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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## Systolic: 140. Diastolic: 104. Impending stroke.

Russ Laraway explains why he believes CrossFit literally saved his life.

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By Russ Laraway

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Verlana Laraway

Over the holidays, I exercised very regularly, but I broke a number of my diet principles. As a result, I watched my weight, body fat and blood pressure creep up.

It occurred to me that this is my reality. My body, for whatever reason, is highly sensitive to diet and exercise. It further occurred to me that, because of this reality, CrossFit saved my life.

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### The Wake-Up Call

I left the Marine Corps in the summer of 1998. I was pretty fit, and more than most people, I had a great foundation to become a fit civilian—but I blew it. I guess it's like a lot of things ...

Next thing you know, it's seven years later. Gradual decline. I didn't fully realize how steep my physical decline had been, but a doctor put it in crystal-clear perspective for me in the summer of 2005. I had acquired a pretty bad case of poison oak, and I headed to the doctor for some steroids. Per normal, they'd taken my blood pressure and other vital signs. Steroid prescribed, the doctor wanted to focus on my blood pressure.

"You know your blood pressure is very high at 140/104."

"Wow. I didn't know."

"Are you on any kind of medication for that?"

"Nah, I don't really like medication, and I'm sure I'll get it back down."

"You don't like medication?" she asked.

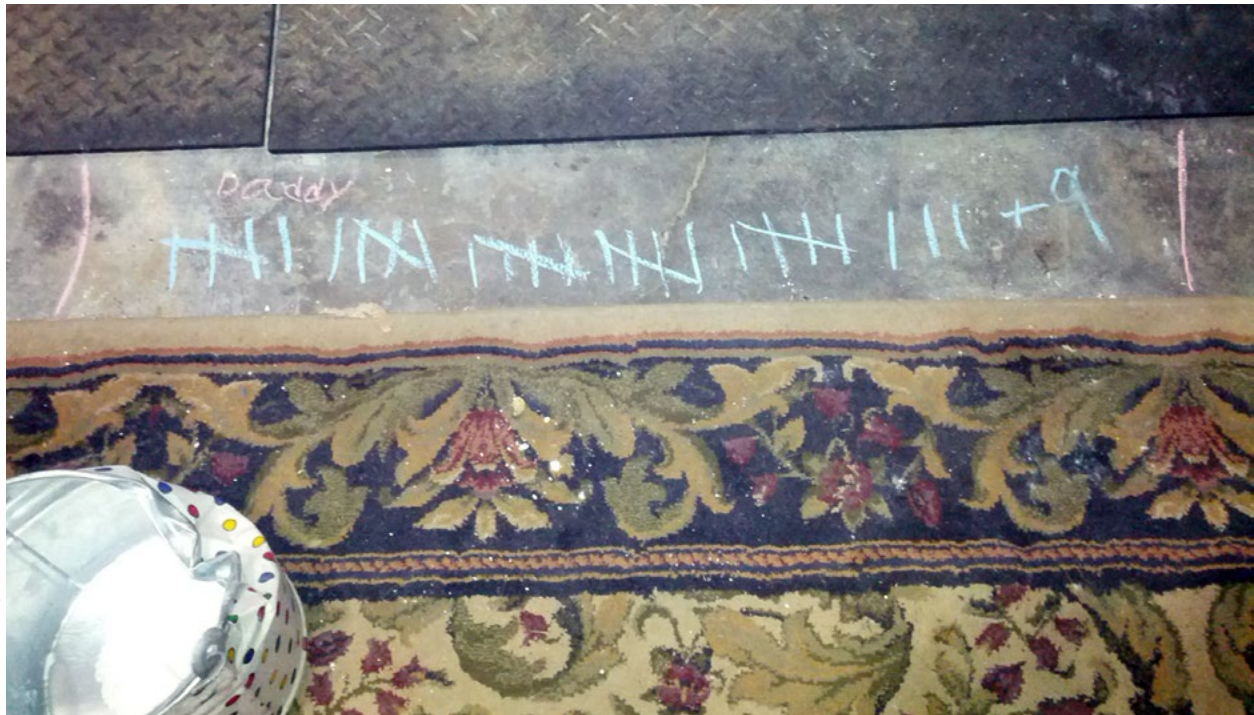
She paused and continued bluntly, "Let me put the tradeoff you are making into perspective: you have decided not to take medication, and consequently you are likely heading down a path of having a stroke before you are 40."

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**I didn't fully realize how steep my physical decline had been, but a doctor put it in crystal-clear perspective for me in the summer of 2005.**

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I moved immediately to get on medication, and things came into balance. I further realized I needed to begin exercising regularly again. I hated the gym and didn't really know where to start. I would occasionally go for a run, but there was no rhyme or reason or regularity to my fitness regimen.



