
THE CrossFit LIFE

Losing—and Learning

Jeremy Striffler explores turning a loss into a win.

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All images: Studio 306 Photography

I recently heard a bit of wisdom that has the possibility to change my outlook on my CrossFit experience: there is great value in losing.

It was an Oprah-defined ah-ha moment that happened on a random Tuesday afternoon in September in a conference room with bright white tables, lime-green chairs and florescent lighting. I was sitting among my co-workers, who were uniformly dressed in business-casual khakis and blue-and-white button-down shirts.

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The WODs that defeat you are the ones that teach you.

I was attending an internal company presentation on winning multi-market accounts. One of the senior executives was instructing the collected group of commercial real-estate brokers to not be disheartened by a loss during our pursuit of new business. Rather, he astutely recommended treating each loss as an opportunity to learn.

Probably to his chagrin, my first thought was not how this applied to my day-to-day job. Instead I jotted the note down and drew a sharp arrow with a pen and scribbled "CrossFit."

It's a timeless saying that you learn from your mistakes. It had been told to me in the past by my parents, teachers, coaches and friends. But in that moment, it was the exact thing I needed to hear in relation to my most recent CrossFit experience.

Feeling Like a Loser

Two days before I had found myself lying on the cold, tile floor of the tiny bathroom in my gym, TwinTown CrossFit (TTCF), after finishing the WOD. After 14 months and over 100 workouts, I had never felt worse.

It had started off well enough with the buy-in. Every minute on the minute for 10 minutes, we did 3 hang power snatches, 3 snatch balances and 3 overhead squats with a PVC pipe. It was 11 a.m. on a beautiful Sunday morning, and we had a good group of the usual suspects in class together. With a nice breeze coming in through the garage door and some good tunes playing, the 10 minutes flew by with little cause for concern.

Next up was the main WOD: 10 rounds of 10 kettlebell swings, 10 push-ups and 10 box jumps. We grabbed a light kettlebell, and our coach, Peter, reviewed the proper form for the swings. He went around the circle and observed everybody's technique. Once he was satisfied, we grabbed the kettlebell we would use for the WOD and did a few more swings to make sure we felt comfortable with the weight for that many rounds.

Everyone set up his or her area and got psyched up to attack the WOD. I figured out where I would do my push-ups, set up my box and put on my gloves. I situated myself so I was facing away from everyone and able to get into the zone to focus on the work ahead.

A deep breath and I watched the clock as we counted down 10 seconds to begin. With the blare of the music and the ring of the clock, I was off.

The first two or three rounds went by without a hiccup. And then ...

My stomach started to turn with every box jump, sloshing and churning and knotting itself into a maelstrom. I was breathing heavily and sweating excessively. A stain in the shape of a heart began to form on my shirt. It looked the Grinch's organ after his heart grew three sizes.

Round 4 was worse than 3, and so on. I was resting between each round, and by Round 6, I was resting between the individual box jumps. I was not a happy camper and showing signs of distress. Peter checked in with me as I was giving the universal symbol of looking like I was going to vomit: a clenched fist raised to my lips.

With two rounds left, I was walking around in circles trying to breathe and ignore the puking feeling that had taken over. Coach Peter mercifully interfered and switched in a much lighter kettlebell. I did the 10 swings and grimaced through 10 push-ups. I knocked the top box off my stack so I hardly had to jump. Others cheered me on in the background, but their encouragement was muffled by the dizziness.

I hustled through the last round and went straight to the bathroom to stare into the toilet. I didn't need to call time as everyone knew I was done.

Thankfully, I didn't throw up but I did end up lying on the tile floor, miserable at what could be deemed a "loss" at the gym.

Studying the Loss

What had happened? Why was I staring up at the shelves above the toilet with the packaged rolls of paper towels and tissue boxes?

The fact was I had treated my body poorly that weekend. On Friday, I had consumed an excessive amount of calories at the Minnesota State Fair—a cornucopia of corn dogs,

deep-fried apple pie with cinnamon ice cream, thin crust pizza topped with corn and bacon, and Sweet Martha's chocolate-chip cookies. And on Saturday I had drunk more tall boys than usual at a TTCF party that got extended many hours with trips to more bars and me singing Neil Diamond's *America* during karaoke at the local VFW. As predicted, I also didn't get a good amount of sleep either night. A cheat day had turned into a long cheat weekend.

While these may be seen as excuses or temporal conditions, I paid a heavy tuition that morning. I learned very clearly that I cannot expect to perform well in a WOD on any given day of the week just because I CrossFit. What I do outside the gym has a very real effect on how I do in the gym.

Forget this one bad weekend; the lesson remains that as an athlete, I need to be mindful of my nutrition, my sleep and my general well-being to derive the true benefit of CrossFit.

It's an idea that Teddy, Peter and the rest of the coaches at TTCF preach every day, but I needed a real "loss" for it to sink in.



Losing isn't a bad thing if you can learn something that will help you win the next battle.



Turn a loss into a win by analyzing your mistakes and making a change.

An Eternal Lesson

There are real lessons to be learned every time we perceive loss, whether inside or outside the gym. If we examine losses closely we can uncover our weaknesses and discover points of focus moving forward.

I am always annoyed with myself during a WOD that includes double-unders because I don't string them together. But I have to realize that in that loss there is a lesson to be found. I need to correct my form and practice them much more regularly at open gym or on my own time if I want to start "winning."

I can attend a clinic on kipping, but my losing record on the pull-up bar will continue if I don't pay attention to why I am losing. Am I not driving with my hips? Am I not being aggressive enough on the bar? What can I take from the loss to better prepare for a victory?

Scholars, athletes, scientists, philosophers and more have known this eternal truth for centuries. Here's just a sampling of what some have said on the topic of losing:

"Winners have to absorb losses." —Ice T

"Losses have propelled me to even bigger places, so I understand the importance of losing." —Venus Williams

"If anything, you know, I think losing makes me even more motivated." —Serena Williams

"Sometimes by losing a battle you find a new way to win the war." —Donald Trump

"That's what learning is, after all; not whether we lose the game, but how we lose and how we've changed because of it and what we take away from it that we never had before, to apply to other games. Losing, in a curious way, is winning." —Richard Bach

"If you learn from a loss you have not lost." —Austin O'Malley

The past year of CrossFit has been a series of triumphs as I improved my times in workouts, finished races in which I never thought I could complete and saw gains in my overall health and wellness. But recently I have experienced a bit of a plateau and seen that early winning streak come to an end, with that brutal Sunday-morning loss being the needed shot in the arm.

If I really want to win in the long run, I have to start learning from my losses.

