

The Panther Recon Downrange Gym

Staying fit on the frontlines presents unique challenges to soldiers in Iraq. Here's how one squadron used ingenuity and the *CrossFit Journal* to create a special gym near Baghdad.

First Lieutenant Matthew Hoff, U.S. Army, 82nd Airborne Division



Courtesy of 1st Lt. Matthew Hoff

A quick Google search of "Iraq" and "nuclear" will bring up references to the Osirak nuclear power plant.

In the late 1970s, Saddam Hussein purchased a nuclear reactor from France and began to build a power station. The ruined site sits near the town of Jisr Diyala, southeast of the city of Baghdad. As the plant was nearing completion in 1981, the Israeli Air Force bombed it into unrecoverable ruin during an air strike known as Operation Opera.

So what does this quick history lesson have to do with CrossFit?

Fitness on the Frontlines

On the other side of one of the 200-foot-tall dirt mounds that separate the ruins from the town is an American combat outpost. Since the occupation of COP Cashe South, the base and the living conditions have been slowly improving for the soldiers stationed there. Less than 24 hours after 5th Squadron, 73rd Cavalry Regiment assumed control of the area, the gym facility transformed from a collection of broken cardio equipment and cable machines into a downrange garage gym worthy of those it serves.

The centerpiece of the facility takes the concept of the garage set-up one step further: it's a rapidly deployable gym. The equipment can be assembled in about the same amount of time as a brand new Swedish living-room set, and the elaborate set of pull-up and dip bars served paratroopers from the squadron at three different bases during our deployment to Iraq.

The first stage of the gym made it to the CrossFit main site on [March 21, 2009](#). Since then, the equipment has grown to include homemade parallettes, medicine balls, adjustable plyo boxes, a climbing rope, rings and a 12-foot-tall addition that serves as a perfect platform from which to hang the rings. Tucked into a nicely air-conditioned warehouse, the pull-up bars are co-located with all the Olympic bars, squat racks, treadmills, dumbbells and other fitness equipment—yes, elliptical machines, a Smith machine and various other cable devices can still be found in the facility.

While the gym itself is enough to make any new box jealous, what makes it unique is its true grassroots foundation. The squadron doesn't have a Level 1 CrossFit trainer or a Games-qualifying firebreather. Instead, we have a group of paratroopers committed to improving the functional work capacity of both themselves and their charges.

Leading the Charge Toward Fitness

The impetus behind the facility is a non-commissioned officer who wanted to do what he could to take care of his "pipe-hitters." Sgt. Maj. Mario Cockrell, the squadron's operations sergeant major, is the man responsible for the construction of the gym. He combined the resources available to him from the technical competencies of his paratroopers and the [CrossFit Journal](#), and he built something special in the desert.

Building a functional fitness gym in six hours from popping the lock on a container to the first pull-up is an asset to any deploying unit.

Courtesy of 1st Lt. Matthew Hoff



Due to lack of equipment and unpredictable schedules, it's hard to stay fit on the frontlines— which is exactly where you're going to need that fitness most.

Sgt. Maj. Cockrell was first exposed to CrossFit by his company commander while assigned to the 173rd Airborne Brigade. He admits that his first few WODs hurt so badly that he wanted to opt out of physical training. His commander “Ranger Challenged” him to continue and, like most CrossFitters, he saw the results of the pain and was hooked.

The inspiration for the Panther Recon Gym came from a trip to the sprawling Victory Base Complex in Baghdad. While there, Sgt. Maj. Cockrell saw a similar apparatus in the compound for an elite unit, and he brought the idea back to squadron with him. The *CrossFit Journal* article [Mobility in Design: A Portable Pull-Up Structure](#) served as the primary reference and guide in the construction of the gym. The influence of the *Journal* is readily evident: articles on training in austere environments, monster mashes, Iron Majors and special-forces preparation hang on a corkboard outside Squadron Headquarters.

Using the welding and construction skills of the squadron’s Forward Support Company, an exceptional pull-up and dip station was built from scrap metal. Emblazoned with the Panther Recon crest, the apparatus has several key features. Because one of the major constraints was mobility, the rig was designed so the entire assembly could fit inside a 20-foot metal shipping container. Remarkably, on our last move it took five people only six hours to reassemble the gym. Building a functional fitness gym in six hours from popping the lock on a container to the first pull-up is an asset to any deploying unit.

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Surprisingly, the hardest part of building the gym (besides finding time for construction in an already full schedule) was creating the plyo boxes. While the skill required to nail a few pieces of plywood together is significantly less than constructing a masterpiece of welding, finding wood—or “Class IV material” as the army supply system calls it—capable of supporting burly, fully equipped soldiers was more challenging.



Courtesy of 1st Lt. Matthew Hoff

“Little groups of paratroopers” were effective in Normandy in the Second World War, and they’re pretty good in the CrossFit box, too.



Courtesy of 1st Lt. Matthew Hoff

Staff Sgt. DeWolfe of 1st Platoon demonstrates functional fitness with a .50-caliber overhead squat in full kit. Total weight: approximately 155 lb.