Verlana Laraway

***"CrossFit code" such as this wouldn't have been seen near Russ Laraway circa 2005. Since it started appearing, he's noticed sharp improvements in his health.***



Brightroom Event Photography

***With the risk of a stroke averted, the author decided to search out new challenges to overcome.***

In the fall of 2006, I started mountain biking. I got really into it with some buddies, and it seemed like enough. But it wasn't.

In September 2009, a close friend suggested I try P90X. All I had to do was show up and press play.

I persevered through P90X, and my appearance was significantly better, but I wasn't quite there, so I decided to start it over again: P180X, if you will.

It was fun at first, but midway through I started to get bored. Losing engagement, I started skipping workouts. I realized this was not going to be my long-term solution. It was not, in fact, the gym I hated, but the routine.

I was nervous to lose all the progress I'd made but wanted to find something sustainable and not rush into another 90-day fad. That same buddy who suggested P90X suggested CrossFit, and on Aug. 16, 2010—roughly a

month after I finished P180X—I opened CrossFit.com and saw a very accessible workout. I'll never forget it: 15 sprints (run for 20 seconds and rest for 40).

I sprinted my butt off and started the process of learning CrossFit. I scaled the crap out of everything. I used dumbbells for every weightlifting movement. I used dining-room chairs instead of plyo boxes. The door-frame pull-up bar started to destroy the molding around the door.

I soon added some modest CrossFit equipment: a 30-lb. kettlebell, a rock-hard 10-lb. medicine ball. CrossFit Brand X's website became my best friend with ready-made scaled versions of the workout of the day (WOD).

I was consistent and enjoyed it. I read [What Is Fitness?](#), and the article resonated. I'd worked for Google and am now at Twitter—two companies that strongly believe in measurement, transparency, data and rigor—and What Is Fitness? used those elements to answer the article's title question. CrossFit was specifically designed to maximize performance according to that definition of fitness, and it was humble enough to adapt and change as measurement and transparency demonstrated the efficacy of approaches through better human adaptations and results.

I quickly started to outgrow my home box. Because my wife and I were both all-in on CrossFit, and with three growing boys, we decided to go all-in on a home gym. Hampton bumper plates; 45-lb. Olympic bar; permanent metal pull-up bar; 20-, 24- and 30-inch boxes from Rogue; nice jump ropes; poods of kettlebells; big, soft, fluffy medicine balls and so on.

I was on a roll. In fact, I had convinced my doctor to cut my blood-pressure medication in half and had achieved sub 13 percent body fat. I was very steady, very disciplined—loved my CrossFit workouts. I tried to learn form from videos on YouTube and made progress, but the weights started to get to the point where I knew intuitively that if I didn't get my form squared away, I would eventually hurt myself.

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addiction, and I did.**

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I elected to attend a CrossFit Level 1 Seminar in Pleasanton, Calif., in the summer of 2011, while my wife was away visiting family. I learned, clearly, that I'd been doing it wrong and learned to do the big movements correctly.

The most important lecture, though, in that session was the lecture on diet. CrossFit prescribes the Zone Diet, and Seminar Staff trainer Russell Berger asked us all to go strict Zone for four weeks with no legumes, dairy or grains. I read the Zone book and realized the extent to which we'd been poisoning ourselves—and our kids in particular—with our nonchalance toward sugar.

I was disturbed by this paradox: tons of hard work and yet my body fat was still curiously high, and I was unable to fully get off the blood-pressure medication. I realized with great clarity that I had to break my sugar addiction, and I did.

I went through a couple of weeks of withdrawal. I was irritable, moody and had frequent headaches, but by the winter of 2011, I achieved 9.5 percent body fat and was finally off blood-pressure medication. I had finally achieved health.

### A New Approach to Life

It seems a drastic, dramatic and exaggerated statement to say CrossFit saved my life, but there are two reasons why it is true.

First, it is true because of how CrossFit works—not only because routine is the enemy, but also because every time you work out, you have a chance to achieve something. It's a sustainable program for me. Ellipticals and road biking and running and regular gyms are all my bane.

The second reason why I can say this, quite literally, is because of the diet insights that materialized at my Level 1. Berger is a gifted teacher, and he compelled me to act. I have no doubt my life has been extended as a result of this one session.

CrossFit has served as the foundation of a profound, though gradual, change in lifestyle and as the pathway to health.



### About the Author:

*A Philly native, Russ did his undergrad at the University of South Carolina, served as a Marine Corps company commander, ran his own business, received an MBA from the Wharton School of Business and worked at Google for seven years. He now works at Twitter, where he is @RussLaraway and leads the global SMB business. He's been an evangelical CrossFit athlete since August 2010. He lives in the San Francisco Bay area with his family of three CrossFit athletes and one gymnast.*