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Lengel's Legacy

Dr. Michael P. Morran explains how murdered affiliate owner Joe Lengel taught him what to look for in a coach.

By Dr. Michael P. Morran

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On Nov. 19, 2012, Joe Lengel was murdered in a morning robbery before opening his box, CrossFit Toledo Intensity Fitness.

Though I am fairly new to CrossFit and have only practiced its principles for the past year, I can truly say that Joe defined to me what a great CrossFit coach is. That November morning, the people who set out to rob Joe of some quick cash ended up robbing a box, family and community of a great individual.

It's hard not to feel selfish sometimes worrying about your own personal needs when you know how hard his family must be hurting, but I now face the same problem as many others practicing CrossFit for the first time: how to find a great coach who works for me?

Luckily, Joe provided me with everything I need to evaluate a coach, and I believe his memory will be honored by sharing that knowledge with the CrossFit community.

Traits of the Great

When I first met Joe, he did not have to sell me on the concept of CrossFit. I was well aware of its success and principles, but I needed to find someone who could join me in a mutually beneficial relationship. In any relationship, finding someone who is happy and passionate makes anything you do with them an easy process. Joe was a two-time CrossFit Games athlete in the master's category, so his knowledge and dedication were given, but just because you're good at something does not mean you can coach it.

Great coaches do not even have to say anything and you know what they're thinking.

A great coach has to be in love with what he or she is doing. Finding a coach lovesick with Fran, Angie and Diane is mandatory because eventually his or her enthusiasm

will transfer over to you. Without realizing it, the coach's energy will become yours—and sometimes even vice versa. Finding someone with enthusiasm even for dreaded movements means you have found someone special who will push you out of your comfort zone, and we all know that doing something you're bad at only makes you a better person.

In physics, power refers to the rate at which energy is used or transferred. In social terms, power refers to the ability to influence others without resistance. The power of influence is an indispensable trait of any great leader or mentor, and believe me when I say that Joe had power. Great coaches do not even have to say anything and you know what they're thinking. They can give you a look during a WOD that tells you to get those damn elbows up or to keep pushing and just keep moving.

Great coaches influence athletes by making them hold themselves accountable for their actions. They guide their athletes but do not force change upon them. Great coaches influence and educate their athletes to a higher sense of accountability and self-worth, thus prompting change within the individual by his or her own means.



Jake Grollee

Joe Lengel was particularly proud of his gym's performance in a fundraising truck pull.



Great coaches usually find themselves surrounded by great people.

As an athlete, you have to be open to influence, and one cannot enter into a coaching relationship without respect for the mentor. Trust and respect are interconnected. Clients must respect and appreciate the knowledge of the coach in order to trust that his or her programming will yield the results the clients need. The coach must respect the needs of the athletes and work to bring results for each and every client.

The day of my first WOD I was excited and nervous. Though I was in pretty decent shape, the idea of the unknown scared the hell out of me. Before CrossFit, I was the Globo Gym rat doing isolation exercises mixed with body-weight conditioning, so I thought everything was going to be no sweat. As soon as I walked in the door, Joe said to leave my ego at the door. It's funny to think back to his comment, but he was right.

In CrossFit, you need to realize your limits and be humble. This is how I knew I could trust Joe. From Day 1 he was honest, insightful and very protective. The WOD was a triplet of burpees, kettlebell swings and box jumps, and he scaled everything for me, even the reps. At first, I took

his actions as an insult, but after the WOD I thanked him for looking out for my well-being. He reassured me that my numbers and workouts would progress rapidly, and he was right. I was hooked and loved every minute of it.

Joe was not all about performance; he was actually more about the longevity of his athletes. He always made sure to talk with us about the dangers of over-training and the importance of taking days off. For me it was easy to trust Joe. I was a complete stranger, but he treated me with the compassion of a family member and pushed me through that first week of hell.

One of the most important roles of any coach is being a great a motivator. Figuring out how to keep an individual or group of 10 people on task and motivated is difficult, and at some point almost everyone needs outside motivation. Motivation comes in a number of forms, but often it comes in the form of a person everyone compares himself or herself against. You know who I am talking about. This is a person you honestly respect but secretly want to outperform—if even for just one day.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Few young men could keep up with Lengel, a two-time CrossFit Games masters competitor.

Sadly for Joe, he was the man we all loved to try and outperform. Realistically, who knows a 57-year-old man who can usually physically outperform most athletes half his age in any task? If Joe happened to join you during a WOD, undoubtedly you tried harder, pushed more and kept your standards tight. That is motivation, plain and simple.

The ability to motivate someone to return to fight another day is the mark of a great coach.

With a great coach, the joy and benefits of competition are multiplied. I often heard Joe describe this to individuals hung up on their performance after a WOD.

“The reality of the WOD and the competitive aspects lies more in the fact that you are competing within yourself and not with others. Every day you cannot be your best. Getting hung up on the negative aspects will not allow you to see what you have accomplished,” he would say, highlighting the successes hidden in apparent failures.

