

# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

## June 2016

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THE  
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# PROGRAMMING: IN-HOUSE OR OUTSOURCE?

Affiliate owners sound off on the best way to program a CrossFit affiliate. **BY EMILY BEERS**





Raul Alonso Valenzuela is passionate about coaching, but he's even more passionate about designing workout plans for his athletes.

"Programming is one of the most satisfying parts of my job," said Valenzuela, owner of CrossFit Down Under in Adelaide, Australia.

He isn't alone: Thousands of affiliate owners share Valenzuela's love for designing and implementing workouts and fitness plans for their athletes. But for every Valenzuela, there's also a Jan Clingston. The owner of CrossFit Kungsbacka in Sweden bowed out of doing his affiliate's programming when he started outsourcing the task in October 2015, and he's very satisfied with his choice.

Some affiliate owners vow they'll always program for their gyms, while others are happy to give the role to a staff person or pay an outside vendor to program. We talk to members of both camps to find out why they do what they do.

## Imported Squats?

Many gyms still use the high-quality free programming on [CrossFit.com](https://crossfit.com) and other websites, but the choice can be made to pay for programming that's either generic or tailored exactly to a particular gym. A number of individuals currently offer monthly programming packages for affiliates. A close look at half a dozen options shows a great deal of variance among programs.

One major difference is price: The least expensive program of those surveyed costs US\$75 a month, while the most expensive is \$499 a month. Much of the cost differential can be attributed to the level of detail in each program.

For example, David Spitz of Cal Strength in San Ramon, California, offers a strength program as opposed to a program focused on general physical preparedness (GPP). Spitz's gym, which has been around for a decade and has produced many high-level American weightlifters, has been offering this service to CrossFit affiliates for two years. Those who follow Spitz's Chapters strength program pay \$75 a month, which gives them access to four-week strength cycles, papers Spitz writes based on the data he tracks, and a workout-tracking app that also serves as a forum for interaction and discussion.

Because Spitz's program is solely focused on strength and is not tailored to individual affiliates, gym owners who follow it add their own flair by designing and implementing skill work, conditioning, accessory work, flexibility training and so on.

David Spitz (right) of Cal Strength offers a bolt-on strength program some affiliate owners have used to complement their own conditioning programming.



In contrast, Pat Sherwood, CrossFit Media personality and owner of CrossFit Linchpin in Fremont, California, sells his GPP affiliate program for \$499 a month. Sherwood works with affiliate owners individually and then drafts a program based on the demographics and specific needs and characteristics of that affiliate, such as weather considerations and equipment limitations.

One of the other big differences between affiliate programming is intent. The purpose of some programs—such as Chapters—is to get a large number of athletes on the program, which helps Spitz collect data and test different strength methods.

“It doesn’t matter how elegant my theory is. If I’m not producing results and people aren’t progressing, then I have to make adjustments,” Spitz explained. He said he analyzes his athletes’ numbers each month to help him optimize his program and produce the best results.

Meanwhile, other programs, such as Sherwood’s, are often temporary solutions to help new affiliate owners learn about programming—essentially mentoring them until they feel confident creating their own programming. Sherwood, a former member of CrossFit Inc.’s Seminar Staff, acts more like a coach—or programming mentor—to the affiliate owners he works with.

Despite variance among the programs, there are also many similarities. By and large, affiliate programming is designed for general clients as opposed to competitive CrossFit athletes, though it’s not uncommon for providers to offer two slightly different variations of the same workout—one for competitors and one for general clients. Most programs provide a workout six or seven days a week. In certain cases, additional skill work, flexibility pieces and accessory work are also programmed. Warm-ups are usually not included; however, Pat Barber—a CrossFit Seminar Staff member, the head of coaching development at NorCal CrossFit, and one of the principals at Warmup and Workout—offers a program with a warm-up specific to each session.

Other common features include scaling options to reflect different fitness levels, as well as possible substitutions if a gym doesn’t have enough equipment for an entire class. Further, most programs include links to outside resources—often relevant articles and videos—and coaching tips. Barber’s program, for example, includes a detailed lesson plan—an explanation to help the coach implement the programming correctly. It’s also common for vendors to provide an online forum to allow recipients to ask questions and generate discussion with other owners and coaches.

Finally, affiliate programs are released to their audiences either one week or one month at a time, usually near the end of the previous month so the recipient has a chance to look over the program beforehand.

Affiliate programming is usually designed for general clients as opposed to competitive CrossFit athletes, though it’s not uncommon for providers to offer two slightly different variations of the same workout.

Pat Barber’s program includes warm-ups and lesson plans for affiliate owners. Scaling options and online forums are other common features offered by vendors.



## “I’ve Got It”

Valenzuela believes doing your own programming is an integral part of being an affiliate owner. It’s part of creating your own culture and catering to your athletes’ needs, he said.

“I got into CrossFit because it challenged me and my opinion of fitness. And I really enjoyed having to think about how it all made sense and having to progress and learn new things as an athlete and a coach,” he said. “I started my affiliate in my garage with limited equipment. And part of my learning was about learning how to run things with limited equipment. If you’re getting (programming) offshore, they don’t (necessarily) understand what equipment you have and how you run things.”

Even more important than culture and logistics is staying up to date with new science and trends, he said. Doing your own programming allows you to do this, he added.

“There’s a certain degree of mastery to it,” he said. “And I think you lose that when you’re following something someone else designed.”

When you design your own program, you understand the method behind the madness, the intended stimulus and the reasoning better than anyone else, Valenzuela explained. Conversely, if he were following someone else’s plan, he said he would fear becoming complacent, not to mention less passionate, because he would be less connected to the process.

“If you’re not interested in showing people your knowledge and what you know, then there can be a lack of understanding on your end and theirs,” Valenzuela said.

“I like to know that my clients’ achievements are a combination of my programming and coaching and their hard work.” —Krzysia Stevens

Krzysia Stevens of CrossFit Uckfield in the U.K. holds a similar view. The former primary-school teacher said her role isn’t so different now than it was as a teacher.



Jan Clingston (left) outsourced his programming and said he’s saved four hours each week that he can devote to other tasks.

“Making long-, medium- and short-term plans based upon what I want my class to achieve in a given amount of time (is my job),” she said.

And nobody knows her students better than she does. Her familiarity with her students even includes knowing their schedules each week, she said.

“I know some of my clients come the same days every week, so I make sure the programming (reflects this). For example, Monday isn’t always squat day,” Stevens said.

What’s even more important for Stevens, though, is her desire to be closely involved in her clients’ journeys.

“It isn’t that I wouldn’t trust someone else to do my programming for me. I’m sure there are plenty of folks out there who could do an amazing job—a better job than me, a different job than me. But I like to know that my clients’ achievements are a combination of my programming and coaching and their hard work,” she said. “We are a team and we do it together.”

And because CrossFit is measurable, it’s easy for her to see what’s working and what’s not working, she explained.

“Sometimes the week I had planned turns out to be tougher than I had envisioned. You have to respond to the needs of your clients on a daily basis. Some days, shit happens and things need to be tweaked or even chucked out the window entirely,” she said.

This trial and error is all part of it, she said. And it’s why she loves it.

“I think if I didn’t like programming I would be in the wrong job. It’s part and parcel of what we do.”

## How, not What

Josh Earleywine of CrossFit Sanctify in Madison, Wisconsin, is considering purchasing gym programming. He doesn’t think it will take away from his or his athletes’ growth because he said he thinks the program itself is secondary to its implementation.

“In the five years we’ve been open, I’ve had our members do just about every strength template there is and all sorts of different

things in terms of the workout. At times, I’ve gotten pretty geeky with it trying to figure out what the ideal program is to keep all of my people getting fitter,” he said.

These experiences made Earleywine realize it’s less about the program and more about the coach, he explained.

“I believe if we coaches over deliver and coach the heck out of the program, (my athletes will) get better. And if they believe in the program—and they will if they trust their coach and their coach buys into the program—then they’ll get results.”

He added: “If I find someone I trust to program, and he understands our culture—our class sizes, space, equipment—so logistically he can program something we can pull off, then I won’t have any concerns giving it up.”

“Programming, whether ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ is secondary to effective coaching, appropriate scaling, using sound mechanics, and a group dynamic conducive to pushing oneself.” —“CrossFit Level 2 Training Guide and Workbook”

The “CrossFit Level 2 Training Guide and Workbook” covers this very topic:

“A trainer cannot lose sight of the small influence programming has among a host of other factors that determine a client’s success. Programming, whether ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ is secondary to effective coaching, appropriate scaling, using sound mechanics, and a group dynamic conducive to pushing oneself (i.e., highest intensity brought to the work). Even with less-than-optimal programming, a trainer with a good eye for movement mechanics, and who develops a good rapport with his clients, will help clients improve their fitness for years.”



With this in mind, Earleywine feels comfortable hiring someone to relieve him of his programming duties, as it will save him five to eight hours a week, he said—hours he can use on other parts of the business.

“The Level 2 Training Guide and Workbook” is also clear that the magic is in the movements, particularly when coached by a skilled trainer:

“Functional movements performed at high intensity, regardless of how well they are combined and varied, are powerful enough to elicit dramatic changes in one’s health and performance, particularly for the unaccustomed. Therefore, trainers can spend more focus on his or her coaching skill set and member rapport instead of striving beyond reason to create the ‘perfect’ template and programming cycles.”

### Get With the Program

Like most affiliate owners, there was a time when Clingston programmed for his gym in Sweden.

But unlike owners of large affiliates, who often have the luxury of delegating various business tasks among multiple coaches, Clingston only had one other assistant coach working with him. He needed to find a way to buy back some precious hours each week, he explained. His answer was to outsource his programming. It’s made a world of difference, he said.

“A lot of the time I’ve saved from programming I’ve used to actually train myself—leading by example, you know?” said Clingston, who has freed up at least four hours each week just by ridding himself of programming duties.

Before he made the change, Clingston admitted he had concerns.

“I was worried there might be some equipment issues in the beginning. We are a small gym with 70 members,” he said. The programming he purchases comes complete with substitution options, so he hasn’t had any problems.

“And we have a forum where we can ask questions and get input from (the other users and the programmer),” he said. “I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve discussed substitutions on stuff like GHD sit-ups.”

His other initial fear was about losing his unique style and brand by giving up programming. This hasn’t happened either, he said.

“My own unique style has a lot more to do with my personality than it has to do with programming,” he said.



Mike Warkentin/CrossFit Journal

“A box of Fran? Who ordered this? Can we send it back?”

Clingston said the new programming has helped his business and his clients: “My athletes are seeing better results.”

George Burke of CrossFit Munster in Munster, Indiana, is another affiliate owner who said his athletes are benefitting from a decision to purchase monthly programming. Burke spends \$75 for a strength program and continues to program his own conditioning workouts, reducing programming time to one day a month.

“The (strength) cycles last four weeks. I usually get the new cycle the Saturday before it starts. And I will spend most of the day Sunday planning met-cons and skills training around it,” Burke explained.

The set-up is working because it allows Burke to continue to be involved in programming but leaves the strength aspect of the program to someone he considers to be more expert than himself, he explained.

“Our members love all the strength work that we do. And our strength levels as a gym have skyrocketed,” he said.

### The Best of Both Worlds

Sonja DeWitt—owner of CrossFit Up in Santa Cruz, California—and husband Ryan DeWitt used to share their gym’s programming load among three coaches.

The situation wasn’t ideal, DeWitt explained, as their program lacked consistency and the coaches could never agree on what was best. But programming just wasn’t something she or her husband was all that passionate about, she said.

“Ryan never wanted to do the programming because it’s just not how his brain works,” DeWitt said. It made sense to pay \$250 to someone more suited to the task.

They decided to keep programming in house and use one of their own coaches to take on the job. The decision has saved them multiple hours each week and has given them peace of mind that the program is designed by someone who knows their members well, DeWitt explained.

“She knows what’s going on at the gym. Like right now, we’re doing a Whole 30 nutrition challenge, so we asked her to program

“The standard by which to evaluate any programming is measurable improvement in performance markers.”  
—“CrossFit Level 2 Training Guide and Workbook”

a test workout at the start and end of the 30 days. Or recently, we had a photo shoot going on in the gym, so we had to program to work around it,” DeWitt said. “And nobody argues anymore.”

But the best part of the change at CrossFit Up, DeWitt said, is the new program is producing better performance.

“The fitness that is being delivered is far better now,” she said.

### Improve Fitness ... By Any Means

A host of options are available to affiliate owners when it comes to programming, including simply sitting down at the computer and creating a great mix of heavy days, couplets, triplets and chippers, all according to CrossFit principles. Whether you choose to design your own program or outsource the task to someone you trust, the “Level 2 Training Guide” is clear that you must monitor the input versus the output:

“Effective—or ‘good’—programming produces results, and the relative degree to which programming is effective is the degree to which it optimizes fitness. The standard by which to evaluate any programming is measurable improvement in performance markers.”

With that in mind, it likely doesn’t really matter who does your programming as long as workouts are well coached and you and your clients are getting fitter. ■

**About the Author:** Emily Beers is a CrossFit Journal contributor and coach at [CrossFit Vancouver](#). She finished 37th at the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games.



THE **CrossFit** JOURNAL

# STRONG GETS STRONGER: CROSSFIT RISK RETENTION GROUP

Undefeated in litigation, CF-RRG continues to defend the CrossFit community and improve service to policyholders.

BY ERIC REINGEN







**Since 2009**, CrossFit Risk Retention Group (CF-RRG) has stood behind affiliates and trainers.

A community-owned insurance company, CF-RRG provides all insurance requirements in affiliate licensing agreements and fulfills CrossFit Kids requirements. CF-RRG also provides personal-trainer policies for independent Level 1 CrossFit Certificate holders.

Last year was very strong, and 2016 has already brought notable successes, making the future very promising for CF-RRG and its policyholders.

## Premium and Capital

CF-RRG continues to be the insurance leader for CrossFit affiliates in the U.S. Over 36 percent of U.S. affiliates use CF-RRG for insurance, up from 30 percent in 2013. In addition, all U.S. military affiliates are insured by CF-RRG.

