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Lessons Learned

Flowmaster and self-described “slow learner” Pat Sherwood shares wisdom acquired over six years of CrossFit training.

By Pat Sherwood

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All images: Staff/CrossFit Journal

August marked the end of my sixth year of CrossFit, and let me tell you, it has been one hell of a ride. Since 2005, I've gone from watching Greg Amundson's WOD demos on CrossFit.com while working a real-estate job that I did not enjoy to working for CrossFit Headquarters, teaching Level 1 Seminars and meeting CrossFitters from around the world.

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Sherwood, in his element, explaining proper form to a group of seminar attendees.

I truly enjoy the many aspects of my current position at CrossFit Headquarters; however, my favorite by far is explaining CrossFit methodologies to an audience. That audience may be a random person I strike up a conversation with on an airplane, 50 to 100 people at a Level 1 Seminar, or tens of thousands of people tuned into the media coverage of the 2011 CrossFit Games.

After six years, I have lots of experiences to share that will hopefully help newer athletes and coaches get on the right path a whole lot sooner than I did. Anything that you can do wrong in CrossFit, I've probably done. I'm a slow learner. I usually try to break the wall that is in my way before I decide to go over or around it. So, I've decided to share some of my lessons learned in the hope of making other CrossFitters' learning curves better than mine.

Lesson No. 1

What is the proper course of action to learn CrossFit and its movements most efficiently and effectively? Start with mechanics, gain consistency, and then—and only then—add intensity. (This lesson will repeat over and over again.)

What course of action did my knucklehead friends and I employ? As far as we were concerned, there was only one step, not three: add intensity. To hell with learning how to do movements with a PVC pipe or light load! We intended to do all the WODs as prescribed immediately. We did this for about 18 months.

It's almost as if that Greg Glassman fellow knew what he was talking about.

What happened? We got pretty damn fit, and then we reached a plateau. Why? Because I did not need to yank on the bar harder to increase my squat clean. I needed to put my ego to the side, take weight off the bar, scale workouts and learn proper mechanics. It's almost as if that Greg Glassman fellow knew what he was talking about.



Sherwood learned that the only way to improve at CrossFit is to relentlessly hammer away at your weaknesses.

In other words, the productive application of force is technique dependent. Who knew, right? But that sounds kind of familiar. Where have I heard it before? Refer to Lesson No. 1.

Variance and Targeting Weaknesses

Where do we see the greatest gains in athletic capacity almost regardless of how talented the athlete might be? This is largely done via two avenues. The first avenue is classic GPP, or “general physical preparedness.” The second avenue is working on weaknesses. Identify the activities, domains, loadings, repetition ranges and so on that you don’t want to see come out of the hopper, and then embrace them.

Classic GPP is pure, beautiful, elegant CrossFit. At its core are couplets, triplets, going heavy at least once a week and, every now and then, going long. There is no real need to build overly complicated workouts that look super sexy on paper. But what do most of us do when we are new to programming? We try to become mad scientists. We construct these monstrous workouts under the old mindset that “more is better.” After several months of overtraining ourselves and unnecessarily beating up our bodies, we wonder why our times and lifts are not improving. So we return to where we started with classic GPP, and suddenly our fitness returns. See Lesson No. 1.

Weaknesses? Who the heck wants to spend time doing things they are not good at? I personally blew off handstand push-ups for my first two to three years of CrossFit because I sucked at them. Guess what? I’ve never recovered. I’m much better at them than I used to be, but I’m still years behind where I should be. Nothing exists in isolation in the human body. Now, years later, my greatest weakness remains anything overhead. This is no one’s fault but my own. Refer to Lesson No. 1.

“I’ll Take Variance Without Bias, Please”

Every weekend we tell CrossFitters at Level 1 Seminars that the key to GPP is variance—also known as not biasing your programming. The CrossFit.com WODs are so useful for the simple reason that they are not tinged by your personal biases.

Yet programming is a blast. Creating your own workouts gives you an understanding of what works and what doesn’t like almost nothing else will. I think every CrossFit trainer should try it.

I followed CrossFit.com programming for about two years, and then I programmed for myself for just more than three years. I was actually quite proud of the fact that I routinely went overhead in my workouts. You have to work those weaknesses, right? I would even snatch and clean and jerk once a week to stay up on the neurologically challenging Olympic lifts.

Then one day I had a rude awakening. Chris Spealler had programmed a workout that he passed along to Miranda Oldroyd, who in turn passed it along to me. It was just a simple couplet. It looked innocent, even fun. It was three rounds for time of 10 squat cleans at 135/95 lb. paired with 20 box jumps of 24/20 inches. With my squat clean a few pounds away from 300, I planned on destroying this little workout.



