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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## Hitch is Hooked

St. Louis Blues coach Ken Hitchcock embraces the CrossFit Life. Mike Warkentin reports.

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By Mike Warkentin Managing Editor

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All images: Getty Images

Ken Hitchcock is a hockey guy.

He's coached over 1,000 games behind the benches of four NHL teams, and he's won over 500 of them. He's been a head coach at three NHL All-Star Games, and he's been a part of two Canadian teams that won gold medals at the Olympics.

Hitchcock has also hoisted hockey's Holy Grail, the Stanley Cup, while coaching the Dallas Stars in 1998-99.

"Hitch" is a hockey guy through and through.

Now he's also a CrossFit guy.

### The Turnaround

Coaching a pro sports team is a high-stress job that includes travel, long hours, incredible pressure to perform, constant media attention and interactions with temperamental elite athletes.

Hitchcock has been described by former player and current Blues assistant Scott Mellanby as a "hardass," and former superstar Brett Hull famously clashed with Hitchcock's rigid system in the late '90s. That didn't stop Hull and Hitch from winning a Stanley Cup together, and it didn't stop Hull from respecting his coach.



*Hitchcock's 500 wins and 1,000 games put him in very elite company in the all-time NHL coaching stats.*

"There is no nonsense with Ken. You're going to play, you're going to play hard, and you're going to play within his system. If you do, you're going to have a lot of success. And if you don't, you're probably going to try to have a lot of success on another team," Hull said in a 2011 interview on StLToday.com ("Hockey guy Brett Hull talks up Ken Hitchcock," Nov. 8, 2011).

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Still, Hitchcock struggled with his weight for years, and at his heaviest he was well over 400 lb. That made him a target for angry players, and a recent TSN video profile featured players such as Jamie Langenbrunner and Brenden Morrow talking about some of the abuse Hitchcock endured ([Hitch's Switch](#)).

In the same interview, Hitchcock explained his problem with food.

"Food became the element of frustration," he said.

He added: "I was in a don't-give-a-damn-gonna-live-forever mode."

February 2010 was full of bad and good for Hitchcock. He was fired as head coach of the Columbus Blue Jackets but was an assistant for the Canadian men's team that won Olympic gold on home soil at the end of the month. Following the victory, Hitchcock headed south and spent some time in California. While there, he was coaxed into trying CrossFit by his partner, Corina Kelepouris, and her sister Tina.

"She (Corina) dragged me along," Hitchcock recalls, "and I would say after a week I felt like I needed this type of program from a conditioning standpoint."

Hitchcock was no stranger to exercise. He just never got results with machines.

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**—Ken Hitchcock**

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"You could spend an hour, an hour and a half in the gym, and I was going in five or six times a week, and it wasn't making any difference," he says. "And I was eating a low-fat diet—the whole thing. It wasn't making much difference."

After getting into CrossFit, the coach lost 30 lb. immediately and was instantly convinced that there was something to the high-intensity program.

"I think the thing that convinced me about this form of exercise, to be honest with you, is I never changed my eating habits at all when I lost all the weight. I never changed anything for the first two months. Not one bit. And then to go and lose that much weight right away when you've been exercising all the time is pretty dramatic," Hitchcock says.

After adding in Paleo eating habits, Hitchcock reports that he lost another 30 lb.

Now head coach of the St. Louis Blues, Hitchcock has Paleo food catered to him and maintains a primal diet. The Blues also brought in some CrossFit gear for him, and he's even sucked a few assistant coaches into joining him for early morning CrossFit WODs. Hitchcock does CrossFit about four times a week and often follows the programming of CrossFit DV in Drayton Valley, Alta., or CrossFit Glenmore in Kelowna, B.C.

And, of course, he makes a mess of hotel gyms when he's on the road, using whatever equipment is available to do some form of the CrossFit program.

### **A New Lifestyle**

Echoing the sentiments of CrossFitters everywhere, Hitchcock both loves and hates the program.

"My experience with CrossFit was that I feared every day going in ...," he says. "I don't look forward to going, but when I'm there I love it. There are certain programs I don't love or even like, but the energy with the people there makes you want to do it and not let them down, so I get enthused by it."

A career coach, Hitchcock has been around athletic teams for his entire life, and it's the positive group atmosphere he finds most appealing about CrossFit.

"I always call it 'the quiet suffering.' We go in there, and we all suffer at different levels, but we all suffer the same thing," he says of the WODs. "Some people are able to do it without props. Some people can do it straight up, some people need props, but at the end of the day, we all suffer about the same. And I find that dynamic for me is what makes it work. I love the camaraderie."

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He continues: "There's a certain level of people who are the firebreathers. We all know who they are. They stand out like sore thumbs. ... The rest of us go there because we want to feel a part of something, and I think the more fun you can make it, the more supportive you are, the more enthusiastic you are, the better we feel about it. We don't do the same as they do, but we suffer the same. We feel the same pain as a firebreather does. They're a lot fitter than we are and always will be, but we still feel the same pain at the end of the day, and I think doing it together really builds the camaraderie and a bond."

That camaraderie has added a new aspect to Hitchcock's life. He used to hang out only with hockey people, but the coach now finds himself bumping into CrossFitters all over North America. He counts 2010 CrossFit Games champ Graham Holmberg as a friend, and he'll see familiar CrossFit faces all over Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver. He also socializes with other CrossFit friends, which is a big step for a man who's spent most of his time talking shop with hockey people.

Hitchcock has learned that those who do Fran together usually stick together, and while NHL players often employ personal trainers and do their own form of conditioning, Hitchcock thinks the unifying nature of a CrossFit WOD is something players could benefit from.

"I think those competitions, those team workouts, I think those things are fascinating for the players," he says. "I know a lot of teams that do that type of stuff and don't even know it's CrossFit, whether it's a team workout of push-ups, sit-ups, burpees, wall-balls, squats—whatever. That's CrossFit. We do it and we don't even know that there's a name for it."

As of press time, the St. Louis Blues were sitting in third in the Central Division and fifth in the Western Conference. The team's winning percentage has increased dramatically since Hitchcock took over in November 2011. Hitchcock's main concern is leading the Blues into the playoffs and beyond, so he hasn't found a local CrossFit gym in St. Louis yet. But he will.

For now, he continues to pull WODs from different sites and brings them into the weight room for coaches' workouts. And he maintains a Paleo diet.

"I want to do this," he says. "I want to be on this lifestyle, and I feel like if I'm going to be in a stressful business, I'd better have the energy to handle the stress—and this has given me great energy. So that's the sales job for me: I'm not tired, I'm not exhausted, I'm not tired after I eat, and I feel good."

"I think that resonates throughout the way I coach, too. And if you're positive and you feel good and you've got energy, that's the way you're going to coach. If you look tired and drawn and stressed out, I don't think you would be as good a coach as you can be. So I think this has made me a better coach."

He adds: "I've found a lifestyle that works for me, and I can't say enough positive things. I feel strongly about this. From a physical and mental standpoint, when you feel like I do, it's a good thing because I'm 60 years of age."



### About the Author

*Mike Warkentin is the Managing Editor of the **CrossFit Journal** and the founder of [CrossFit 204](#).*