In 2015, its largest year ever, CF-RRG wrote US\$3,319,075 of premium, up 7.5 percent from \$3,075,457 in 2014. CF-RRG collected \$474,100 in capital contributions in 2015 vs. \$620,800 a year prior, down 24 percent.

Capital contributions, also called membership contributions, are \$1,000 for affiliate owners (payable in two installments) and \$200 for trainers. These contributions make policyholders stockholders as well. CF-RRG expects capital contributions to continue to decrease as the insurance company matures. Once members have made their full contributions, they no longer need to make additional capital payments. As the renewal membership population continues to increase, CF-RRG will collect less capital. This is normal and expected.

CF-RRG has continued to mature and stabilize in 2015. Years ago, general fitness-industry data was relied upon to manage critical components of the insurance process. Rate establishment, claims expectations and expenses were all based on analysis outside the community. After six years, CF-RRG now uses its own data based on claims submitted by CrossFit policyholders. It's a paramount shift in maturity. Pricing now more accurately represents risk, claims can be predicted with greater accuracy, and forecasts are made well into the future. This allows for a healthier, safer insurance company.

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its own data based on claims  
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It's a paramount shift in maturity.

As of press time, 2,525 affiliates and trainers are covered by CF-RRG. On average, CF-RRG welcomes 50 new members per month and renews the insurance policies of existing members at a success rate of 90 percent. Relatively unchanged for years, these numbers are great indicators of stability for CF-RRG and its community.

Understanding growth is only one component of managing CF-RRG. Claims are becoming increasingly important as periodic allegations threaten to hurt CrossFit's training programs and the CrossFit community as a whole.

## Claims

At inception, CF-RRG was created to protect against potentially devastating allegations regarding CrossFit training, specifically rhabdomyolysis (rhabdo). Almost immediately, in 2011, CF-RRG found itself defending against a rhabdo claim. After many years, CF-RRG, CrossFit Inc. and P3 CrossFit recently prevailed on all counts.

The case has been well documented by Russell Berger ("**CrossFit Inc. Victorious in Texas**") and Dale Saran ("**Rhabdo Redemption and RRG Proof of Concept**"). Our purpose is not to detail the victory but to understand how CF-RRG's claim decisions have affected the company in 2015 and why they will pay dividends in the future.

CF-RRG spent \$232,153.26 defending P3 CrossFit and CrossFit Inc., though we had good reason to believe CF-RRG could settle the case for \$15,000 in 2015. This was not a case CF-RRG wanted to settle, so we chose the more costly but more valuable route to defeat the claim. The defense cost of the case has impacted losses in the short term but stabilized legal expenses and claims moving forward. CF-RRG is identifying this in decreasing loss ratios. A loss ratio is determined by dividing the claims payments by the premium written in the same period. It's an important factor when

Tip: Boxes should be inspected regularly for wear and tear that could cause accidents.





Allan Teer

Tip: Frayed ropes, straps and bands should be removed from use immediately.

establishing the health of an insurance company. In 2015 the loss ratio of CF-RRG was 38 percent, while in 2014 the loss ratio was 43 percent.

CF-RRG expects defense costs to decrease (on a per claim basis) as legal victories are publicized in the community of personal-injury attorneys and these attorneys become less likely to pursue frivolous claims against CrossFit affiliates and trainers. In addition to the recent win with P3 CrossFit, CF-RRG has won cases via summary judgment on multiple occasions, leading to an undefeated record in litigation since inception in 2009. The significance of this achievement cannot be overstated because it forms the backbone of personal-injury litigation strategy for U.S. CrossFit affiliates.

CF-RRG has an undefeated record in litigation since inception in 2009.

CF-RRG strategically appoints counsel to defend its members, with all coordination through the CrossFit Inc. legal team. Counsel appointees know CrossFit, understand the CrossFit methodology and are very familiar with the local jurisdiction from which they are chosen. Local counsel also hires medical experts in a similar fashion. These elements and strategic protocols can be expensive, but the long-term positive effects are worth it. Defending cases vigorously now creates a reputation of community protection for the future.

Contrary to previous notions, rhabdo claims have not been as frequent as we expected. This could be because of the efforts against plaintiff Adam Gottlieb in the P3 CrossFit suit or simply because of the existence of CF-RRG.

The most frequent claims have been associated with property damage—vibrations and damage to flooring, subflooring or walls, for example. We’ve even seen claims involving vehicles rammed by errant tires.

With regard to CrossFit programming, CF-RRG has seen claim frequency with back injuries. Attorneys are creative in their assertions of malpractice, usually because their understanding of CrossFit is limited. This makes the importance of a CrossFit-educated insurance company even more valuable. As with rhabdo claims, the CF-RRG defense is robust and vigorous for these cases. Allegations concerning a universal movement such

as the deadlift highlight the propensity of attorneys to sue quickly and without understanding.

## Media

Recognition of claim origin is an important aspect of CF-RRG management, and intelligent analysis and execution of risk-management goals help the community. CF-RRG has increased its media output to raise awareness of simple ways our community can make gyms safer. “The Soap Box Series” takes on issues such as spatial awareness, waiver preservation, on-boarding new members and so on.

In 2015, CF-RRG hosted webinars in each region to help the community understand the regulatory requirements of automated external defibrillators (AEDs). We currently send six emails to our members throughout the year that illustrate other exposures a CrossFit affiliate might not be aware of, including workers compensation, network security issues and employment practices. Sometimes a claim can be diverted if one suggestion is implemented at an affiliate.

In January 2016, we introduced an added benefit to CF-RRG membership: the WellCard. The WellCard provides a significant discount on prescriptions, doctor visits and other health-care services—reductions that are very welcome as health insurance becomes increasingly expensive.

## Technology

To better serve the community, CF-RRG successfully integrated into CrossFit ID and went paperless in 2014. Payments are now taken online and quotes no longer need to be manually signed.

CF-RRG is the most advanced insurance company providing coverage to CrossFit affiliates—but that’s not good enough. Continually improving member experience and process is vital, which is why we are making changes.

Later in 2016, CF-RRG will have a new look. A new website will replace the current scheme that is a replica of the CrossFit Games page. My Account, which currently serves as the place to sign quotes and make payments, will be completely reworked. New features will allow members to change their address from the website with zero wait time. Additionally, members will be able to change their name or add an additional insured from My Account effortlessly. Members will not need to sign their quote, and coverage choices will be easy to choose online.



A qualitative research project was conducted in the CrossFit community to guide CF-RRG in this process. Through research, CF-RRG learned new things about our community and how its members view insurance, and the knowledge will be used to create a better user experience.

Behind the scenes, we're working to increase efficiency from CF-RRG staff, resulting in quicker response times, even more accuracy and more time devoted to each member. One of the best things we learned from our research is that CF-RRG provides the highest customer-service satisfaction. In 2017, the bar will be raised even higher.

## 2016 and Ahead

In 2016 and for the first time, CF-RRG will partner with a company beyond CrossFit Inc. and its affiliates. Infant Swimming Resource (ISR) provides swimming lessons to infants and children by empowering its 450 instructors across the world, and it's been part of the CrossFit community for a long time.

CF-RRG will provide insurance for ISR instructors in the U.S. because ISR instruction is unique and can create challenges when trying to fit into traditional insurance policies—much like CrossFit. Most policies restrict swimming instruction and don't adequately provide coverage for professionals with expertise in the water. We've worked together with ISR to provide a comprehensive insurance policy that is specifically designed for ISR Instructors and their businesses. Find more about this new partnership [here](#).

The page for ISR Instructors also provides a glimpse of the experience CrossFit affiliate owners and trainers will enjoy following our website redesign.

CF-RRG expects premium growth of 10 percent or more in 2016, but, as stated earlier, we expect capital contributions collected to grow at a slower rate. Nevertheless, CF-RRG's total assets will be over \$8 million by year's end, and we'll begin the process of returning over \$500,000 of contributions from our capital-raising efforts in 2008 (this does not include active policyholders). This process will start in late 2016, upon approval of the Montana Insurance Department.

In 2013, we believed insurance markets could harden and create higher prices in the short term; however, capital has continued to flood reinsurance markets, extending the soft insurance market into 2016. Indicators show the soft market and CF-RRG's increased maturity are leading to better terms from reinsurers and other insurance partners. Better reinsurance terms coupled with low claims are probable, and we expect this to play a large role in growing capital reserves.

As capital grows, CF-RRG is in a better position to defend its members from attacks on the CrossFit community and its methodology.

The growth and increasing strength of CF-RRG will allow us to take aggressive action in defense of our affiliates and trainers. ■

**About the Author:** Eric Reingen is a principal at [CrossFit 310](#) in Redondo Beach, California; assistant vice president of CrossFit RRG Inc.; and vice president of Nexo Insurance Services Inc. Email him at [eric@crossfitrrg.com](mailto:eric@crossfitrrg.com).

The growth and increasing strength  
of CF-RRG will allow us to take  
aggressive action in defense of our  
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Tip: Worn skipping ropes often have exposed wires that can cause injuries.





MIKE WARKENTIN | UNCOMMON SENSE | JUNE 2016

Chris Rosa



THE  
**CrossFit** JOURNAL

# ELLIPTICAL SYNDROME CRIPPLES FRAN, HELEN

Warning: Reducing intensity can be habit forming. Please consult your CrossFit trainer immediately.



You have to do Fran today.

Stop reading, close your eyes and really think about that for a moment.

Note the freefall feeling in your chest, the sweaty palms and the subtle changes in your breathing.

Now consider this statement:

You have to do Fran in less than 12 minutes today.

I bet you suddenly don't feel nervous at all. You might even view the reps as a warm-up for another workout.

Provided you've scaled properly and aren't slogging through singles at maximum effort, a 12-minute Fran is a relative cakewalk. A fairly proficient athlete could do the round of 21 in about 2 minutes, then take the next 7 or 8 minutes to recover before banging out the 15s and 9s in another 2 or 3 minutes. It wouldn't be that bad. Or you could steadily chug through 1 rep every 8 seconds or so, occasionally throwing in a triple to allow for a few adjustments of your knee sleeves and several checks to ensure the phone is recording your efforts for Facebook.

Same weight, same reps, same workout—different results.

Intensity burns. It tastes like a mouthful of old pennies soaked in battery acid.

Intensity burns. It tastes like a mouthful of old pennies soaked in battery acid. It makes you dizzy. It causes you to writhe around on the ground trying to work the misery out of your muscles. It usually requires a period spent on your back or butt, and sometimes it sends your lunch back the way it came in. Intensity gets caught in your throat and keeps you hacking hours after the workout ends.

Intensity also brings results. Push someone out of the comfort zone and physiology adapts. Do that regularly and fitness improves dramatically. After more than 15 years of workouts on [CrossFit.com](https://www.crossfit.com) and six years of the CrossFit Games Open, we can make that statement with certainty backed by data.

**“Intensity is the independent variable most commonly associated with maximizing favorable adaptation to exercise.” —Greg Glassman**



Discomfort creates adaptation, but it can be very tempting to avoid the continuous discomfort needed to keep driving adaptation—even as a CrossFit athlete who knows its rewards.

Repetition creates habit, and you can adjust to almost anything—even fairly unpleasant stuff like Fran. I’m sure The Man in the Iron Mask was pretty uncomfortable for the first period of his imprisonment, but after a few years of metal, he was probably well used to flattening out his sandwiches so they would fit through the mouth slot.

Same deal with fitness. As we all know, “beginner’s gains” in CrossFit are the reward athletes are given simply for ditching inactivity or a stagnant fitness routine in favor of a superior regimen. When beginner’s gains evaporate and the nose must go right to the grindstone for sustained improvement in CrossFit, it can be tempting to get comfortable and step back from intensity. Not all the way back—just enough to take the edge off. Satisfaction with current output can reduce discomfort significantly—and limit results—while the quest for further improvements would bring great reward but also renewed acquaintance with that deep burning sensation.

Reducing intensity can be as subtle as breaking up Fran’s 15 thrusters when we don’t have to. It’s a very minor reduction in effort, and almost no one notices—sometimes not even the athlete. Fran burns a bit less, and only 20 seconds are added to a PR time, giving him or her the opportunity to attribute the score to an off day, bad sleep or “that third burrito at lunch.”

Luckily, the athlete still stays far fitter than if he or she hadn’t done Fran, but slacking off a little can lead to slacking off a lot, which is equivalent to treating a CrossFit workout like a 20-minute roll through the sports section while plodding on the elliptical machine.

To reap the greatest benefits from CrossFit, you have to be willing to push yourself, to be uncomfortable, to suffer for reward.



Set your mind, grit your teeth and finish the reps.

I realized I was cutting with the wrong side of a very sharp knife a few weeks back in a workout that forced me to push myself:

100 wall-ball shots  
Do 13 burpees after any broken set; no resting while holding the ball.

In that workout, my utter hatred of burpees forced me to complete my final set of 45 by pushing into the neighborhood of my physical limit. But my mental limit had come 30 reps into that last set, when I normally would have quit had the burpees not been present.

“I can’t finish this unbroken,” I thought before a coach saw me

mentally crumbling and quickly advised that trading only 15 wall balls for 13 burpees plus 15 wall balls was a bad deal.

So I kept going, and while the 45th rep burned deeply, it was achievable. In fact, I had a few more in me. I had no idea—but my coach did.

The workout and the coach kicked me off the elliptical machine, so to speak, and they highlighted the fact that I’m capable of more than I think I am. I bet you’re more capable than you think you are, and your CrossFit coach knows it. Listen to him or her when you’re told to keep going and see what happens. When the coach says, “Do 5 more,” do 5 more—even if you think you’ll fail. I bet you won’t. I bet you’ll get fitter.

To get even further out of your CrossFit comfort zone, I’d encourage you to experiment with workouts similar to the wall-ball challenge detailed above.

**Air Force**, with 4 burpees preceding the work every minute, is a good example of a nowhere-to-hide workout.

Or try 500-meter rowing or 400-meter running repeats with a thruster penalty for every second under a certain challenging but achievable time.