Going heavy is important, but nothing will destroy you like a light-to-moderate load in a well-designed, high-intensity couplet.

The opposite happened. That elegant couplet absolutely murdered me—and I never saw it coming. I knew I was in trouble on my seventh squat clean in the very first round. Then, on the eleventh box jump in the first round, I found myself resting on the top of the box, hands on my hips, sucking wind. My time was twice as slow as everyone else's. What the hell happened?

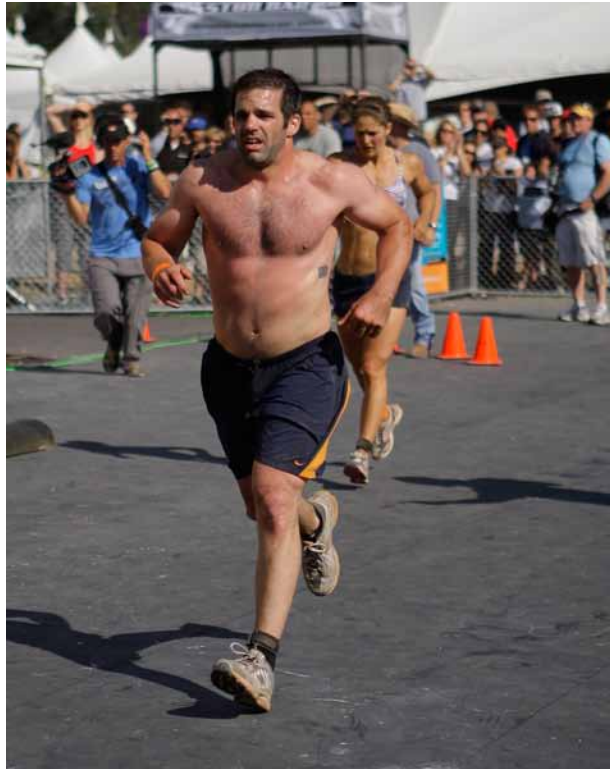
Classic, elegant, wonderfully effective CrossFit GPP programming lives in couplets and triplets.

I had biased my programming without even realizing it. While I was being diligent about hitting the Olympic lifts every week, I was only hitting them on heavy days. I was unconsciously not putting them in WODs because I knew I would hit them on a strength or practice day. So my O lifts were getting better—until you asked me to do them

in a WOD at a high heart rate with a light to moderate load. Once that happened, all my precious “strength” disappeared. Damn it. Back to Lesson No. 1.

My lessons learned about the O lifts lead nicely into something that I forgot for a while: light to moderate weight hurts way more than heavy weight does. This goes back to an earlier point. Classic, elegant, wonderfully effective CrossFit GPP programming lives in couplets and triplets. Take a look at some of most notorious WODs that leave you lying on the ground wondering how something so “simple” turned out to be so nasty. Chances are they contained a light-to-moderate loading of two or three movements paired intelligently to keep the athlete moving and the power output high.

Don't get me wrong ... you need to go heavy. It's a critical part of the programming. CrossFit is not a conditioning program. It is a strength and conditioning program. Yet the fact remains that most people I know, myself included, would agree that Heavy Fran hurts, but nowhere near as much as regular Fran. Why? Because once the loading gets to a certain point, most of us have to slow down or put the barbell down and rest. The clock keeps ticking while the power output (intensity) is going down.



Hate running? Do it more, and your workouts will improve.

If you have not touched a light load in a while, go try to PR on Jackie, or try this old one from CrossFit.com: Five rounds for time of 15 thrusters (75 lb.) and 15 sumo deadlift high pulls (75 lb.). There are literally hundreds of these. Enjoy.

Saying—Then Programming—the “R” Word

The next lesson learned makes me unhappy just saying the word out loud. That word is “running.” If there was one thing I was good at doing for many years, it was blowing off the “run 5K” days on CrossFit.com. What was my rationale? I would tell myself that I ran day in and day out for seven years in the military. I did not think I needed to work on my running, so I would go do another workout (one without handstand push-ups, of course).

These running days—which I had grown so fond of blowing off—are classic metabolic conditioning, or “cardio” as people outside our community would call them. They are a very nice test of stamina, cardiorespiratory endurance, and your ability to push through pain when your legs and lungs burn and all you want to do is slow down the pace.

