody interested to join, we'd grown to 40 UNC students, including 10 girls.

People that you never thought would try CrossFit started doing it. The members were as different as the world we live in. As the numbers swelled, we split up the workouts. I would go in the morning and David would run the workouts at night. As the community started to grow, people began showing up in groups of three, five and sometimes more. The community started to feel like a real community as the workouts became more intense.

Grumbling from the Establishment

It was a great feeling to see such a rapid spread of the CrossFit ideology throughout the gym and the campus itself. But that feeling was tempered by ill will among the old guard. With CrossFitters growing more common in the gym, we assumed that any tension with management and regular gym-goers would disappear as they became more familiar with us and our method. But that isn't what happened. In fact, the tension ratcheted up. Despite our numbers, CrossFit was still looked upon as an underground movement, and was given no acceptance from the masses at UNC. The gym rats would get mad at us—no

fistfights, but they'd stare us down, question our methods. The gym supervisors considered thrusters, hang cleans, and all explosive lifts to be dangerous. We never had a day free of harassment from the staff, who demanded that we tone down or cut out certain lifts.

I often liken our ongoing battle for legitimacy to a 12-round slugfest between an up-and-coming fighter (us) and the seemingly unbeatable world champion (the gym). A big blow from the school came when they denied us any funding for the purchase of rings and kettlebells. They even prohibited us from using the sports teams' gym, which houses all the top equipment. The reason: CrossFit is not school-sponsored sport; it does not put money in the hands of the administration. The university does provide us with some decades-old metal rings, but they only scar our calluses and leave us bloodied when we bash our heads into the support bar.

Ultimately, our problem in getting an unfettered place to do CrossFit boiled down to two issues: We weren't an "official" campus club, and we were not officially associated with CrossFit. No official recognition as a club on campus = no funding. That made it easy for the university to turn its back on us. But as the CrossFit buzz grew, we could feel the tide turning.

The local newspaper interviewed Blumberg and wrote a column about the CrossFit movement at UNC. Finally, one sympathetic gym manager drew up a compromise: we could do overheads in the gym, but only within the squat rack. That cramped taller people like David. Yet the school would not budge further. If we wanted to be legitimate, we had to go through legitimate channels.

Join The Club

We resented having to do our workouts without muscle-ups and kettlebell swings. We hated living in the shadows of the typical lifters. We needed to break out and force the recognition of CrossFit as a legitimate and elite training program. The feeling was universal in the growing community. We realized if we were to continue improving ourselves through CrossFit, we'd better act.

Blumberg, Valdez and I tackled the task full-frontal by deciding to form an on-campus, school-certified, non-profit club. We would use this club to correct misperceptions, cultivate support, strengthen and then broaden the CrossFit community. On top of that, certification would make funding available.

Blumberg then emailed CrossFit to inquire about the possibility of starting a non-profit affiliate here at UNC. The okay came quickly—as long as we had a certified trainer to run it. No problem—even though I'm only a freshman, I volunteered to get the certification. There was one small hurdle, however: A fee of \$1000. One thousand might as well have been one million for us college students.

But in keeping with the CrossFit mentality, we didn't quit. I talked to Andy Hendel, the creator of CrossFit Charlotte, the venue for a certification on December 21. He found a way for me to attend it cost-free.

As I write this, certification is just a month away, yet it seems like an eternity. I have a lot riding on it. I have always been an optimist, looking for ways to help people, and the cert obviously will further that. It might also help pave the way for my future profession: teaching, which hopefully will include coaching football, a lifelong love of mine. A CrossFit certification might open the door to an assistant coach position or strength-and-conditioning job.

And finally, the expertise I gain from the Cert will help me in my personal life, aiding my confidence, focus, and work ethic, the qualities everyone needs for success in life.

If all goes as planned, CrossFit UNC will be fully operational by next fall. After my cert, there's a lot of paperwork to fill out, and plenty more bureaucratic hoops to jump through. Until then, we as a group will continue to better ourselves and the CrossFit community by putting our major goals into practice: the spreading of the CrossFit philosophy of self betterment and the acceptance of CrossFit as an elite workout program.

And when next fall rolls around, lack of equipment will no longer stand on our way. By then, as an official UNC club, we can price out what we need and submit a funding request. After all, the school's been known to give clubs five to ten thousand dollars. But to tell you the truth, we'd be happy with \$500 for kettlebells. As CrossFitters taking our rightful place in the UNC gym, we'll be ready for the stares—of amazement and admiration.



About The Author

Juan Hernandez, a Freshman at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, has been strength-training since 8th grade and CrossFitting since August.