Another option: Create a workout with a scheme about 2 reps out of your comfort zone and vow to do all sets unbroken. Fran at 23-17-11 might present an excellent challenge even if it lacks the mathematical grace of the original prescription.

Or you can create workouts in which a certain number of reps must be completed every 60 seconds. If you pick the right amount of work for your fitness level—say 15 wall-ball shots and 10 heavy kettlebell swings, for example—you’re going to have to work hard and go unbroken to get the work done in each minute.

To reap the greatest benefits from CrossFit, you have to be willing to push yourself, to be uncomfortable, to suffer for reward. And most of us are most of the time. The whiteboard and the rivalries thereon are powerful motivational tools. Still, a 5-minute Fran can become a habit if you let your mind trick you into dropping the barbell well before you need to.

Remember: Objects in motion tend to stay in motion, while objects at rest tend to head to the chalk bucket. ■

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Mike Warkentin is the managing editor of the CrossFit Journal and the founder of **CrossFit 204**.





All photos: Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

THE  
**CrossFit** JOURNAL

# 21 + 15 + 9 = BETTER TEACHERS

Educator Julie Potts applies CrossFit training principles to help her students succeed.

BY JULIE POTTS





A few months ago, I walked into a CrossFit box hoping to learn new ways to get in shape. What I did not expect was the insight CrossFit would give me into my career as a kindergarten teacher.

Watching a CrossFit class is like witnessing the most perfectly differentiated and inclusive classroom. Every athlete is completing the same workout, but all work at very different levels. Some do pull-ups while others do ring rows, and some squat with 75 lb. while others lift 200 lb. or more.

The structure allows me, a beginner, to attend the same class as a competitive CrossFit athlete. I don't feel threatened or unsuccessful, and he or she doesn't feel bored or unchallenged. This structure is what I strive to achieve every day in my classroom.

I was always a fairly successful student, and I don't think I've been able to truly empathize with my struggling learners until my CrossFit experience.

I was always a successful student,  
and I don't think I've been able to  
truly empathize with my struggling  
learners until my CrossFit experience.

Imagine if I had walked in on my first day of CrossFit and the coaches told me to do as many pull-ups as I could. I am hardly strong enough to hang from the bar, much less attempt pull-ups. What if they did not give me an alternative or became frustrated with me for not trying? No matter how angry they might get, I just can't do a pull-up.

I think of my students and how some activities are simply not appropriate for certain learners. No matter how badly I want them to read or write at a certain level, they might not be ready, and forcing them to attempt tasks that are inappropriate is only going to lead to feelings of inadequacy and failure. Just as I would have walked right out the door if coaches insisted I do pull-ups, children will give up if we give them tasks that are out of their reach.

My definition of having high expectations for my students has changed since starting CrossFit. I used to think "high expecta-

The key to learning is ensuring students are challenged at the right level. If a task is too easy, boredom is likely. If a task is too hard, some students will become very frustrated.





All students learn differently, whether they're in a school or a CrossFit gym. Smart teachers and coaches find ways to connect with individuals to produce the best results.

tions” meant a goal for all students to read at a certain level or achieve a certain score on a writing or math test. What I’ve realized is that I can have high expectations for all students, but those expectations do not need to be the same for every child.

Just as I can have a great workout that will not come close to the level of the competitive athlete at the rack next to me, a struggling learner can complete an incredible piece of writing that might not contain many letters or words. I am still working the same muscle groups and becoming stronger every day, just as my students are becoming better readers and writers every day, even if some aren’t yet reaching the milestones the department of education would like.

I needed introductory training sessions to teach me the basics, and I still need the coaches to check in with me more frequently during class workouts. I am not ready for some exercises, and for each I have an alternative to strengthen the same muscle group. It’s not embarrassing to do something slightly different, as everyone knows we all work at different levels.

I have already made changes to my classroom activities and expectations, and I look forward to continuing to develop a learning environment similar to the one I experience when I attend CrossFit classes.

Psychologist Lev Vygotsky taught us to keep tasks within a child’s zone of proximal development (ZPD), providing her with experiences that challenge her just enough to move forward but not so much that she becomes frustrated. Success is unlikely if a child is constantly pushed past her ZPD and into frustration and failure, just as it would be impossible for me to succeed if pushed past my physical limits or given a task my body simply cannot perform.

Will I be able to do a pull-up eventually? Yes! When my body is ready for it, just as all my students will read and write when their minds are ready. ■

**About the Contributor:** Julie Potts is a kindergarten teacher in Massachusetts. She started CrossFit in January 2016 at **The Fort CrossFit** in Hampstead, New Hampshire.



# BEYOND PROVEN

BY HILARY ACHAUER

Top athletes talk about their single-minded pursuit of the podium and how they filled the void when they stepped back from the sport they love.







Very competitive athletes often find serenity when the pressure is off and they train only for health and fitness. A more relaxed Rob Orlando actually found his way back to the CrossFit Games as a master.

My husband threw me a semi-surprise party for my 40th birthday. When I walked through the roll-up garage doors of the gym that night, I saw three banners hanging from the ceiling. Each had a photo of me along with one word. One said “Writer,” one said “Mother,” and one read “Athlete.”

There was my life, my identity, wrapped up in three words: writer, mother, athlete.

Most of us define ourselves, in part, by our job, our family and our interests. But what happens when I stop working, when the kids grow up, if I get injured and can’t pursue sports—who will I be then?

Rory Zambard—who started CrossFit at 14—took 14th place at the 2013 Reebok CrossFit Games. Now, at 24, she’s stepped away from competitive CrossFit, and it wasn’t easy for her to leave behind something that had defined her.

“I had found my identity in CrossFit for too long, and when I could no longer be who I thought I needed to be, or who people thought I needed to be in the world of fitness, things sort of fell apart,” Zambard said.

When a CrossFit Games athlete makes the decision to step away from the sport, it’s not an easy transition. Competing at the highest level of any sport is all consuming, and giving it up leaves a vacuum many struggle to fill. However, these athletes often find a pot of gold on the other side of hours of training and time away from family and friends: a return to basics and a renewal of what they initially loved about CrossFit and fitness.

Competitive athletes often find a pot of gold on the other side: a return to basics and a renewal of what they initially loved about CrossFit.

## The Decision

After her strong showing at the Games in 2013, Zambard was ready to compete again in 2014. She hurt her back swinging a kettlebell just before the regional competition but still qualified for the Games. When she hurt her back again three weeks after regionals, Zambard got an MRI and discovered a softball-size





After Rory Zambard finished 14th at the CrossFit Games in 2013, health issues made her re-evaluate her priorities. Now, she's given up competition and focuses on her work as a coach and CrossFit Inc. Seminar Staff member.

tumor in her pelvis. She withdrew her name from the Games but was determined to come back in 2015 after surgery.

Once her body healed, Zambard began attacking workouts again, but something had changed.

"My heart had become hardened to the process," Zambard said. "I didn't find joy in (training) anymore, and I didn't love it anymore. It was work. I had to really push myself to just walk into the gym."

She continued: "As that started to grow ... I realized I was in jeopardy of falling out of love with CrossFit, which isn't something that I wanted to do."

Halfway through a partner competition in January 2015, Zambard realized she was miserable. She hated every second of that competition, she said.

So Zambard stopped working out altogether, determined to figure out who she was beyond a CrossFit competitor. It would take five months of soul searching to find the answer.

Like Zambard, Miranda Oldroyd's transition away from competitive CrossFit was precipitated by an injury. When competing on NorCal CrossFit's team at the 2015 Reebok CrossFit Games, Oldroyd tore her ACL and damaged her meniscus. Through rehabilitation and recovery, a move to Southern California, and a new position with Progenex, Oldroyd realized she needed to take a break from competing.

The deceleration process was not easy, especially for someone unaccustomed to sitting on the couch. Oldroyd said she knew she'd never be the type to fall into inactivity, but she also knew she needed time away from competition.

While Oldroyd was done competing, many of her friends were not.

"I still talk to Molly (Vollmer, former NorCal teammate) every day. She's my best friend, and she's getting PRs and I'm happy for her, but I think, 'I couldn't do that.' And I think, 'Oh my God, I'm losing that,'" Oldroyd said.

It's not easy to switch off the competitive, hard-driving mindset. Even though she's sure about her decision to step away from competing, Oldroyd said she finds herself slipping into the old thought patterns.

"This morning I was trying to figure out (when to fit in a workout), and then I thought, 'Why am I stressed about this?'" she said.

## Family First

Val Voboril has long been a hero to CrossFit athletes with full-time jobs and kids at home. The five-time CrossFit Games athlete, who took third in 2013, works full time as a fourth-grade teacher and has a daughter, born in 2011. Voboril did not qualify for the Games in 2015, and before the Open started in 2016, she decided she wouldn't proceed to regionals no matter where she placed in the Open.

"I've been back and forth on the idea for a while," Voboril said. "I think trying to compete last year at regionals was a mistake. I don't think my heart was in it. And Day 1 showed that more than anything. I think I spent the training leading up to last year's regionals trying to force it. I just didn't want to force it this year."

In 2016, Voboril qualified for the California Regional but didn't film her workouts, a requirement for entry. She said the Open was "so much more fun" knowing she wasn't going any further, but stepping away from competition wasn't easy.

"The biggest struggle was leading up to the decision, worried about letting other people down, because at this level of the sport you have a lot of people who put a lot of their time and energy into you," Voboril said.

"So many people in my world just give so much to me, and I feel like I was really letting them down by not moving forward," she said.

"When you're doing CrossFit for fitness ... it's all positive."  
—Rob Orlando

Like Voboril, Rob Orlando stopped competitive CrossFit to focus on work and family. Orlando competed as an individual at the Games in 2009, 2010 and 2011 but was disqualified during the swimming event that opened the 2011 competition.

"It left a little bit of a bad taste in my mouth," he said about the swim event, "but such is life. I realized, though, at the Games that year that the competition was just getting so much younger and that my ability to recover was dramatically different than somebody who was 10 years younger than me."



Orlando has two children, ages 10 and 7, he runs two affiliates—[Hybrid Athletics](#)—and he created the CrossFit Strongman Trainer Course. He wanted to focus on his work and his family, not competing.

“I would have these moments where I’d think, ‘I wish I was still on the floor,’ but then as quickly as that comes it immediately washes away because you think, ‘No, I’ve got a 10-year-old and a 7-year-old that want me around, and I’ve got a wife that wants me around’ ... and so these moments would come and go,” he said.

“When you’re doing CrossFit for fitness ... it’s all positive.”

## Letting Go

You can become tremendously fit with one CrossFit workout a day, and many busy people spend 60 minutes training, then get back to other daily responsibilities. Some of these athletes are so fit they can do well in competitions without spending more than an hour a day in the gym.

The elite levels of the sport, however, often require additional time and effort spent weeding out weaknesses, learning new or more complex movements, or training to handle the volume of a multi-day competition. That type of commitment usually means the athlete has to prioritize competitive CrossFit over other aspects of life, something Chris Spealler talked about in the 2014 article [“Hanging up His Shoes.”](#)

Stepping away from something that takes so much time and energy can be a painful process.

“I think that’s why a lot of people do this (work out so much), because they feel a sense of control and you don’t really have to think about anything else (other than your workout),” Oldroyd said. “You can be like, ‘I can’t do that because I have to train.’”

Zambard said being the best in the world at anything requires selfishness.

“In order to go to the CrossFit Games and in order to really be the best, you have to ignore other parts of your life,” she said, “and for me that meant my relationships with people and my relationship with God and my relationship with coaching ... I had to let a lot of other things slide, and in that process I sort of lost sight of who I am other than how fit I am.”

For the longest time, Orlando said he’d show up to family birthday parties with his own food, telling people he could only stay for 30 minutes because he had to go train.



After retiring from competition, Zambard took five months to figure out who she was—and who she wanted to be.



Even in yoga, Miranda Oldroyd has a drive to be the best.



For years, Val Voboril balanced life, work and training with great success.

“To train at that level and to compete at that level, you have to be a bit of a narcissist,” Orlando said.

“Everybody makes concessions around you,” he said. “Everybody says, ‘That’s where he is, that’s really important to him,’ but I think at some level you’re missing this bigger picture—at least for me, anyway. (Competing) started to become a whole lot less important. How I ranked in this particular workout, how I ranked in the Open—it just didn’t carry as much weight with me.”

It takes time to figure out how to fill those hours once spent training. For a while, Oldroyd worked out on her own, but one day she was in a hurry and decided to jump into a class at CrossFit Chalk in Newport Beach, California. It was so much fun she’s been working out in the group classes ever since.

“It’s fun, and I actually think I’ve improved a little bit since I’ve been doing it because I’ve been going so much harder than when I’m alone,” Oldroyd said.

“The members there are cool ... they don’t expect me to be the best,” Oldroyd said. “That’s the weird thing too about going to regular classes is sometimes you kind of feel like you need to beat everybody every day and put up these crazy numbers, you know? But I don’t feel that from them.”

Oldroyd has also taken up yoga, boxing and salsa dancing, and she writes regularly on her [blog](#), but it’s been a challenge to dial back the intensity in some of these other pursuits, too.

“The (salsa instructor) told me to just relax—‘This isn’t a competition,’” she said with a laugh. Oldroyd knows that if she tries something, she’s going to go at it with gusto.

“For me, with yoga, it’s going to be the hard yoga,” she said, “I’m a perfectionist. I want to do it right.”

“So there’s a lot of crying and a lot of tears and a lot of ‘am I making the right decision?’”  
—Val Voboril



As she worked through the process of stepping away from competitive CrossFit, Voboril said she struggled with questions about her identity.

“(Competing) is such a defining part that it’s kind of hard (to let it go),” Voboril said. “So there’s a lot of crying and a lot of tears and a lot of ‘am I making the right decision?’ and ‘am I making a terrible choice or am I totally going to regret this?’”

Her husband had an adjustment to make as well.

“My husband was cute,” Voboril said. “He said part of his ego really does like to brag about me, so (my not competing) meant he couldn’t brag the same way.”