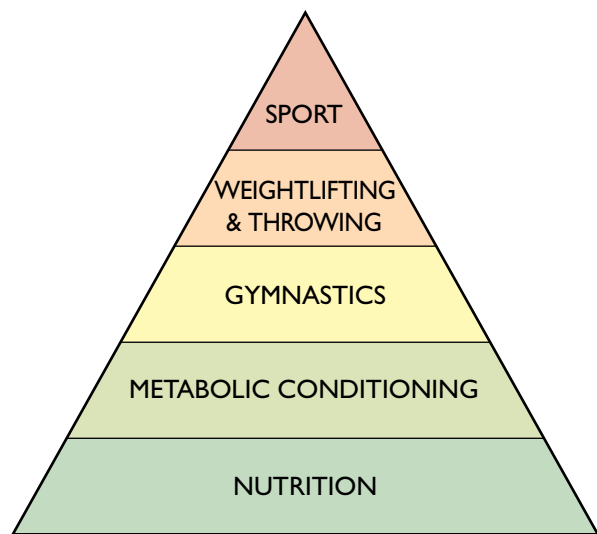
A couple of years ago, my friends and fellow Level 1 Seminar flowmaster Joe Alexander came up to me with a simply ludicrous idea: “I think we should run more,” Joe said. Anything at all would be running “more” because, at that time, we were not running at all. So we started running.

It hurt. It hurt badly. Soon we were over the initial pain and made it a point to run once a week. So, if we ran four times a month, I would say that one time was just a moderate pace for 30 to 40 minutes. The other three days we would sprint. Suddenly, we were doing mile repeats, 800 meters, 400 meters and 200 meters. Little by little, our splits got faster and faster. Those days always hurt like hell, but we learned to push through the agony, endure the suffering and maintain our pace. With this addition to my training, all my workouts got better.

Running, as it turned out, was a huge weakness of mine. It is not a weakness anymore. To this day, I sprint or run once a week. Who knew that working on your weaknesses would be one of the most beneficial things an athlete could do for his or her fitness?

Someone knew. See Lesson No. 1.

Also, isn’t metabolic monostructural conditioning near the base of the pyramid on the Theoretical Hierarchy of the Development of an Athlete (see below)? Hmm, I wonder if it was placed there by accident or for a specific and beneficial reason? (Again, see Lesson No. 1.)



Theoretical Hierarchy of the Development of an Athlete

Nutrition

Nutrition occupies the very base of the pyramid on the Theoretical Hierarchy of the Development of an Athlete. The base, the foundation is what everything else builds upon. I have a feeling that metabolic conditioning, gymnastics, weightlifting and throwing, and sport were all given a subordinate position to nutrition for good reason. I had seen that pyramid for about two years before I decided to try the dietary prescriptions recommended by CrossFit. I figured that meats and vegetables, nuts and seeds, some fruit, little starch, and no sugar, along with the Zone, were for people who did not eat "healthy" like I did. My breakfast was a bowl of Special K, skim milk, a whole-grain bagel with fat-free cream cheese and a big glass of OJ with the pulp. I was a nutrition ninja, right?

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like taking legal steroids as
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Then one day I decided to try these "crazy diets." I told myself that if things got worse, I could always just stop and go back to my old super-healthy ways that had been treating me well for years. Holy crap! Why did I wait so long to fix my nutrition? Eating the right foods is like taking legal steroids as far as I'm concerned. I was stronger, fitter, and faster than ever before. My body composition was the best it had ever been, and it was easy to maintain. That all started about four years ago, and I still eat that way to this day. I would describe my diet today as clean, high-quality, real food (most of the time) that is weighed and measured as often as I can get near the scale in my kitchen. I have found the perfect blend of quality and quantity with my food, and life has never been better.

The Theoretical Hierarchy of the Development of an Athlete was one of the first things I read about in CrossFit. I should have heeded the obvious importance placed upon nutrition a whole lot sooner, but like I said, I'm a slow learner. Don't get me wrong: I love experimenting with

diet and programming. If we don't try new things and question accepted theories, methods and practices, then we will not progress. However, these days I routinely bring myself back to Lesson No. 1 and find that things in my life and fitness improve.

Learn!

I could go on and on about the things I've done wrong in CrossFit, but I hope to write an article, not a novel. Getting "good" at CrossFit is a lifelong journey. I'm finally ready to drop my ego and start addressing things that should have been fixed a long time ago. I have learned, and continue to learn, so much from Coach Glassman, the entire CrossFit HQ staff that I have the pleasure of working with, as well as all the affiliates and thousands of CrossFit athletes I have met around the world, with whom I've shared stories, experiences, and lessons learned.

Never stop learning.

And thanks, everybody.



About the Author

Pat Sherwood is the CrossFit Training Department Project Manager as well as a flowmaster. He's done approximately 200 seminars all around the globe for CrossFit HQ and competed in the 2009 CrossFit Games. He hates HSPU and loves ice cream.