

---

# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

---

## Addiction, Recovery and CrossFit

Ron Gellis, a recovering alcoholic and psychologist, started a program that combines elements of a traditional 12-step model with CrossFit. Community, he says, is key. Andréa Maria Cecil reports.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

December 2012

---



*Ron Gellis is a masters competitor and the man behind the Integrated Recovery program.*

About a year ago, Zach's 7-year-old brother found him lying on the floor of their parents' Washington home, passed out from a heroin overdose. Two weeks later, his sister saw him in the bathroom with a needle in his arm.

The 21-year-old, who asked that his last name be withheld, became addicted to painkillers at 16 after multiple surgeries to remove malignant tumors from his ears.

---

1 of 6



**Gellis, a recovering alcoholic, believes exercise is a great way to stabilize the moods of addicts.**

"My ears would basically bleed every day," he said. "I had four surgeries over the space of a year to remove those two tumors. After each surgery, I had pain pills that would last me a month or two."

For the next year, Zach took prescription pain pills.

"After my last surgery, I had to find other ways," he said. "I would basically find people who had prescriptions of OxyContin."

Once he found them, he would pay as much as \$50 per pill, handing over money he earned at his full-time job or stole from his family or friends.

Zach said his drug use didn't get serious until after high school.

"Sometime after high school was when I really transitioned (from) recreational to full-time, everyday use," he said.

When Zach's sister told their parents what she saw in the bathroom, the couple was quick to send their son to a Pacific Hills Treatment Center in California.

---

**"One of the things that struck me immediately was the strength of the community in CrossFit."**

**—Ron Gellis**

---

"One of my very close friends and one of my cousins actually went through Pacific Hills and went through rehab there," Zach said.

The treatment center was one that worked with Integrated Recovery—a program founded by recovering alcoholic, psychologist and CrossFit Games masters athlete Ron Gellis. Integrated Recovery combines traditional aspects of 12-step rehab with CrossFit.

At the time, Zach had mixed feelings.

"My whole life was built around lying and cheating and stealing," he explained. "The only reason I really wanted to go to rehab was, 'OK, I'll give it a try. I don't really care.'"

He added: "In some ways, I was hoping to die just because the lifestyle was so miserable. I needed to get high every 12 hours."

Today, Zach credits the program as being integral in keeping him alive.

"I would be dead or in jail," he said. "It was just a matter of days."

### **An Idea**

A recovering alcoholic himself, Gellis spent decades helping addicts recover.

"I've always known that some form of exercise is a good component to recovery," he said.

In 2008, Gellis' son, who was in the Navy at the time, told him about CrossFit.



**Recent studies have shown that exercise helps addiction recovery and can even mimic some of the effects drugs have on the brain.**

"I was pretty surprised because I thought he was in pretty damn good shape," he said with a laugh. "What are you talking about? There's a fitness program that's going to get you in better shape?"

Having always been fitness oriented, Gellis traveled down from Lake Forest, Calif., to San Diego to watch his son do CrossFit.

"My first thought was, 'He is crazy to think I can do that. I'm 60,'" Gellis recalled. "But, nevertheless, I didn't want to say 'no.' So eventually I got into it."

He returned home to find the nearest affiliate. At the time, it was CrossFit Laguna Beach—about a 35-minute drive.

Within a few weeks, Gellis began having light-bulb moments.

"One of the things that struck me immediately was the strength of the community in CrossFit," he said. "And in dealing with addictions, one of the biggest problems is the isolation that people have. So anything that speaks of community support is a good thing."

Plus, Gellis said, exercise can be a way to stabilize mood.

"Knowing that it was a good substitute often for medication ... I saw it as a very important part of the recovery piece for some," he said.

After about a year of CrossFit, Gellis decided to put his private practice on hold. He had an idea.

### Coach B's Story

For Mike Burgener, athletics was an addiction. A positive one, so he thought.

"I was a good athlete in high school and college, and weightlifting and so on and so forth, and it became, for me, I was addicted to working out. I was addicted to being that Marine," explained the 65-year-old. "That addiction was positive ... that's who I was. But there were so many other things involved with me."

The longtime Olympic weightlifting coach and former Notre Dame football player was so obsessed with athletics that whenever any of his favorite teams lost, he would become enraged.

"I would have thrown a candle at the TV when the Chargers were losing," Burgener said. "If Notre Dame ... lost the game, I would fret for a week because it was my fault that they lost the game."