Orlando never regretted stepping away from competitive CrossFit, but he admits the transition was difficult psychologically.

“I struggled with it, because you have these moments. I would say that it’s more these impulses now and then,” he said about his intermittent desire to compete.

Of course, even retired competitors can scratch the itch by throwing numbers on the whiteboard every day or entering a competition that doesn’t require months of training. Some will still yearn for the highest levels of competition at times, but that yearning is often balanced by other aspects of life.

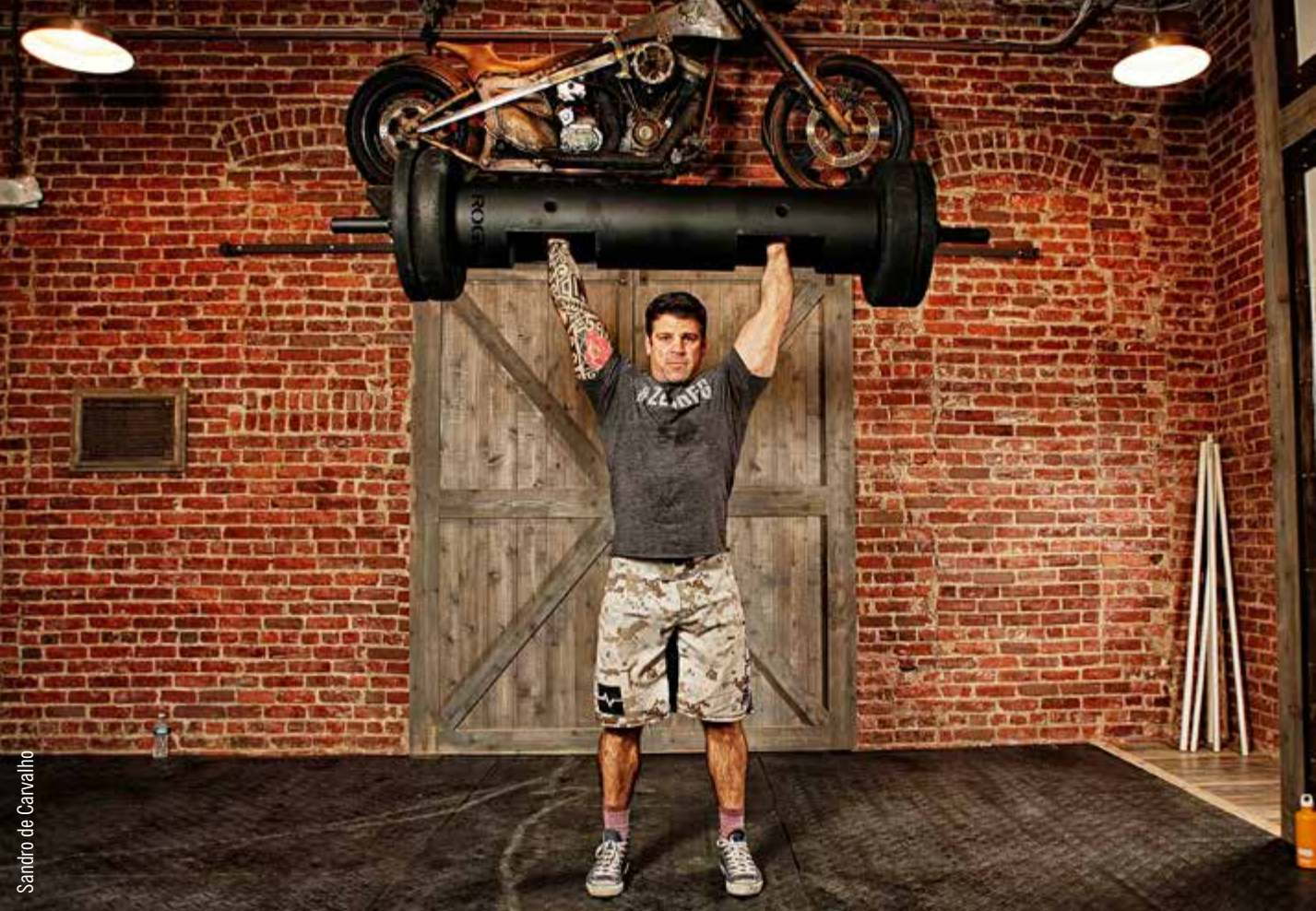
“Those moments (of regret) come and go, and with a little distance in between you’re kind of like, ‘I kind of like my life the way it is,’” he said, now that he has time to have a hot dog with his kids at a baseball game or the freedom to eat a slice of birthday cake. “I replaced those feelings with other emotions and other things in my life that bring just as much if not more value.”

## The Other Side

Zambard, a member of CrossFit Inc.’s Level 1 Seminar Staff, moved to Kauai, Hawaii, in early 2016 to run a kids program for CrossFit Poipu and work for the **Ultimate Hawaiian Trail Run**, which raises money to develop the health and fitness of the youth in Kauai.

“Most of my time is spent developing the kids program and finding every avenue possible to give these kids the same opportunity that I had,” Zambard said.

After her five-month hiatus, Zambard returned to the gym and began doing CrossFit for fun and fitness.



**A father and business owner, Orlando dialed back his competitive drive but still found himself one of the fittest 40-year-olds in the world.**

“My friends and the gym community were all a big part of me finding fitness for fun again instead of competing ... (I) just go in and have fun and play,” she said.

In her time off, Zambard realized she’s not an innately competitive person.

“I wouldn’t die for points. I don’t really care if you beat me. I just happen to be really good at it,” she said about CrossFit.

“My coaching career for CrossFit and working for CrossFit occupies my head and my heart, and I love that job. I know what CrossFit can do for you as a kid. I know the lessons it can teach of perseverance and dedication and hard work and how it can show you that no obstacle is too big to overcome, and it can provide you with a community that loves on you and cares about you regardless of your circumstances,” she said.

Like Zambard, when Voboril turned her focus away from competing, she rediscovered what made her love CrossFit—the community.

“Training in my backyard by myself, there’s no community. And although that fits nicely with my lifestyle and my time schedule, it wore thin,” Voboril said.

“I’m off right now to go meet with Jamie Hagiya and Kris Clever (both of whom qualified for the California Regional) to go have fun. They are going to work out really hard, and I am going to play,” she said with a laugh.

As for Orlando, a funny thing happened when he took the focus off competition. The 41-year-old competed in the Open for the first time in years, and he qualified for the CrossFit Games in the Masters Men 40-44 Division.

“I’m still doing all the regular things I was doing two months ago and six months ago,” Orlando said. “I drink a little bit of beer every day. I eat pizza. I’m not gonna change my routine, and I’m not going to fall back into that trap of being the full-time athlete. I am a dad and a business owner ... I’ll do what I can, and I’ll be the best version I can of this guy.”

## The Big Picture

When a pursuit or a job becomes all consuming, it’s difficult to avoid linking the outcome of that activity—whether making money or winning a competition—to your identity.

Orlando said he will never forget something seven-time Games competitor Spealler said years ago.

“He said, ‘These workouts don’t define me,’” Orlando remembered. “That resonates with me. Under no circumstance does one workout define me as a person. This is just what I do.”

Orlando said there are going to be uncomfortable moments in any transition. He said it’s the same for a professional athlete who retires and goes on to do other things.

“There’s a transition time and it’s just going to be uncomfortable. There’s just no way around that,” Orlando said. “For me, personally, I looked at my kids and my family and I said, ‘These people need me around, too.’ That adds value to my life on a daily basis.”

Now when Voboril works out in her backyard, she includes her husband and her daughter. The focus is on fun as much as fitness.

“Because (there’s) less pressure, I have more time be together and enjoy it,” she said. ■

**About the Author:** Hilary Achauer is a freelance writer and editor specializing in health and wellness content. In addition to writing articles, online content, blogs and newsletters, Hilary writes for the CrossFit Journal. To contact her, visit [hilaryachauer.com](http://hilaryachauer.com).





THE **CrossFit** JOURNAL

# LIVE TO 100, DIE ON YOUR FEET

BY ANDRÉA MARIA CECIL

Septuagenarian CrossFit coach Mike Suhadolnik refuses to let his peers age gracefully.





A chemotherapy patient fighting prostate cancer, 77-year-old John Barber says his doctors are shocked at his physical capabilities compared with those of his peers.

It's a bright, sterile room—what you would expect at a hospital. Large windows line one wall.

“You've got a nice view out,” said 77-year-old John Barber.

As many as 40 people can sit in the room, each 10 feet away from a neighbor in a reclining chair framed by cabinets that hold TVs. Every few feet sits a nurse's station.

Many people sleep. Not Barber.

“I never sleep while I'm there. I read and I watch a little TV,” he said. “They got all these clear bags with liquid in it, and they're all lined up on a pole, and ... as they run out there's an alarm that goes off, and they show up and change the bag and start some other kind of fluid.”

Eight bags are typical.

“One bag to keep you from gettin' sick, another bag that's the actual treatment, and then there's another one to keep you from havin' the shits and, I don't know, there's some kind of thing ... after you've had all of 'em to kind of clear the system.”

In contrast to the other chemotherapy patients at Springfield Clinic in Illinois, Barber is a bit livelier. The retired real estate agent cracks jokes, drives and does CrossFit.

“The doctors at the hospital say they've never had anyone be able to do what I'm doin’,” Barber said as he finished 5 miles on the Schwinn Airdyne one Monday afternoon in late April at CrossFit Instinct, also in Springfield. He's been doing CrossFit for three years.

On that particular day, his workout started with 12 miles on the same Airdyne, then went to 3,000 meters on the rower, followed by 5 sets of 5 deadlifts at increasing weight that topped out at 75 lb. While the rest of the class did Russian kettlebell swings and toes-to-kettlebells, the coach directed Barber back to the bike for more cycling.

“I still gotta get John where he gets uncomfortable,” Mike Suhadolnik said after the workout, sitting in the affiliate's small front office while Barber stood diagonally to his right at the corner of the desk.

“If he poops in his pants, he poops in his pants. It doesn't matter.”

The 72-year-old CrossFit Instinct coach is primarily focused on the gym's Longevity class—entirely comprising people over 55. The youngest is 57. Many have physical limitations, and several are

managing arthritis, diabetes and other chronic diseases or some form of metabolic derangement. A smaller number are there to simply lose weight and stay active.

“There's people who thought he'd be pushin' up daisies. ... He ain't pushin' up daisies. He's still drivin'.”

—Mike Suhadolnik

Suhadolnik has accompanied Barber to his cancer treatments and noted the difference between him and the other patients.

“Everybody's sittin' there like this,” Suhadolnik said, throwing his head down to portray a hunched-over posture. “And he's walkin' around gettin' smart with the nurses.”

CrossFit coupled with chemotherapy is a good thing, he added.

“This will make the medicine work better,” Suhadolnik said. “They can't believe he's not in pain. ... And he drives, he's alert. We talk at 4 o'clock in the morning.”

“I got a younger wife, too,” Barber proudly interjected.

“Younger,” said Suhadolnik, emphasizing the word's last two letters.

The couple is planning a summer trip north to picturesque Door County.

“He's still doin' all these things,” Suhadolnik said with his quintessential toothy grin. “There's people who thought he'd be pushin' up daisies. ... He ain't pushin' daises. He's still drivin'.”

## The Vision

Suhadolnik, a former offensive tackle and middle guard at Illinois State University, spent most of his life powerlifting. At his best, he benched 350, squatted 450 and deadlifted 550 lb. His physique implied fitness. But when his daughter Molly and her now-fiancé Tim Hahn asked him to overhead squat more than seven years





Barber (right) is undergoing chemotherapy once every three weeks but still makes it to CrossFit Instinct at least four times a week.



No longer prediabetic, Dr. Craig Backs changed the way he practiced medicine after starting CrossFit in 2012.

ago, he couldn't get the bar over his head.

Then they asked him to do burpees.

"I played football in college. I said, 'No problem,'" Suhadolnik recounted. "I couldn't do a burpee."

Disturbed by this, the then-65-year-old visited his doctor in Springfield.

Of concern was Suhadolnik's rising level of prostate-specific antigen (PSA). PSA is a protein produced by prostate-gland cells. A growing level in a man's blood could indicate inflammation or enlargement of the prostate, even prostate cancer.

Other than that, "Your whole profile is good," the doctor told him. His rising PSA was not an emergency, the doctor said, but if it did become one any medication would negatively affect his otherwise-good health.

Upon his doctor's recommendation, Suhadolnik sought out a nontraditional doctor 200 miles northeast in Chicago. This one performed a dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry—known as a DXA scan—to measure his body fat and bone density.

"He said, 'I'm gonna just tell you something: Even though you almost look like Arnold (Schwarzenegger), 22 percent of that is fat.'"

For all his weightlifting, 6-foot-4, 250-lb. Suhadolnik was only in the "acceptable" category when it came to body fat. Had he been only a little higher—at 26 percent—he would have been considered obese.

"I told him I wanted to live until I was at least 110 years old but that I did not want somebody pushing me around in a wheelchair, walking with a walker or having someone wipe my butt," said Suhadolnik, today 223 lb.

"I told him I wanted to live until I was at least 110 years old but that I did not want somebody pushing me around in a wheelchair."

—Mike Suhadolnik

The doctor recommended changes to Suhadolnik's diet, including eliminating processed sugar, dairy and grains. Suhadolnik also became an athlete at CrossFit Instinct, Molly's affiliate.

Three months later, he arrived for his follow-up appointment with the Chicago doctor. Suhadolnik was at 9.5 percent body fat and had gained 12 lb. of muscle. His PSA had plummeted out of the danger zone. And he had done it without a lick of medication.

"Excuse my French, but I said, 'Holy shit.'"

Suhadolnik added: "My life changed forever."

In the year that followed, Suhadolnik paid closer attention to the world around him and the people in it.

"Every time I turned the television on, it seems like all they were showing (was) big butts and fat guts," he said.

He decided to do something.

It started with a program he dubbed Doctors Get Fit.