Courtesy of 1st Lt. Matthew Hoff



Using the resources in the *CrossFit Journal*, members of 5-73 Cavalry constructed the portable, rapidly deployable Panther Recon Gym.

Once again, Sgt. Maj. Cockrell came through and was able to find a way to get some good, sturdy American plywood. The result is a set of durable and adjustable boxes covered with a non-slip surface. Creative solutions like this came at almost every turn of construction and will continue as the Panther Recon Gym continues to evolve.

The Squadron-sized garage gym utilizes programming from CrossFit.com and a system of peer training. The absence of a certified Level 1 trainer in the unit and our widely varied schedules due to combat operations mean coaching is—out of necessity—done in the chow hall, before meetings and anywhere else we can find a free minute. Admittedly, this is not the ideal. There is a world of difference between asking someone to explain how to do a proper below-parallel squat and having a CrossFit trainer walk you through the progression with proper cues.

If You Build It, They Will Use It

The Osirak garage gym is a CrossFit field of dreams: once it was built paratroopers flocked to it. While it's a long way away from qualifying as anything close to an affiliate, it does provide paratroopers with very severe time restraints the means and direction to achieve world-class fitness between patrols, meetings and myriad other duties.

At the beginning of our deployment, CrossFit was known to many, and many others dabbled in it. For many, the initial appeal of the program was the length of the WODs. While more traditional bodybuilding isolation circuits and long, slow distance runs on the treadmill require a significant time investment and may or may not be interrupted, CrossFit WODs can usually be completed under a half hour including warm-up.

The revolution started at Forward Operating Base Loyalty at the beginning of the deployment. While the FOB had a gym that was both well stocked and close, it was far enough away and crowded enough at peak hours that it provided several readily available excuses for already swamped paratroopers to skip a workout. When the welded set of homemade pull-up and dip bars was placed right outside Squadron Headquarters, conveniently between the entrance and the closest latrines, the main excuse quickly disappeared.

Paratroopers from our squadron and sister battalions and even contracted civilians started using the gym at all hours of the day and night. One of these visiting paratroopers was a CrossFit dignitary. Capt. Steve Smith, a competitor who finished 48th at the CrossFit Games, took advantage of the gym as part of his training.

While the bars became the cornerstone of fitness for the soldiers living on the FOB, what truly speaks to the efficacy of CrossFit is that paratroopers doing refit on the FOB would make a WOD at the gym an essential part of their visit. It's common to see a team-sized element still in combat equipment doing highly functional movements at the Panther Recon Gym.

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Even more effective was the whiteboard. Paratroopers are, by their very definition, a competitive group of people. Having a whiteboard displayed in such a public place was almost an open challenge to all comers. Imagine the spike in membership if everyone could take their affiliate's whiteboard to their workplaces and put it up on the wall. Like Coach Glassman says, "Men will die for points." Placing the whiteboard where everyone could see it served as a catalyst at two different bases, and the board may even redeploy with us.

The gym was made possible only through a significant amount of time and effort by Sgt. Maj. Cockrell. When asked if he would do it again or if he would do it for another unit he was assigned to, his response was an emphatic, "Definitely!" He sees CrossFit as an important tool in improving the performance of his soldiers, which is a key task in his role as a senior NCO.

"CrossFit's benefits are threefold," according to Sgt. Maj. Cockrell. "It is just awesome in the way that it brings people together, prepares soldiers for the physical challenges of combat and builds a state of mental fitness in the individual."

The Legacy of the Panther Recon Gym

The list of firsts, PRs and success stories achieved on the Panther Recon Gym is simply too long for this article, but the improvements seen here add to the evidence of CrossFit's effectiveness.

Constantly improving the position in Iraq was key in the time before most of the people in the unit were even in the army. The primary meaning of this was to continually add defensive measures to a location. After almost a decade in Iraq, the mandate has expanded beyond defensive measures and force protection to include improving the quality of life for soldiers. The CrossFit gym was the first major improvement made at COP Cashe South once 5-73 Cavalry assumed control of the base.

I cannot do justice to the positive effects CrossFit has on general physical preparedness, combat effectiveness, mental health, stress relief, focus and a plethora of other human needs. What I can vouch for is that, with a little ingenuity, the line between "austere training environment" and "CrossFit box" can be blurred. Add the expertise and detail of the *CrossFit Journal* and a strong peer-support network, and world-class fitness is available to everyone—even those living and conducting special combat operations near a blown-up Ba'ath party nuclear reactor.

Unique to our gym is its legacy. This apparatus has served hundreds of paratroopers at three forward bases in eastern Baghdad, and it will redeploy back to Fort Bragg, N.C., with us as a functional testament to the squadron's commitment to excellence.



About the Author

1st Lt. Matthew Hoff is the Scout Platoon Leader assigned to First Platoon, Bandit Troop, 5-73 Cavalry (Panther Recon), 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division. He is currently deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. He is a graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point (2007). An Infantry Officer, he has achieved Ranger, Airborne and Air Assault qualifications.

