
THE CrossFit LIFE

CrossFit Is Not for Everyone

Despite its growing popularity, CrossFit is not for everyone. You have to have a thing for suffering—and its rewards. Craig Nelson explains.

By Craig Nelson

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A recent article in the *CrossFit Journal* titled “CrossFit Is for Everyone,” documented the inspiring efforts of Chris Knapman, who, in spite of significant cognitive and physical limitations, is an active (and even competitive) CrossFitter. There are many other stories of amputees, stroke patients, cancer patients, paraplegics—the list goes on—who participate meaningfully in CrossFit.

While I unreservedly applaud the efforts of these courageous souls, I must disagree—CrossFit is not for everyone.

It's not any physical or mental challenges that might disqualify one as a CrossFitter. Rather, there is a more fundamental requirement to participate in CrossFit: an affinity for DIS/GFB. (I've been searching for a better acronym but this is the best I've come up with. Readers are encouraged to offer their own.) The initialism stands for: drenched In sweat/gasping for breath. This, of course, describes the state of being that results from most CrossFit encounters. It turns out that the world is divided into two types of people: those who enjoy the state of DIS/GFB and those who do not. If you are among the latter, sorry, CrossFit is not for you.

Loving DIS/GFB

If you're reading this, you probably don't need me to explain the pleasures of DIS/GFB, but let me offer my own perspective. During any sustained WOD, my thoughts may oscillate from "OK, I can do this" to "Uh oh, I don't think I can do this" to "Please, God, let this be over" and back again. And then the time expires, or I complete my last rep and I'm done. I will then typically collapse onto the floor in a sweaty heap—as a friend put it, "to make the floor smell like effort." In the next few moments, I'm simply concentrating on trying to catch my breath.

Sometime within the next minute, the euphoria of DIS/GFB kicks in. First there is the immense pleasure of not moving followed shortly by the more positive sensations and emotions directly attributable to DIS/GFB. (I'm particularly fond of hot-weather WODs when the condition of projectile sweating is achieved.) In a somewhat attenuated form, this state of being will linger for several hours after the WOD. Maybe this is the same phenomenon that used to be called a "runner's high." Perhaps, but in my experience a CrossFit WOD is far more effective at producing serious DIS/GFB than running.

The pleasures of DIS/GFB are transient. But there is a related, more sustained phenomenon that also comes into play: DOMS (delayed onset muscle soreness). These are the achy, sore muscles that appear anywhere from 12 to 48 hours after a workout. This is not to be confused with macroscopic sprains/strains of muscles, tendons and ligaments, which are to be avoided to the extent possible. Technically, DOMS results from injury to the muscle, but it's a good kind of injury. It occurs at an ultra-structural level, involving the contractile fibers themselves. It is the muscles' reaction to an intense and sustained effort. The variety and intensity of CrossFit virtually guarantees that every week you're going to push some muscle group very, very hard, such that DOMS results.



Craig Nelson

TwinTown Crossfitter Brock Harling not quite yet experiencing the bliss of DIS/GFB.



Craig Nelson

Darren Acheson in full DIS/GFB euphoria.

The pleasure of DOMS is a bit more abstract than DIS/GFB. To be enjoyed, DOMS must be experienced through a particular interpretive lens. Think of DOMS as your muscles telling you, "Whoa, OK, we get the idea. There's some serious work going on. We'll retool and be ready the next time."

Do I actually get pleasure from DOMS? Yes, mostly. It can almost be comforting, like a visit from an old friend. "Ah, there you are. I knew you'd be showing up soon." It is in any case a very low grade of pain, one that is not difficult to endure. And it's a pain that is signaling you worked hard and next time you'll be stronger.

The DIS/GFB Divide

As do many gyms, my own box, TwinTown CrossFit, has a promotional video online. This video portrays the "high intensity" aspect of CrossFit in vivid detail, and DIS/GFB is clearly on display—club members are sweating, straining, grimacing, their mouths agape trying to get oxygen. I've shown this video to friends and family, both to explain what I've been doing and to mildly encourage them to give it a try. The reactions are quite varied. Some are intrigued and react positively to the energy of the gym. But many find it off-putting. It seems foreign, alien. They find it preposterous that there might be actual pleasure derived from this experience. My own daughter, after watching the video, concluded, "You're all nuts."

What accounts for these disparate reactions to the prospect of strenuous exercise? Is it a function of will power, discipline, intelligence? I don't think so. Consider this short list of notables who eschew exercise:

"I have never taken any exercise except sleeping and resting." —Mark Twain

"Whenever I feel the urge to exercise, I sit down and wait until the urge passes." —Winston Churchill

"To get back my youth I would do anything in the world, except take exercise" —Oscar Wilde

"Exercise is bunk. If you are healthy, you don't need it: if you are sick, you should not take it." —Henry Ford

"I believe that the Good Lord gave us a finite number of heartbeats, and I'm damned if I'm going to use up mine running up and down a street." —Neil Armstrong

Twain, Churchill, Wilde, Ford, Armstrong. Hardly a litany of slackers. These were men of enormous talent, energy, accomplishment and discipline. At best they regarded exercise as foolish, and at worst, repellent.

There are undoubtedly multiple reasons why some individuals respond negatively to the idea of exercise. For some it may be as simple as unpleasant memories of junior-high gym class or of doing drills during football practice. But there may be a more basic and fundamental cause for many. A study published in the *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation* comes to this conclusion:

"A single session of moderate aerobic exercise improves vigor and decreases fatigue among regular exercisers but causes no change in these scores for non-exercisers. Although total mood disturbance improves post-exercise in exercisers and non-exercisers, regular exercisers have approximately twice the effect as non-exercisers. This limited post-exercise mood improvement among non-exercisers may be an important deterrent for persistence with an exercise program."

Exactly. It is certain that if you CrossFit you will regularly experience both DIS/GFB and DOMS. Worse, it will require great effort to achieve those conditions. I cannot imagine subjecting myself to the rigors of CrossFit without experiencing some direct, tangible and immediate pleasure. During my two-block walk from my home to the gym, I regularly experience apprehension, even dread at what awaits. But I know that all I have to do is show up and I'll manage somehow to get through it.

And on my walk home an hour later, I'm simultaneously relaxed and exhilarated, bathed in afterglow of DIS/GFB.