He began with Dr. Craig Backs, a former neighbor who was more of an acquaintance than a friend. Suhadolnik had seen Backs' picture in the Springfield Business Journal. He noticed the weight gain and picked up the phone.

"His picture was horrible. You couldn't even see his chin. Gee manilly."

The physician remembered the conversation vividly.

"So I get a call out of the blue from Mike Suhadolnik," Backs said while sitting inside his private practice in Springfield. "He said, 'I don't mean to be critical but,' he says, 'why is it you doctors don't take better care of yourselves?' And there was kind a long, pregnant pause. And I said, 'Are you trying to tell me that I'm too fat?'"

It was May 2012. Backs had recently opened his private practice. He also was struggling with his own health issues: atherosclerosis and prediabetes. At 6 feet tall, Backs weighed 235 lb.

All the while, he was advising his patients on the importance of lifestyle.

"I might as well have been sitting there with a cigarette and a glass of whiskey, tellin' 'em they need to quit smoking and drinking."

Suhadolnik had a plan.



“He already had a vision that involved improving the community’s health by getting the people that were supposed to be leaders in the community around health to set a better example,” Backs recounted.

The two men met for an hour and half the next day.

“He made me an offer ultimately I just really couldn’t refuse. He said, ‘Give me 90 days—I guarantee you’ll see your abs.’”

Suhadolnik emphasized diet, telling Backs to eat whole foods and avoid processed sugar.

“He worked me hard,” said 60-year-old Backs.

In 90 days, the doctor lost 40 lb.

“And I was pretty much hooked.”

He also got his atherosclerosis under control and is no longer prediabetic.

Then Backs changed the way he practiced medicine. Rather than immediately suggesting medication, he now starts with lifestyle changes.

“A big part of my medical practice now involves heart-attack and stroke prevention—arterial-disease prevention—and insulin resistance, or prediabetes, is a huge contributor to that that’s under-recognized. . . . I’ve gotten more conversant with that through CrossFit than I’ve ever gotten through any medical journals, which I think a lot of people find ironic. So if the CrossFit leadership is wondering whether (it influences) medical care, at least in my office, it certainly does.”

About a dozen athletes in CrossFit Instinct’s Longevity class are direct referrals from Backs. Some started in the Doctors Get Fit program, an on-ramp to the class for those with chronic problems and who haven’t exercised in years. Being a doctor is not required.

“I took seriously that my payback for that was to be a better example,” Backs said, “and to engage other physicians and other people in the community to be better examples.”

The Longevity program includes about 25 people split between the 7 a.m. and 4 p.m. classes that occur almost daily.

There’s 62-year-old Karen Paisley, who hadn’t exercised on a regular basis for nearly 30 years and recently showed off a photo of herself in a bikini. There’s 64-year-old Walter Lynn, whose legs are no longer black from knees to ankles because of poor circulation.

And 71-year-old Doug Nelson, whose back pain and minimal flexibility were keeping him from a motorcycle ride to Alaska; Nelson made the 3,600-mile trip shortly after completing Doctors Get Fit less than three years ago.

All of them have different stories. All of them have the same outcomes: improved body composition, performance and health. In other words: increased functional capacity.

Suhadolnik sees it like this: His father-in-law, a decorated World War II veteran whose B-29 was shot down over Russia, leading to his being a prisoner of war, lay in bed for six years before he died. He was on multiple prescription medications after surviving cancer and having his leg amputated. His mother-in-law developed Alzheimer’s and weighed 66 lb. when she died, unable to speak for the last three years of her life. His own father, however, died delivering turnips. His mother?

“She went from givin’ me a bunch of crap, still doin’ things, to dying within five or six days. That’s what we want to happen,” Suhadolnik explained. “Now did they live perfect lives? No. But they did what they wanted to do. And they were not a burden to anybody.”

Being a burden, he added, can easily be avoided.

“Hey, don’t wait until you have that heart attack and then start working out. Bullshit. Do it right now. Start right now.”

“Don’t wait until you have that heart attack and then start working out.

Bullshit. Do it right now.

Start right now.” —Mike Suhadolnik

“Gimme One”

With a clipboard in hand, Suhadolnik began leading the 7 a.m. Longevity class on this particular Monday. His haircut, voice and demeanor all point to retired Marine. Or drill sergeant. He is neither.

“All right. Everybody get a ball. We’re gonna stretch out.”

All 12 athletes scooped up medicine balls and followed instructions



CrossFit coach Mike Suhadolnik (foreground) pushes athletes to increase their functional capacity for a healthier, longer life.



After two weeks of CrossFit, Bill Fleer (on floor) had his blood-pressure medication cut in half by his doctor.



to place them below their lower backs, allowing their heads to relax and hang backward.

“Straighten your legs. Get rid of that weekend. Let’s go. Come on,” he barked.

Athletes moved their arms up and down with the med ball at increasingly higher positions on their backs.

“Just give me five snow angels. Go slow. Try to rotate.”

Next was kicking one leg straight back while touching the floor with the opposite hand.

“You look like a goomba, you look like a goomba. Don’t worry about it,” Suhadolnik declared.

The 4 p.m. class was similar.

“Give me snow angels, come on. Get those scapula moving.”

“Cobra. Dog. Come on, let’s go. Cobra. Dog. Please.”

The “please” typically comes after a couple of demands.

It was deadlift day. For most CrossFit Instinct athletes, the objective was to establish a 1-rep max with textbook form. For the Longevity class, it meant 5 sets of 5 reps.

“The movement we’re gonna do is stick you butt back and come back up,” Suhadolnik explained as he pushed his butt backward and snapped to standing again.

He watched each athlete, one by one, lift 55 lb. When he was satisfied with their movement, he gave further instructions.

“Everybody go get a pair of 10s.”

“I knew there was more,” Barber knowingly replied.

Suhadolnik laughed.

“K. We’re gonna do 5 sets of 5. And it’s gonna be academic that you keep your lumbar curve.”

Suhadolnik, who holds a master’s degree in mathematics, spent 17 years teaching the subject. He often uses the word “academic” when coaching.

A couple of the athletes were exceeding expectations.



A few athletes in CrossFit Instinct’s 55-plus Longevity class wear T-shirts made to support fellow athlete Barber through his chemotherapy.

“Rick and Walt, go get another pair of 10s. Please.”

When the additional weight was in place, Suhadolnik surveyed the room to see if the athletes were prepared to move on his call.

“You ready, Johnny?”

“Yeah,” Barber answered.

“All right. Walk up to the bar.”

Athletes positioned their feet below their barbells.

“Lumbar curve. Gimme one!” demanded Suhadolnik, his emphasis clearly on the second phrase.

He called out the same way—“Gimme one!”—for the remaining reps while his body twitched as if he willed the athletes to move.

The results of his no-excuses style are not only physically mani-

fested in his athletes but also mentally. Many in the Longevity class refer to themselves as “a tribe.”

“This is hugely, hugely important. Hugely,” said 58-year-old Susan Nightingale, another athlete in the Longevity class. “It’s been a revelation to me. It’s so much more than the physical.”

In more than a year of CrossFit, Nightingale has lost 40 lb. and lowered her blood pressure, and she hopes she’s gotten “ahead of the curve” on her asymptomatic arterial disease. On a Tuesday afternoon in April, Suhadolnik put her through a workout of 5 rounds of Turkish get-ups and jumping pull-ups. On the final round he bumped her up to a 20-lb. kettlebell, the heaviest she had ever used for the movement. It was a struggle, but she did it.

In that way, too, Suhadolnik is unrelenting.

To keep his athletes motivated, he texts them at 4 o’clock in the morning every day—sometimes earlier—with inspirational words, videos or a workout they can do at home or while traveling.

And several Longevity athletes arrived at CrossFit Instinct because Suhadolnik showed up unannounced at their offices or placed unsolicited calls.

“Because of my age, I can really be frank and get away with a lot of stuff that younger people can’t,” he explained. “I tell them in a nice way that they’re too fat and they’re not gettin’ their job done.”

“I get away with murder,” Suhadolnik added, grinning.

But Backs said it’s more than just age that accommodates Suhadolnik’s coaching style.

“People ultimately do figure out that he cares about them or they wouldn’t do it. ... On the surface it could be seen as ‘Yeah, he was just bein’ a bully.’ But if you get close enough to it and you start realizing that it’s for your own good, then it takes on a very different type of feel.”

Suhadolnik’s age, Backs noted, adds legitimacy to his demands.

“There’s something about maturity. You know that somebody has been through some of the same challenges you’ve been through. And I think we all gravitate toward people who are like us, have common interests, have been through many of the same things.”

## Iron Mike

Three years ago, when Suhadolnik turned 70, CrossFit Instinct coaches and members threw him a surprise party that featured a presentation called “Stuff Coach Mike Says.”

“This is hugely, hugely important.  
Hugely. It’s been a revelation to me.”  
—Susan Nightingale

“Most of them have to do with his apparent—but not real—lack of empathy. Things like, ‘You’ll be OK.’ And, ‘I know, I know,’” Backs explained. “People looking at it from the outside might think that he’s just hard-nosed and maybe even a little cruel. But those of us that are experiencing the benefit of what he’s doing know that it gets the kind of results (that) keep (us) coming back for more.”

Backs described Suhadolnik as “direct and largely unfiltered.”



In Springfield—Illinois’ capital of about 117,000 people—Suhadolnik has been a larger-than-life figure, making no apologies along the way.

“I don’t ask for permission,” he flatly said.

In a 1996 Illinois Times article, writer Jeff Ignatius penned a profile of Suhadolnik titled “Outta My Way.”

“If Suhadolnik dislikes somebody or feels wronged,” Ignatius wrote, “he will let the whole world know, one way or another. He is stubborn as an ass and quick with an acid tongue.”

For 30 years, Suhadolnik owned and ran Construx of Illinois, a general contracting company that challenged construction norms of the time and sought to build quality affordable housing for low- and middle-income families. Across three decades the company—and its multiple ancillary companies—created and performed \$75 million in business, Suhadolnik said. The Greater Springfield Chamber of Commerce twice recognized him as Businessman of the Year.

“He tried to literally change Springfield ... in areas that needed to be renovated and renewed,” Molly said. “He believed in people. He hired people that other people probably wouldn’t.”

He’s a man who, when Molly was a teenager, refused to wear his prescription eyeglasses and instead trained his eyes to have 20/20 vision again. It’s an achievement he still holds today. He also has part of a gold tooth buried beneath the first finger of his right knuckle, evidence of a long-ago fight that most considered a tall tale until an MRI appointment proved otherwise.

Yet, despite her dad’s seemingly gruff demeanor, 29-year-old Molly described him as “a softie.”

“He was not the punisher of our family,” she said, smiling.

The day she was born, Suhadolnik was “so pumped” to have another child, Molly told, that he left the hospital at 3 a.m.—after she was born and while his wife, Maureen, slept—to do a set of 10 touch-and-go deadlifts at 475 lb., followed by 10 back squats at 425.

In Molly’s early years, Suhadolnik would take her and her two sisters to the local park every Sunday. There, he power walked 4 miles. To keep up, the little girls had to run. When they got home, he’d feed them a sandwich “with a huge bunch of meat,” vegetables, fruit and a tall glass of water, Molly said.

As a teenager, she added, her suitors were “always terrified of him.”



CrossFit Instinct’s Longevity class begins with about 20 minutes of mobility work.

These days, her father arrives at the gym before she does. And she teaches the 4:45 a.m. class. Suhadolnik typically rises anywhere from 1 to 2 a.m., does CrossFit Instinct’s daily programming at home and figures out the best way to modify it for Longevity athletes. At the box, he consults with Molly or Tim, who also help coach the Longevity classes.

“He’s preaching it and walking the walk,” Molly said.

Thus when Longevity athletes complain of aches or pains, he understands but offers little sympathy.

“When he sees people with their weaknesses, he doesn’t cut ’em any slack—and that’s out of respect,” Backs said. “I tend to agree with him that we often need to challenge people, that we need to expect more of ourselves and other people, that we shouldn’t assume that just because somebody has a limitation that they can’t do something that we think they should try. Many people will struggle with that, that the only way to show empathy to some-

body is to hug them and stroke them and coddle them and say ‘there, there.’ Mike has never said ‘there, there.’”

## “It’ll Last You the Rest of Your Life”

It was a little after 5:30 a.m. on Thursday, April 28.

Bill Fleer came in for another one-on-one session with Suhadolnik. His first one had been nearly two weeks earlier.

Suhadolnik started him off with a warm-up of candlesticks to a seated V position. Fleer got winded.

Next was the cats-and-dogs stretch.

“Up, up, up,” Suhadolnik said in quick succession. “Now drop it way down.”

Fleer’s face grew red.

Suhadolnik brought him over to the pull-up rig for ring rows. His feet elevated on an 18-inch box, the 64-year-old retired railroad administrator couldn’t quite get his hips to the rings. Suhadolnik explained he needed to squeeze his butt first to force his hips to rise. Finally, Fleer understood.

He counted Fleer’s reps.

“One. Two. One more, please. Three.”

“He can’t chin yet,” Suhadolnik said of Fleer’s pull-up abilities.

He added, smiling: “When he loses 50 lb. of body weight, he’ll fly.”

Next he taught Fleer the shoulder press, push press and push jerk. Suhadolnik added weight to the barbell between sets, then had Fleer bust out more reps.

“We’re goin’ awful quick. We’re goin’ awful quick,” Suhadolnik repeated.

“For this old man ya are,” Fleer said between breaths.

“Big air. Go! Use your butt cheeks,” Suhadolnik instructed.

“One. Two. That’s it. Get your head through the window. Four. One more. Please. Five.”

Finally, it was time for the Airdyne: 20 seconds of work for 5 rounds.

Suhadolnik pushed Fleer to get the screen to read “30 calories.” The bike’s fan whirred and Fleer looked like he was in physical pain. He kept getting close but not quite reaching 30. On the last round, he did it.

“Thirty,” Fleer said, barely able to speak, as the bike became silent and he released the handles.

“Thirty,” Suhadolnik repeated with a broad smile.

“He’s strong. He just hasn’t had to work in a long time,” Suhadolnik said.