Then he started to morph into someone else. When other drivers cut him off in traffic, Burgener would lay on his horn and flip them off while simultaneously yelling at them.

But it wasn't just an athletics addiction that was causing Burgener to act in such a manner. It also was something he referred to as his "qualifier."

In the speech of Al-Anon Family Groups—a Virginia-based international support group for families and friends of problem drinkers—a qualifier is a person who has a problem with alcohol or another addiction.

"I had a qualifier that was ruining our lives," Burgener said, referencing his family. The problem was so extreme that Burgener said he came close to killing this person with his bare hands.

That's when a chance encounter with Ron Gellis changed things. When Burgener's daughter, Sage, began coaching at CrossFit Invictus in San Diego, she met Gellis, a career psychologist.

*Coach B's story continued ...*

### **“A More Profound Effect”**

Gellis began creating what is now known as Integrated Recovery, a program that blends traditional elements of a 12-step recovery program with the CrossFit methodology of fitness and nutrition.

“It’s a way of integrating the treatment aspect of dealing with the addiction and mental illness ... with an exercise program like CrossFit,” he explained. “The essence of Integrated is that it combines multiple disciplines: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual, which includes nutrition. The integrated aspect is all of those dimensions.”

The Integrated Recovery program can manifest itself in various ways.

---

**“They think they’re maybe  
going to walk on the treadmill.  
No, not so much.”**

**—Jeff Hughes**

---

“We have people in treatment programs. People come from all over the country,” Gellis said. “When they leave, we will set them up with a box in their neighborhood, as well as getting them set up to go to meetings in their community. That might be their starting point.”

Others might simply access the [Integrated Recovery website](#) and get connected on their own, he added.

At residential facilities in California and Texas, “The focus is on truly an integrated recovery model,” Gellis said.

In addition to the 12-step program, addicts receive daily education on the Paleo and Zone diets, as well as CrossFit.

“There is a schedule every day that covers the whole day,” Gellis said.

For their workouts, addicts are required to adhere to a three-on/one-off, two-on/one-off schedule.

Addicts in Integrated Recovery’s residential facilities work out at nearby CrossFit affiliates, sometimes in private classes and other times alongside members. The reason for their visit is kept confidential.

*Coach B’s story continued ...*

“He’s a masters athlete, and he needed some help with the Olympic lifts,” explained Burgener, who leads CrossFit Olympic Weightlifting Trainer Courses. “Sage told him about our story, and then I had an opportunity to talk to Ron, and he started schooling me at that point.”

He added: “Of course, I didn’t want to hear anything about that crap. That wasn’t me.”

Today, after nearly three years of weekly Al-Anon meetings, Burgener said he intends to continue going for the rest of his life.

“It’s kind of like my therapy,” he explained. “Hell, I think everybody in the world should go through Al-Anon 101. I think we’d be a lot better off.”

The problem, he said, wasn’t just his so-called qualifier. It was him.

“I went to Al-Anon meetings to fix my qualifier and I realized that it wasn’t my qualifier that needed fixing. It was me that needed fixing,” Burgener said. “I gotta tell ya, when I first went there, I cried like a baby. I was hurt, I was devastated, I was ashamed.”

Gellis, he said, “probably ended up saving my life.”

No one’s above addiction, Burgener said: “We’re all addicts, in my own opinion.”

His weekly meetings, he added, helped him understand how to best live his life.

“When I started going to Al-Anon meetings, I learned how to breathe,” Burgener explained. “I don’t know anything. I know how I feel. The program has really helped me cope and made me a better person. It’s made my life better. It’s made my marriage better. It’s made my relationship with my children better.”

Burgener sang Gellis’ praises, saying he has helped “so many people.”

“Integrated Recovery is all about that—that recovery, trying to bring people who have issues with alcohol and drug addiction ... to CrossFit ... so they can feel good about themselves,” Burgener said. “And CrossFit is a way of bringing people together.”

"There's such a varied level of motivation," explained Gellis, who placed sixth in the 60-Plus Masters Division at the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games and fifth in 2012.

CrossFit Orange County in San Clemente, Calif., most often sees addicts who are 30 to 60 days into the program.

"It's a success to get them out of the van ... and get them through the warm-up and stretching," said affiliate owner Jeff Hughes.

The goal, he added, is to instill in them the CrossFit mentality: get through it, adapt when you need to.