The ability to motivate someone to return to fight another day or find positives in an off day is the mark of a great coach. In CrossFit, you have your entire life to work on bettering yourself. Hitting PRs is an undertaking, an investment in one’s self, and a good coach will help every athlete see that.

The community a great coach establishes extends outside the box and creates an environment where individuals trust each other and respect each other’s efforts regardless of fitness level. Great coaches establish a community where athletes are invested in each other. They help create a group of people willing to push aside differences and come together for the common good if even for only an hour a day.

Great coaches are good at juggling the needs of their clients as a whole but also as individuals, and Joe had a knack for determining what an individual needed in order to motivate him or her. There is definitely a gift to making someone feel special even when he or she is battling through difficulty inside or outside the box.

Similar to other boxes, we perform team or group WODs once a week. We call them our Saturday Suck Fests, wherein the usual 60-minute class is replaced by an extended WOD often full of expletives and loud noises usually only produced by animals in the wild. Whether the workout causes excitement or even fear, a well-coached box has a feeling of security and confidence about it because the athletes support each other and trust that everything is well organized. Great coaches give their athletes the tools to determine how to approach the task in front of them and accomplish it.

It is hard to describe the community aspect of a box to someone outside its walls. You must experience the community to realize the power it has on people. Joe always tried to compete in every team WOD, and he would usually pair up with a novice athlete to push and help him or her during our Suck Fests. He just made everyone happy, and that is hard to do.



Abbey Mortemore

Matt (left) and Aaron Lengel introduce a WOD dedicated to their father.

Joe also tried to get us all involved in various fitness events. Even the community barbecues and cook-outs were preceded by a team WOD or group-building events. I think the one event outside of the box that Joe was most proud of was a fundraiser for the Ronald McDonald House. It was called the Big Mac Truck Pull. Teams competed against one another in a tug-of-war type of competition, where a team of athletes pulled a semi truck for time. I remember showing up the day after the event to see pictures, a trophy and Joe sporting an ear-to-ear shit-eating grin. He never failed to mention that while our team was not the heaviest or largest, we sure generated the most power overall. He was so proud of everyone involved. I remember Joe saying after the final heat was over he was never so excited to give Ronald McDonald a high-five.

I think everyone who knew Joe is still in shock now that he's gone. Everyone is looking for an answer that will help with our pain, yet there is none. Three days after the incident, Joe's two sons, Matt and Aaron, put together a tribute WOD for their father at a local box called Black

Swamp CrossFit. Over 150 people showed up to honor Joe. His sons programmed the WOD based on some of Joe's best and worst movements, and I can honestly say the WOD was filled with pain and love and is something I will never forget. We were all in pain but were just happy to be around people who felt the same connection.

Joe

- 10 rounds for time of:
- 10 thrusters (95/65 lb.)
- 10 bar-facing burpees
- 10 pull-ups
- 57 double-unders

All the surrounding boxes have extended their hands to help any member of our gym in our time of need. CrossFit Intensity has since re-opened its doors to members and is trying to rebound from the loss. New trainers have stepped in to aid in programming and any other duties.

I still feel so much regret for Joe's family and wife. We read daily about new developments in the investigation into Joe's murder. Justice may be served, but nothing can undo what those scumbags did.

Good coaches are good people.

It's still an eerie feeling to be sitting in the same parking lot where the incident took place, yet I know Joe would not want any of us to stop working toward any of our goals in life.

It's worth mentioning that the police say Joe resisted the attempt to rob him. As of press time, four men had been arrested in connection with the murder, while a fifth had not been located.

Farewell, Joe

In the simplest terms, a good coach could be defined as a well-educated, patient individual who aids others in reaching a goal. Good coaches are good people. Though at times they may be brutally honest and tell you exactly what you do not want to hear, you never seem to hold any ill will towards them. They are best friends who are not afraid to tell you your ass looks fat in those jeans. If you really think about, it everyone in your box in one way or another is a coach of sorts, and in most cases they reflect the character of the official head coach.

While plenty of good coaches exist, great coaches are hard to find. Great coaches have the power to unlock the athlete in the elderly or tell the middle-aged housewife "to flip her bitch switch" and transform into a powerlifter. Great coaches see the potential in everyone to accomplish and achieve what was once thought impossible. Furthermore, they possess the power to bring this enlightenment to an entire community on a daily basis.

These select individuals are highly educated and well versed in their craft and readily share their knowledge to allow others to progress. They are some of the most self-sacrificing individuals you will come across and put the needs of their clients before their own. In actuality, they revel in our accomplishments both big and small like proud parents watching kids cross the stage on graduation day.

Though our time with a great coach was tragically ended for me and my community, Joe Lengel's lessons and integrity will live on in all of us who trained under him. Though I'm saddened by the loss, I know finding a great coach will be easier for me because Joe showed me what to look for.



Courtesy of Michael Morran

About the Author

Dr. Michael P. Morran is a research scientist working at the University of Michigan Medical School. His research focuses on both Type 1 and Type 2 diabetes, and he seeks to identify biomarkers to determine if someone is predisposed toward the progression of diabetes. Michael has been actively involved in CrossFit since October 2011 and seeks to obtain a Level 1 Trainer Certificate this year.