“My mind wants to do it. My body’s not there yet,” Fleer replied.

After his heart rate lowered, Fleer explained that his mental outlook has improved. He told of his father-in-law, who failed at his goal of living to be 100.

“I’m gonna be a centenarian. And be fit,” he said with a smile.

In his brief time at CrossFit Instinct, Fleer said his doctor has cut his blood-pressure medication in half.

“He might be miserable for 5 minutes, but that’s better than havin’ somebody wipe your butt,” Suhadolnik plainly stated.

Fleer nodded with a smile.

That’s the point for Suhadolnik, especially when he thinks of Barber, the chemotherapy patient battling prostate cancer.

“Now his quality of life when he beats this—and he’ll beat it; I really believe he’ll beat it—it’s gonna be good,” he said, smiling.

Suhadolnik hopes to inspire other older folks to get their CrossFit Level 1 certificates and start training their peers for longer, healthier lives.

“Functional movement, really, that’s what we do. Number 1, it’s safe. Number 2, it’s useful. I’m gonna teach you how to stand up off the chair, sit, stand up off the pot. And 3, it lasts a long time. It’ll last you the rest of your life. And that’s really what I try to do with these people.” ■

**About the Author:** Andréa Maria Cecil is assistant managing editor and head writer of the CrossFit Journal.





THE  
**CrossFit** JOURNAL

# PROBLEMS AND PROS

BY BRITTNEY SALINE

Creative, dedicated CrossFit affiliate owners share how they've overcome obstacles including floods, angry neighbors and endless bureaucracy.





Courtesy of Hudson River CrossFit

#### Swimming WOD at Hudson River CrossFit?

The rain sounded like gunfire as it pelted John Franklin's home in Hoboken, New Jersey, one night in June 2013. Though it was already past 10 p.m., he pulled on his boots and drove the seven blocks to Hudson River CrossFit, the affiliate he was in the process of opening after months of leading free park workouts.

He was just weeks from the grand opening date, and with the gym sitting right at the city's lowest point, he feared the heavy rain might seep inside.

He heaved the garage door open and flicked on the lights.

"The floor looked kind of like an infinity pool," Franklin recalled, unable to tell where the water ended and dry cement began.

He ventured to the far side of the gym, where a long concrete slab—a storage area in the space's past life as a refrigerator warehouse—was elevated a few inches above the floor. Gray sludge oozed from the hairline crack beneath.



Courtesy of CrossFit 2 Street

#### George Caroulis of CrossFit 2 Street went out of his way to address each and every concern neighbors voiced when he was opening his affiliate.

"It looked as if the concrete was sweating profusely," he said.

Before he had the chance to reach for a mop, he heard a low gurgle from the direction of the bathroom. In a few seconds, the gurgle became an explosive sputter as the drains in the gym's two sinks, showers and toilets began spewing sewage in succession "almost like a fountain show," Franklin said.

As Franklin stood ankle deep in sewer refuse, he thought of the three friends who had showed up to his park workouts.

"Am I just making like really bad life choices?" he asked himself. "Because we had no idea how this would actually work—or would anybody actually sign up for this CrossFit thing?"

Today, Hudson River CrossFit boasts around 250 members, one of two affiliates that make up Flipside Performance (the other is Bowery CrossFit in Manhattan, New York, which Franklin opened at the end of 2013).

With heavy rain flooding Hudson River CrossFit about once a month, Franklin and his staff have become pros at keeping their heads above water, loading all their equipment into an elevated storage room every time the weather report predicts a storm.

"We're very handy with a Shop-Vac these days," he said. "That's how you get all the water out, and then you have to go through the whole process of disinfecting it."

To disinfect the 2,800-square-foot space, Franklin shells out about US\$600 each time for a professional sewage-cleaning service. Adding backflow preventers to the drains would cost nearly \$30,000 and require a total bathroom tear-up, and with real estate at a premium in the area adjacent to New York City, moving is out of the question.

So what keeps Franklin going?

"The community," he said. "Our mission has always been to build a strong urban community ... and we've probably trained 1-2 percent of



Courtesy of CrossFit 2 Street

#### Shared walls made noise a concern at CrossFit 2 Street.

the entire town. That means any time I walk the dog, any time I go to a restaurant, statistical probability says that I'm gonna run into somebody that I've worked with before. So you have a lot of accidental community that happens, and it's much stronger than anything I've felt."

Challenges are par for the course, Franklin explained: "It's all part of the game. There are certain points ... where I get a little beat down, but in perspective, my life is fantastic. I have a staff that I love, I have members that I love, ... I get to share something that I'm very passionate about with other people, and I'm making a living doing it. It's just a team effort, and having that good staff in place is something that has saved my ass more times than I can count."

## Killing Them With Kindness

George Caroulis, owner of CrossFit 2 Street, also wondered if he'd made a poor life choice in 2013 when he arrived to scout the South Philadelphia spot that would eventually become the affiliate's home.



A large garage door took up almost the entire storefront of the 3,000-square-foot space wedged between a split-level duplex and a popcorn shop with two apartments on top. To the rear sat another single-family home. All in all, the affiliate would share walls with five residential units and one business if Caroulis leased the location.

“I remember the first day I pulled up to the address; I thought I was in the wrong spot,” Caroulis said.

But his market research had promised the up-and-coming neighborhood was a good place to be, so he took a chance. As he hauled rigs and rubber mats into the garage, neighbors ogled and whispered.

“Every now and then I would start walking over there to introduce myself and talk to them, and by the time I would get there they’d be halfway down the block in different directions,” he said.

It wasn’t that the neighbors were shy. They were worried. And after Caroulis diligently notified all residents within a four-block radius of the pending affiliate—by city law, the residents had to be given an opportunity to attend the affiliate’s zoning hearing—he learned that emails were circulating among the neighbors, damning the presence of a CrossFit gym.

“The last thing we want is loud music, weights dropping, additional parking on our streets and sweaty guys without shirts running around the block,” the anonymous email read.

Though none of the residents came to the hearing, noise complaints began to fill Caroulis’ inbox days after CrossFit 2 Street opened that October.

One of those complaints came from Joe Nolan, who lives in the duplex next door and shares a wall with the gym. He emailed Caroulis after waking one Saturday—barely recovered from a Friday night on the town—to the rhythmic thud of wall balls behind his headboard.

“It was like that annoying kid in college who would throw a tennis ball against their wall,” Nolan said. “And here I am waking up hung over and there’s people who are working out, and it’s like ‘Oh, God, now I feel even worse about myself.’”

Caroulis didn’t want bad blood with anyone.

“I decided to kill them with kindness,” he said.



Courtesy of CrossFit 2 Street

**Building community the right way: A year after the gym opened, all of CrossFit 2 Street’s immediate neighbors were members.**

Caroulis responded to every complaint in kind, explaining exactly how he would address the issue.

He responded to every complaint in kind, explaining exactly how he would address the issue. He agreed to keep the garage door down at certain times of day to limit the music’s reach, and he instituted a no-drop policy—with the exception of one-rep-max attempts, during which athletes must use heavy crash pads to deaden the vibrations.

Most importantly, he never stopped trying to connect.

“Any time I’d see anybody out on the block, I made sure to go over and say hello, ask them how they’re doing—just being as friendly as humanly possible,” he said. “The last thing I want is someone to have an issue with me or us in any way and not feel comfortable enough to come and talk to me.”

Just a year after the gym opened, all the neighbors directly connected to CrossFit 2 Street had become members—even Nolan. Though he’d previously turned down Caroulis’ many offers to try a workout, Nolan eventually bored of his globo gym workouts.

Now, he’s the one throwing wall balls at his headboard.

“I haven’t looked back,” he said. “You just expect the meatheads you see in your typical (globo gym), just people who are gigantic and brooding, but even from the first day, everyone walked in, asked me my name. ... These people are a lot like me, and everyone just has a common interest in working out. It’s been a really great community.”

Caroulis didn’t have to make all the changes he made. With no protesters at his zoning hearing, he had a full permit and the right to operate as he saw fit.

“But that’s never been my approach to anything,” he said. “I always feel like you’re going to accomplish more when you’re able to work with the people who are against you.”

## Better Safe Than Sorry

With plans to open an affiliate in Manhattan, New York, Izzy Levy decided to tackle potential noise issues in advance. Before opening I.C.E. NYC/CrossFit Below Zero in February 2016,



Levy spent two years researching locations and zoning laws and interviewing experienced affiliate owners to avoid the pitfalls discovered by other New York affiliates.

Levy had no desire to repeat mistakes made by others.

“What we figured is ‘let’s do it right. Let’s try to figure out the secret sauces and we can avoid these problems,’” he said.

After Levy found a location—a 4,500-square-foot space in the bowels of a luxury apartment building in Tribeca—he hired an acoustics team, not just for eventual tests on the location but also to provide past studies of the team’s previous clients to win over the prospective landlord. Once the lease was signed, the experiments began.

“The first thing you think of is noise ... but the real issue is vibration,” Levy said. “What happens is in a building, when you drop 200 lb. from overhead, vibrations run through the columns, and a penthouse 20 stories above you will feel it just as much as the one right above you.”

To deflect vibration, Levy and the acoustics team decided to decouple the floor, or create a “floating” platform separated from the floor by acoustic isolators that prevent the transmission of vibration from machines—barbells in this case—to the building structure. First, they built a small mock platform to test various materials, dropping 225 lb. from overhead each time.

Steel channels ran from one isolator to the next beneath the platform, topped by layers of dampening material. After a bit of trial and error—sheetrock layers were prone to cracking and foam layers resulted in a floor that was too malleable—the team arrived at the winning cocktail of wood and rubber, which brought the vibrations, measured by seismic readers installed on each of the building’s 17 stories, within the acceptable range. After, Levy soundproofed the walls and the ceilings.

Meanwhile, his physical culture establishment (PCE) permit application with the New York Board of Standards and Appeals (BSA) was under review as part of a nine-month process he began well in advance. The extensive testing resulted in a full PCE permit just weeks before the affiliate’s opening date.

“We’ve been open for three months now and not (had) a single complaint from any of the condo owners,” Levy said.

The investment, he said, was worth the risk.

“It was definitely scary, and then in the last five years (the BSA has) really cracked down on CrossFit gyms, so we knew we were gonna have an uphill battle,” he said. “But we were not willing to have issues in the future. If we build a beautiful business, we don’t want our members to



Beneath the floor at CrossFit Below Zero, acoustic isolators ensure vibrations don’t run into the apartments above.



CrossFit Below Zero invested in acoustics studies to ensure happy neighbors.



Submit 2 Fitness CrossFit relocated but stayed local despite a reduction in space.

have to be shut down at one point. So we knew the risks, we knew the expense involved, and we decided to do it the right way.”

## Knowledge Is Power

Billy De La Rosa, owner of another Manhattan affiliate, six-month-old CrossFit Spot, knows all too well the battle that is convincing the BSA to grant a PCE permit. Even after he presented the board with tests and data similar to Levy’s, the board remained skeptical of how a CrossFit gym would affect the community.

“Is it gonna have a good impact? Are you giving back?” De La Rosa summarized the board’s concerns.

Though CrossFit Spot would be located in the wealthy Lincoln Center district, De La Rosa saw an opportunity to give back among the poorer projects a few blocks away. He proposed a plan to offer free workouts for anyone in the community on the weekends, inviting residents of low-income areas via flyers to attend for free on Saturdays and Sundays.

“That was very good with (the BSA),” he reported.

Still, the BSA remained hesitant.

“Their entire issue was that they just couldn’t understand why we had to lift heavy weights and then drop them from above our heads,” De La Rosa said.

So he took a different approach: education.

“I had to first put myself in the board’s shoes,” he said. “I was like, ‘OK, I have to be able to relate this to something they can understand.’”

He explained to the board that the weightlifting done in CrossFit derives from an Olympic sport.

“It’s something that all countries participate in, it’s one of the most beautiful movements out there, and part of the lift is actually dropping the weight,” he told them. “We allow the weights to drop from overhead because it’s the safest position. You can’t expect someone lifting that kind of weight to not drop from overhead.”

“Well, why do you have to lift heavy?” the board replied.

“The new skinny is being strong,” De La Rosa explained. “I told them that more people are realizing that the way to be fit is actually to be strong.”

But it wasn’t until De La Rosa explained how CrossFit Spot’s on-ramp program would work that the board began to ease up. He gave them



a copy of the affiliate's beginners program, which outlined the month-long course.

"I said, 'We don't just allow people to come in here and from Day 1 just start flinging weights around,'" he said. "We teach all the Olympic lifts, all the CrossFit movements, and we make sure they understand and they progress at their own pace. It's not about lifting heavy; it's about doing the work correctly."

When the BSA finally granted De La Rosa the PCE permit, he invited each member to come try CrossFit for a week—though none have accepted the offer yet.

"When they saw that we took the time to actually create a program that teaches people how to safely do these lifts, then they gave a little more credit to what we were saying," he said.

## Tales From the Crypt

Still, not even the most thorough testing and preparation can provide a guaranteed defense against the bonds of bureaucracy.

CrossFit NYC began construction on its Upper West Side location in mid-2013. The spot was perfect—more than 3,000 square feet in an L-shaped space six stories below the first residential floor of a condominium formerly home to ABC Studios. With several hundred members already signed up, affiliate owner Hari Singh had big plans for his new gym.

"We figured out exactly what we could do in the space, how many classes we could run," Singh said.

Singh planned to run three classes simultaneously, with a locker room and showers to accommodate three classes' worth of athletes. But soon after construction began, resident complaints began rolling in.

"There was a big article in the New York Post about condos suing crazy CrossFit gyms that hit the newspapers a week before we were supposed to go for our final approval," Singh said. "With that, the building basically went full blast, got our hearing rescheduled, filed petitions, did everything they could to prevent us from getting in."

While searching for ways to expel the affiliate, the condo board's lawyers unearthed a decades-old R8 district zoning law dictating that no commercial space can be within 75 feet of the sidewalk on Columbus avenue—above or below ground. Most of the affiliate was safely within the commercial zone, but the last 50-by-25 feet bled into a residential district.