"We're not trying to make them into ... top-level athletes," Hughes said.

CrossFit Orange County holds six classes each week for the addicts: three for the men and three for the women. The classes require a coach who has the ability to make personal connections and who can adapt movements to participants of any age or fitness level.

"You can have someone who's literally 50 years old and never exercised in their life and they've been insulting their body with drugs and alcohol for years, and now they CrossFit," Hughes said. "And they didn't come to CrossFit because they wanted to get in shape."



CrossFit Redemption

---

**"I don't remember ever really having a more profound effect on someone's life than I have doing this."**

**—Gabe Baltodano**

---

Sometimes workouts only involve learning to squat on a 24-inch box. It's not unusual for addicts to be physically shaking after five squats and some rest, he said.

"We get a wide range of folks that come through there, and it's really a daunting task for the coach," Hughes continued. "Sometimes they're not interested in what the hell you have to say. They think they're maybe going to walk on the treadmill. No, not so much."

***CrossFit provides an opportunity to reinforce good lifestyle choices in a supportive, positive community.***

At CrossFit Redemption in Huntington Beach, Calif., coaches most often work with addicts who are about 90 days into the program, owner Gabe Baltodano said.

"When we say, 'Your workout is our warm-up,' that's really true for them," he noted.

Depending on their age and physical condition, CrossFit Redemption might have some of the addicts simply stretch as their workout.

To get members of this population to a point where they are making healthy-living choices on their own is the goal, he added.

"It's very fulfilling for me," Baltodano said. "I had worked in law enforcement for 12 years prior to this. I don't remember ever really having a more profound effect on someone's life than I have doing this."

### “I Know It Works”

Today Zach is focused on his career: firefighting.

After completing the Integrated Recovery program, he temporarily moved to Fairbanks, Alaska, for a seasonal firefighting job that started in May and ended in October. Once there, he was one of 20 promoted to the hotshot crew, a high-level firefighting team. Of those, Zach was the third most fit.

“I had no preparation other than CrossFit,” he said.

Baltodano, who called the 21-year-old a “model poster child” for the Integrated Recovery program, was a reference for Zach when he applied for the firefighting job.

“They called me to talk about (his) physical preparedness,” Baltodano said. “I told them, ‘I don’t think there’s anything you can throw at him that he can’t do.’”

He added: “That’s exactly the kind of guy we would like to get a house full of.”

Now back in Washington, Zach and his cousin recently bought equipment for doing CrossFit workouts at home. And Zach is preparing for his next firefighting season in Alaska.

“I’ve already started training for my job next year. That’s how I used CrossFit last year, and that’s how I’ll use CrossFit the next few years,” he said. “Eventually, I’m going to try to get hired as a structural firefighter in a city somewhere, but that might not happen until I’m 27.”

When Zach started the Integrated Recovery program he was 155 lb.—at 6 feet tall—and smoking a pack of cigarettes a day.

“And not working out ever,” he added.

Today he’s 175 lb., doing CrossFit multiple times a week, eating about 80 percent Paleo and “living a very, very healthy lifestyle compared to when I checked into rehab.”

Zach said: “It’s pretty surreal to look back now that all that stuff actually happened to me. I wouldn’t even consider that type of lifestyle or going back to drugs. It’s kind of scary to me to think that I ... (had) a couple of very close calls with death.”



Courtesy of Andréa Maria Cecil

---

“It’s pretty surreal to look back  
now that all that stuff  
actually happened to me.”

—Zach

---

Over the course of three years, Gellis said, the Integrated Recovery program has had positive results.

“I know it works,” he said. “I see the people who do it and stay with it. The quality of their recovery is much better.”

*Andréa Maria Cecil is the Regional Community Media Director for the Australia, Europe and North East regions. She was also the North East Regional Media Director for the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games. Cecil has been a freelance writer and editor for the **CrossFit Journal** since 2010 and also writes for the CrossFit Games site. She spent nearly 13 years as a professional journalist, most recently as managing editor of the **Central Penn Business Journal** in Harrisburg, Pa. The 34-year-old is a native of New Orleans who lives in York County, Pa. There, she’s been doing CrossFit since 2008 at **CrossFit York**, where she coaches Olympic weightlifting as a USA Weightlifting Level 1 Sports Performance Coach. Additionally, Cecil dedicates four days a week to training the Olympic lifts herself at **McKenna’s Gym**.*