"We said, 'That's crazy because ABC Studios has been there for 25



C. Mead Jackson Photography

The crypt at CrossFit NYC: where burpees are banned by bureaucracy.

years," Singh said.

As it turned out, ABC Studios, which was built after the zoning law was implemented, was grandfathered in. When CrossFit NYC stepped in and changed the building's zoning to allow for a PCE, the new zoning laws went into effect, and the affiliate was forced to wall off the space.

"There's nothing on the other side of the wall except dirt," Singh said. "It's just a wall and a hole on the other side. It's a crypt, basically."

The loss was catastrophic.

"We didn't see this coming," he said. "It basically cut our capacity by a third ... . It cost three-quarters of a million dollars to build out the space, which included the locker rooms—and the locker rooms were designed to support three classes."

Singh continued: "It's kind of a disaster for us. It's the best space in the gym because it's literally under nothing but dirt—there's not even a

building above it. It's the most soundproof place in New York."

Despite the fears of the residents, the BSA granted CrossFit NYC a two-year PCE permit in November 2014—so long as they followed through with the plan to wall off the offending 1,250 square feet. Six months from now, the gym will be re-evaluated in order to receive a full permit, good for 10 years. But Singh's lawyers doubt that even a record free of noise complaints will be enough to reclaim the crypt.

"We thought, 'OK, we'll just wall it off for the two years,' and then when the two years are up, surely the zoning board or whoever's rational will say, 'Yeah, that doesn't make sense, you've been a good guy, you can have the rest of the space.' But it turns out that nobody has the authority to give us back the rest of the space in all of New York," Singh said.

With the complexity of the New York building permits system, redesigning the space was out of the question.

"It turns out that nobody has the authority to give us back the rest of the space in all of New York."  
—Hari Singh

"It's endless, and it just wouldn't be worth it," Singh said. "Ultimately, we just accepted that we're only gonna have two-thirds the number of members, that it's not gonna be as profitable as we hoped."

## Community Trumps Square Footage

Long-forgotten zoning laws aren't the only things that can surprise affiliate owners. After five years of renting a 2,500-square-foot warehouse space in Secaucus, New Jersey, Submit 2 Fitness CrossFit owner Javier Ferrer found himself with six months to pack up and get out.

He had been subleasing from a friend who ran a martial-arts studio on one side of the warehouse. Investing his heart, soul and what little money he had into his dream of making people fitter, Ferrer spent five years building his own rigs, acquiring equipment and growing his membership to just over 50 athletes. About a month out from taking over the entire warehouse, Ferrer was told the building had been sold and all its tenants had six months to get out.

"I felt like somebody just ripped my heart out," Ferrer recounted. "We worked so hard to where we got to and we had started to get out of the red, and the community was getting built and people's lives were changing. The first thing that came to my mind was, 'What are we gonna tell our people?'"

Most of his members lived or worked within walking distance of the affiliate, so Ferrer and his girlfriend scoured the neighborhood, but every place of comparable size was too expensive.

A few months into the search, Ferrer came upon 3,500-square-foot dream of a warehouse—complete with its own private parking and the option to acquire an additional 10,000 square feet of space—for half the price he was paying. His friends told him he'd be stupid to turn it down. The problem was that it would be a 20-minute drive for most of his members, many of whom were used to a five-minute walk.

"We knew if we went there some people would follow, but it would kind



of be like starting all over again,” Ferrer said.

He considered his athletes.

“It’s an awesome feeling when you have people that were on medication and because they were part of our community they changed their lives around,” he said. “And there were still a lot of families that had a lot of work to do ... I had a heart-to-heart with my girlfriend and I said, ‘We’re gonna have to bite the bullet on this one. We’re gonna have to do whatever it takes to stay in town, because we have an obligation to our community.’”

It was more than a year before Ferrer found a suitable location in town, less than a mile from the original affiliate (luckily, the sale of the original location was stalled, allowing Submit 2 Fitness CrossFit to remain in operation while he searched). Of the new site’s 1,100 square feet, only 900 square feet are suitable for training.

“There is always a solution.  
We sacrificed where we needed to  
sacrifice to make it work.”  
—Javier Ferrer

To save space, Ferrer suspended everything from benches to rowers from hooks bolted high on the wall. He also invested in space-saving equipment such as pull-up rigs and squat racks that fold into the wall, as well as a collapsible GHD from Rogue. To keep from knocking the neighbors’ products off their shelves, Ferrer built a separate barrier for wall-ball shots: It’s made of wood and metal and hangs from the rafters several inches away from the shared wall.

The modifications cost Ferrer thousands in new equipment and gear left behind, and he had to downsize the maximum class from 20 to 10 athletes.

Still, his members are happy, Ferrer said.

“Everyone loves the new cap of 10 (athletes), and so do we,” he said. “We have anywhere from two to three coaches on the floor, so our athletes get that one-on-one feel.”

Today, Submit 2 Fitness CrossFit is nearly 100 members strong. And

though affiliate ownership hasn’t been without hardship, for Ferrer, it’s all part of the game.

“We love what we do and we don’t look at (hardship) as a problem,” he said. “There is always a solution. We sacrificed where we needed to sacrifice to make it work, and if somebody’s not willing to put in the work, the sacrifice, the heartaches and the sleepless nights, they have no business opening up a box.” ■

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Brittney Saline is a freelance writer contributing to the CrossFit Journal and the CrossFit Games website. She trains at **CrossFit St. Paul**. To contact her, visit [brittneysaline.com](http://brittneysaline.com).





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# TRAINING TIPS: FROM WRECK TO RECOVERY

BY SHANE UPCHURCH, CF-L3





Courtesy of Shane Upchurch



Upchurch struggled with dorsiflexion after the injury, so he slowly combined small, progressive increases in range of motion with strength work in the new range.

On Aug. 8, 2015, I was hit on my motorcycle by a box truck that ran a red light. I suffered degloving of my lower left leg, three displaced ribs, a bruised lung and swelling of the brain. I spent one month in a hospital and underwent a free flap transplant to my lower left leg, a craniotomy and a few other smaller operations.

After I was released from the hospital, I spent about five weeks on a couch resting.

I finally began working with a physical therapist, and in the beginning I mostly rode the Airdyne before doing my therapy homework.

After being cleared by my doctors for all activity, I began working my way back to CrossFit-style training. After all, it was arguably this fit lifestyle that helped me bounce back in the first place.

In dealing with my return to CrossFit, I've learned a few things I think would be beneficial to other coaches and athletes who are coming back from an injury or even just a lot of time off CrossFit. I narrowed my experiences down to five concepts that have helped me the most.

## 1. The New Normal

When I returned everything felt heavy. My form was garbage at any moderately heavy weight, and it was frustrating and misleading to think of what I had been able to do only months before. I had to quickly learn and accept that my normal was now different than before and would never be the same again. Accepting this fact was actually very relieving because it removed all preconceived notions of what I could and couldn't do.

The new normal will be harder for some clients to accept, but the sooner they do, the sooner they'll progress. Depending on the injury they're coming back from, they might never have the body they used to, and they might not be able to do what they could before. That's OK. We can call it bad or good, but it really boils down to what you have to work with in the moment. If you're caught up on what you used to have or what you will have in the future, you'll never really improve the version of you that is available right now—which is all you really ever have.

This acceptance also gives you a blank logbook to begin tracking your progress. That means PRs every day—at least for a while—so enjoy the journey, acknowledge the victories, and respect the athlete you are today.

If you're caught up on what you used to have or what you will have in the future, you'll never really improve the version of you that is available right now.

## 2. Volume

Soreness is big factor in coming back from an injury. If you make returning clients so sore that their next days are impossible, they won't come back. More discomfort is the last thing they want.

It's better to play it safe than push the envelope too soon. Depending on the injuries or how long the clients have been out, some movements and loads might be accessible but leave them so sore that they're unable to train. Remember, the goal is to get them to a point where they can exercise and help recovery, not to train at a volume that best prepares them for competition.

In my situation, I started out by staying around the 30-rep range. I also started at very light loads and worried more about positions and full range of motion. Over the course of a week or two, I would bump the reps up by 15-20, and during the following week or so, I would also increase the load slightly. I continued until I could do most CrossFit workouts without being excessively sore for the next few days. I entered the CrossFit Games Open this year with a goal of doing everything as prescribed, and I made it, finishing in the top 40 percent of my region.

## 3. Strength and Range of Motion

An athlete who is coming back from an injury will probably have some sort of movement restriction, and full range of motion trumps strength 90 percent of the time, especially if we're training to be better at life. I had a lack of dorsiflexion in my left ankle, which made it very difficult to go deep into a squat and keep my chest up.



Some days I would throw air squats into a conditioning session and work to a butt target I eventually eliminated. Other days I wanted to work more on strength, even if it was only in a partial range of motion. For squats, I would use a box. I have a client who is recovering from back surgery, and we sometimes work with a trap bar to get him in a better position with a load. Other times we go with empty-bar deadlifts and focus on increasing range of motion.

As range of motion improves, continue to challenge strength in the new range. The end goal should always be a full range of motion with progressively heavier weight, but don't let the pursuit of full range of motion deter you from lifting heavy at times.

This brings up max lifts. I would never max out in a shortened range of motion, and I didn't truly max any lifts for several months after returning to activity. I would often find a weight that challenged my technique, and I made sure it was as heavy as or slightly heavier than what I had done before for a similar rep scheme. This kept me progressing at a consistent rate and prevented any new injuries.

4. Perfect Positions

Let's be honest: Once you've achieved a certain level of strength, it's really hard to go back to the basics. Returning from an injury is a great time to do just that. We're not training for anything in particular, we need to take it slow, and our conditioning is garbage anyway, so the idea of high intensity seems silly. We also know that perfect positions make a stronger athlete, so why not strive for those positions?

I've often said that the best part of returning from ground zero is that I have no excuse not to work on perfecting movement patterns, and I'll bet I end up stronger because of it.

I've often said that the best part of returning from ground zero is that I have no excuse not to work on perfecting movement patterns.



Upchurch recovering from his accident in 2015.

I spent a lot of my warm-up time working on perfecting positions and dealing with different mobility issues, performing exercises such as hollow holds, wall slides, squat holds, single-arm and single-leg work, stability drills and more.

I found Interval Weight Training worked perfectly for this because it allowed to me to work on quality lifting at low intensity, with a more basic movement at high intensity to follow.

Interval Weight Training was created by Pat O'Shea, and the basics involve lifting 5-8 reps at 70 percent perceived exertion, then following up with 1-2 minutes of all-out intensity on another activity. Rest 1-2 minutes and repeat for 3-5 rounds. In the original format, you would then rest 5 minutes and repeat with new movements. A typical workout for me looked like this:



Upchurch today.

3 rounds of:  
6 low-hang box power cleans  
90 seconds for max calories on an Airdyne  
Rest 2 minutes

Rest 5 minutes

3 rounds of:  
8 trap-bar deadlifts  
60 seconds for max calories on a ski erg  
Rest 2 minutes

This system allowed me to focus on hitting good positions with submaximal weights while slowly increasing volume, and it also developed conditioning. Interval Weight Training wasn't the only

thing I did, but I added workouts like this into my training, and I still do them.

5. The Big Picture

I couldn't do a number of things when I first got back to exercising—double-unders, for instance. Jumping rope at all was a chore, and it didn't take long before I caught myself falling back into old habits and creating plans for how I would conquer double-unders immediately. But why? If my goals were to get back to a level of fitness similar to what I had before and to be able to do things in life without special preparation, why did it matter?

I found that a better approach was addressing weaknesses as I found them, just as I would attack a chipper. Only making a start is needed this very moment.

I began with single-unders in warm-ups, and I kept an eye on volume levels to make sure I wasn't making any huge jumps. Over time, I tried a few double-unders with almost zero success, and then a few group workouts came up with a format that allowed me to try them again. This went on for a while. Finally, during a workout that had athletes running 400 m and then doing double-unders, I strung together 9. I didn't get any more in later rounds, and that was OK. Then in Open Workout 16.2 I got 50 in a row!

The Long Game

It's very easy to get overwhelmed with all the areas for improvement in CrossFit, and we can quickly fall into the trap of wanting to fix everything today. Viewing goals on a much larger timeline really helps keep things in perspective and keeps me from getting carried away.

I plan to live to 100, so that leaves me 68 years to keep working on the things I can't do today. If your goal is to win the CrossFit Games, then your approach is going to be much different, but for most of our clients the 100-year approach will work very well. ■

**About the Author:** Shane Upchurch, CF-L3, is a coach at **CrossFit Roots** in Boulder, Colorado. He's been involved with CrossFit for 10 years, and he's coached for seven of those. His accident opened his eyes to the beauty of the CrossFit community, and he continues to chase his passion of a healthy lifestyle through activity and nutrition. He and his wife are believers in the Paleo lifestyle and plan to have a farm that will allow them to provide real food to their family and friends.



# ZONE VS. MACROS: ACCOUNTING FOR FAT IN PROTEIN

Tracking the amount of food you eat is key to accomplishing health, performance or aesthetic goals. While the Zone has been a staple in CrossFit, macronutrient (macro) tracking has become increasingly popular. Both programs require eating a prescribed amount of food every day, but caloric totals rarely match when the exact same meals are evaluated in each system.

This brief neither criticizes nor applauds either system, nor does it discuss how much of each macronutrient someone should eat. Instead, this brief demonstrates and explains the differences in caloric measurement between the two systems so athletes can optimize their approaches.

## Precision and Hidden Calories

The Zone counts “blocks,” where one block is equivalent to 7 grams of protein, 9 grams of carbohydrate and 3 grams of fat. Food is generally assigned to one macronutrient group based on its primary source of calories. This means the Zone has “hidden calories”—calories not reflected in your daily total. Using an orange as an example, only 18 grams (2 blocks) of carbohydrates are tallied in the Zone despite the 2 grams of protein an orange also contains. These eight protein calories are hidden.

Counting one’s macros is inherently more precise, as it allows you to track every gram and calorie of every macronutrient in every food. This means all calories are accounted for. The Meal 1 table compares blocks, grams and calories for a single meal, with hidden calories highlighted.

Meal 1 (Chicken)						
Food	Protein (blocks)	Protein (g)	Carb (blocks)	Carb (g)	Fat (blocks)	Fat (g)
Chicken	4	28	0	0	0	4
Apple	0	0	2	18	0	0
Banana	0	1	2	18	0	0
Avocado	0	1	0	1	4	6
Total	4	30	4	37	4*	10
Calories	112	120	144	148	108	90
*4 blocks: 1.5 g of fat from the avocado plus 1.5 g assumed to be in the protein source (3 g total fat per block)						

**Meal 1 total calories according to blocks = 112 (protein) + 144 (carb) + 108 (fat) = 364**

**Meal 1 total calories according to macros = 120 (protein) + 148 (carb) + 90 (fat) = 358**

For this meal, the Zone and macro approaches are essentially equivalent.

## Fat: The Major Swing Variable

Fat has over double the caloric density of protein and carbohydrates (9 calories per gram of fat compared to 4 calories per gram of protein or carbohydrate). The fat content, specifically in your protein source, can add a significant number of calories to your diet depending on your choices. In the Zone, a block contains 3 grams of fat, with the assumption that half (1.5 grams) is from the protein source. When constructing meals, only 1.5 grams of fat are to be added per protein block.

This means a protein source with greater than 1.5 grams of fat per block of protein adds more calories to the diet than anticipated in the Zone system. A large egg is a block of protein, but it contains 4.5 grams of fat—3 grams of fat not accounted for by the Zone. A four-egg omelet would contain 12 grams of fat (108 calories) that are hidden in calculation. If an individual chooses protein such as ground beef (20 percent fat), pork cuts or eggs as dietary mainstays, the daily total calories may be significantly higher than intended (approximately 400 calories per day for a 16-block athlete, for example).

The Meal 2 table illustrates the increase in calories created by switching from chicken breast to ground beef (20 percent fat).

**Meal 2 total calories according to macros = 120 (protein) + 148 (carb) + 216 (fat) = 484**

Meal 2 (Ground Beef)						
Food	Protein (blocks)	Protein (g)	Carb (blocks)	Carb (g)	Fat (blocks)	Fat (g)
Ground beef (20% fat)	4	28	0	0	0	18
Apple	0	0	2	18	0	0
Banana	0	1	2	18	0	0
Avocado	0	1	0	1	4	6
Total	4	30	4	37	4	24
Calories	112	120	144	148	108	216

The substitution of a fattier protein source results in an approximately 35 percent increase in caloric intake over Meal 1.

Depending on your goals, taking some time to identify the fat content in your protein sources can be beneficial. For example,

individuals who are not leaning out or reaching health/performance goals on the Zone can evaluate and make changes as necessary. For those individuals attempting to use the standard fat prescription (1x), eliminating the additional 1.5 g of added fat in consideration of a fatty protein source can move the athlete closer to the intended prescription (Meal 3). If one eats lean meats all the time, precision is greater.

**Meal 3 total calories according to macros = 116 (protein) + 144 (carb) + 162 (fat) = 422**

This results in an approximately 18 percent increase in caloric intake from Meal 1.

## Combination Items

Combination items can add significant calories to the diet depending on how they are blocked. A favorite go-to protein bar has a macronutrient split of 18 grams of protein, 25 grams of carbohydrates and 17 grams of fat. At 2.5 blocks of protein, 2.8 blocks of carbohydrates and 5.7 blocks of fat, the bar’s composition dictates that all calories from macronutrients should be accounted for. Treating the bar only as a fat source or carbohydrate source leaves too many hidden calories on the table—about 170-225 of them.

As a general rule, if the item contains at least a block of a macronutrient per serving, it should be accounted for—even if one macronutrient contributes more calories.

Meal 3 (Ground Beef, No Avocado)						
Food	Protein (blocks)	Protein (g)	Carb (blocks)	Carb (g)	Fat (blocks)	Fat (g)
Ground beef (20% fat)	4	28	0	0	0	18
Apple	0	0	2	18	0	0
Banana	0	1	2	18	0	0
Avocado	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	4	29	4	36	0*	18
Calories	112	116	144	144	0	162
*Added fat blocks eliminated in consideration of the fat in protein source. The meal still contains fat, but it comes from the protein source entirely.						

## Fruit Variations

One of the benefits of the Zone diet is the “eyeball” approach that can be applied instead of weighing and measuring every item. In particular, fruit can be widely variable in size and, therefore, carbohydrate content. Particularly for the items that are frequently consumed in your diet, spend some time calibrating your eye to determine which banana is truly equivalent to 3 blocks. Assuming the individual is not getting all carbohydrates from extra-large fruit, significant hidden calories are likely not added; however, it is a factor that could affect daily precision.

## Considerations for Application

Although hidden calories can make your daily Zone calorie or block totals imprecise, they might not be cause for concern. Consistency can trump precision in that a constantly imprecise diet still provides a solid baseline from which to make changes in pursuit of the optimal diet. For example, it does not actually matter if you consistently have 12 or 9 extra fat grams per meal as long as you are monitoring your diet’s effect on performance and aesthetic goals. If you realize you need to make adjustments and then do so, your consistent baseline will allow you to make those adjustments regardless of the system.

However, for those whose day-to-day diets are highly variable, sometimes choosing more combination items or fattier protein cuts will inconsistently add hidden calories to the diet. This can thwart health or performance goals because it is impossible to make precise adjustments from an inconsistent baseline. The more frequently one chooses leaner cuts of meat, the more precise the Zone will be, even when eyeballing.

Finally, while precision is laudable, food labels are not always 100 percent reliable, and the body is not sensitive enough such that small fluctuations in day-to-day totals are significant. Hitting within 10 grams of protein and carbohydrate goals and within 5 grams of fat goals for the day is precise enough when weighing and measuring. ■

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** E.C. Synkowski is a Flowmaster for CrossFit Inc. Seminar Staff and has worked at more than 200 seminars. She is the Program Manager for the Training Department and is pursuing a master’s degree in human nutrition and functional medicine (anticipated completion in 2017).





All photos: Alicia Anthony/CrossFit Journal

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# CROSSFIT CULINARY NINJA: BEYOND A BLAND BOWL OF BROCCOLI

BY EMILY BEERS

Chef Nick Massie teaches athletes how to mix their macros for delicious fare that supports a healthy lifestyle.





Head ninja Nick Massie is trying to get CrossFit athletes out of the “macro rut” with delicious recipes and food combinations.

Phillip Gomez used to suffer from mageirocophobia—the fear of cooking.

“I thought cooking was hard. I didn’t know how to cook, so it seemed like a waste of money because I figured I’d mess it up,” said Gomez, a police officer and coach at Turn 2 CrossFit in Murrieta, California.

“It was scary and unknown. I didn’t even have time to think about making anything in the kitchen, never mind prepping large portions for the week. So I didn’t do it. I didn’t want to have any part of it.”

Gomez also avoided cooking because healthy foods—which he tried to eat—just didn’t taste that good. He knew food was essential for survival, health and athletic performance, but eating didn’t excite him, he explained.

That changed when he and wife Michelle Gomez took CrossFit’s inaugural **Culinary Ninja Specialty Course** in April 2016 at CrossFit Del Mar in San Diego, California.

## Macros, Unite!

Chef Nick Massie, with more than 20 years of experience, is the Culinary Ninja instructor. He said Gomez is typical of many CrossFit athletes he meets.

“A lot of CrossFit (athletes) aren’t interested in cooking. And they don’t think eating healthy tastes good,” said Massie, the man behind **PaleoNick.com** and the owner of **Ice Age Meals**.

Because mealtime has become boring, food prepping and cooking feel like a time-sucking nuisance, he added.

Given the importance of nutrition to good health and performance—two things CrossFit athletes care a great deal about—food prep and cooking should never be afterthoughts, Massie explained.

“Their priorities are skewed in that nutrition is the foundation. But how much effort are (CrossFit athletes) putting into the kitchen compared to the gym? There’s a huge disconnect,” Massie said.

The biggest reason for kitchen laziness? The “macro rut”: Athletes focus on getting the right amount of macronutrients but don’t bother to combine the foods, nor do they take the time to make their meals taste good, Massie said.

“Their food is bland and boring. I compare it to functional movements versus isolation movements. They’ll make rice and

chicken and broccoli and keep their macros all separate and isolated. Food is more exciting and tastes better when you combine them all into one dish in the form of something like chili, lasagna or fajita pie.”

“Food is more exciting and tastes better when you combine them all into one dish in the form of something like chili, lasagna or fajita pie.”  
—Nick Massie

Massie said he thinks many athletes also avoid the kitchen because they assume cooking takes up too much of their precious training time.

“They just need to learn how to be more efficient with their food prep,” he said.

In creating his culinary ninjas, Massie is determined to teach CrossFit athletes and coaches how to be more efficient in the kitchen, get them out of the macro rut, and show them that healthy eating can taste good.

## What Ninjas Know

Massie’s one-day seminar is part hands-on cooking course and part nutrition-theory course—based on Dr. Barry Sears’ **Zone Diet**.

The theory side of the course teaches attendees about nutrition math, such as calories-to-grams conversions, Zone-block measurement and macronutrient percentage calculations. The practical side of the course has novice ninjas cooking various meals. Massie also introduces cooking concepts such as seasoning, salting, toasting spices and using herbs, as well as efficiency tips including batch cooking and crock potting.

“Crock potting allows you to cook overnight. Things are getting done in the kitchen while you’re sleeping. That resonated with people at the course,” Massie said.

The idea of making healthy food taste good also piqued the interest of attendees, he added.





Just like other CrossFit courses, the Culinary Ninja seminar includes lots of hands-on work.

“We talk(ed) about basic things like salting meats properly, about using heat instead of sweet, like using jalapeños instead of sugar, or putting sriracha on chicken instead of ketchup.”

To emphasize the point that healthy can be tasty, Massie made **mayonnaise** in front of the group to show them it doesn't have to be littered with sugar. His mayo combines olive oil with lemon juice, mustard, egg yolk, garlic and some spices.

“I did a mayo demonstration for a 120-block chicken salad, and I added chicken, grapes, celery, honey and toasted pecans. The mayo gave us our fat, and that became our lunch,” he said.

In keeping with CrossFit philosophy, the course is very hands on: Ninjas made meals themselves and left with 16 different three-block dishes, including chili and lasagna.

“They made four gallons of chili. And we used the same meat sauce in the chili as the lasagna,” Massie said. “This showed (attendees) they can make more than one meal at a time, and they can turn a simple meat sauce into a variety of different dinners that all taste completely different. It opened their eyes to being more efficient.”

From kitchen efficiency to knife skills, Massie said the concepts he teaches are simple but effective. Most importantly, they're practical, he added.

“(CrossFit Founder and CEO Greg) Glassman is big on practical application. You can go to a nutrition class anywhere and listen to the science all day long, but if it doesn't translate to make your life better, then what's the point?” Massie asked.

“I want people to take what they learn here and use it every day.”

## Nutrition Is the Foundation

Cynthia Martinez was another attendee at the first Culinary Ninja course.

Unlike Gomez—whose fear of cooking caused him to avoid it altogether—Gomez has always enjoyed spending time in the kitchen preparing healthy food.

Her focus on quality nutrition became even more important to her last year when she suffered a major heart attack.

“I didn't know I had heart disease. I don't remember the event because my heart stopped for 40 minutes,” said Martinez, now 43, who was revived by a paramedic in the ambulance on the way to the hospital.

With a renewed desire to stay healthy through proper nutrition—and to help those around her use food to fuel good health—Martinez enrolled in the course. Her plan was to acquire more cooking and nutrition knowledge, which she could then pass on to the athletes at her affiliate, CrossFit Point A in San Marcos, California.

“A lot of times people come into our gym and they want us to give them the whole package of coaching. They want to work out and be physically fit, but they also want a nutrition plan,” Martinez said.

“Other culinary classes are often just about making food that tastes good and not necessarily food that helps you in the gym.”  
—Cynthia Martinez

She knew there were many options for culinary and nutrition courses, but she wanted one dedicated to teaching the nutritional concepts she believed in. Taking a course at a local culinary school wouldn't have given her the same confidence, she explained.

“Other culinary classes are often just about making food that tastes good and not necessarily food that helps you in the gym,” Gomez said. “This particular way of eating that Massie teaches helps fuel performance.”

Since taking the course, Martinez said she has become better at delivering nutrition, cooking and recipe advice to her athletes.

“We're now implementing (Massie's methods) to new members who come in. We have different options for them on the nutritional side and ways to help them meet their goals,” she said.

## The Massie Effect

Today, Gomez is no longer afraid of the kitchen and he no longer shies away from helping his wife with dinner. The days of unseasoned, uninspired meat and vegetables sitting apart from each other on the plate are over.

In recent weeks, Gomez has been cooking and trying new recipes with his wife, all the while sticking to Zone Diet principles, which



Gomez said makes him feel healthier.

“I’m not afraid of carbs any more. I used to think carbs were the enemy. And I’ve added more fat to my diet, too,” Gomez said. “I always thought, ‘Why can’t I get any stronger?’ I’m a small-framed guy and I was stuck at this particular size and weight. Now I know I wasn’t eating enough carbs and fat. I can see the difference in my body already.”

On top of it all, cooking isn’t nearly as hard as he thought it would be.

“Nick showed us how easy it is to make mayo. I always used to switch to mustard because I thought it was healthier, but now I see how easy it is to make my own, and I don’t have to feel guilty about eating mayo,” said Gomez, who has made Massie’s mayo a handful of times since the course.

All this has added up to a more enjoyable, tastier life, Gomez explained.

“I had been in this rut for so long. Now I’m actually enjoying food again.”

For more information and a list of upcoming CrossFit Culinary Ninja courses, visit [Training.CrossFit.com](#). ■

**About the Author:** Emily Beers is a CrossFit Journal contributor and coach at [CrossFit Vancouver](#). She finished 37th at the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games.

