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Building the New School

Mission Vista High School in California teaches CrossFit to 500 athletes a day. E.M. Burton reports.

By E.M. Burton

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All images: E.M. Burton

“We built the old school. Now we’re building the new school.”

CrossFit Brand X produced that great slogan a while ago for its T-shirts and wall art.

There’s an actual manifestation of what can be called the “new school,” CrossFit-style, in a high school in Oceanside, Calif.

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The Future of P.E.?

Mission Vista High School (MVHS), very recently chartered in August 2009, is indeed new in more ways than one.

A “dual magnet school,” MVHS draws students from all over the region, some from as far as 20 miles away. It attracts them (that’s the magnet) with its unique curriculum that specializes in the dual areas of arts and communication and science and technology.

CrossFit programming forms the foundation of MVHS’ general physical-education classes.

In its first year, MVHS enrolled 500 students in two grades—9 and 10—who were temporarily accommodated on the campus of a neighboring middle school. MVHS relocated to its new, permanent location in Vista in its second year, where the current cohort of 1,200 students spend the better part of their days. The beautiful campus contains a commons space filled with light, and a great view of the local landscape and mountains makes for a lot of outdoor warm-ups. With many parents and family members picking their kids up at the end of the day, the atmosphere is friendly and very community oriented.

MVHS is also the only school in its district to offer a unique “4x4” schedule, a different way of breaking up the academic year. Classes are scheduled to afford students the option of having more elective classes in their areas of interest and to allow them to complete an accredited high-school term-length course in just eight weeks. It’s this unique 4x4 schedule that affords MVHS staff the luxury of programming CrossFit workouts for the students 90 minutes a day, five days a week, for 18 weeks.

CrossFit programming forms the foundation of MVHS’ general physical-education classes, which are quite distinct from what we might expect of typical high-school athletics departments. In the CrossFit classes, the focus is on technique first, and then students progress to light weights, which are scaled for each student. They do the Burgener Warm-Up, work out with PVC pipe and focus on movements that take advantage of their body weight.



MVHS has a unique schedule that allows students to do CrossFit workouts for 90 minutes every school day for an 18-week period.

Using dumbbells and kettlebells, they do complexes, as well as cleans, snatches and deadlifts. The emphasis is on quality over quantity. Students have the freedom to scale their own workouts by reducing reps or rounds. They do the benchmark workouts and follow the CrossFit Kids PreTeen and Teen Lesson Plans.

The school is very committed to collecting and assessing data points on its students. To begin with, all high-school students in the state are tested in physical fitness. MVHS does pre and post testing including assessments of body composition; height and weight; and level of capacity in push-ups, sit-ups, pull-ups or flexed-arm hangs, and 1-mile runs.

The data is also collected in preparation for continued accreditation as an educational facility in the California. The school is currently under review by authority having jurisdiction, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, which has motivated staff to evaluate all the ways in which they assess their students.

The students enjoy the activity, being there by choice. They like the variety of the challenging workouts. They have noticed big changes in their level of fitness and their scores on the statewide fitness tests. They improve their mile times, with many knocking two to four minutes off previous times. Two students in the current class had already lost 25 and 26 lb. before the end of the current term.

Even more encouraging is to hear how they feel fitter and want to continue with the workouts. They're excited about CrossFit in general and are looking into local boxes. They know the workouts by name and they watch the CrossFit Games on ESPN2. They want to take the class again. One of their assignments was to design a workout that included a warm-up, WOD and cool-down.

This doesn't happen without a committed staff, all of whom have the goal of earning CrossFit Level 1, CrossFit Kids and CrossFit Olympic Lifting certificates.

"Mission Vista is not the first high school to offer CrossFit programming, but it's unique in San Diego County due to its thorough integration into the physical-education curriculum, as well as the number of students (500) who CrossFit daily. It's very well programmed, with a minimum of three trainers who have attended both (CrossFit) L1 and (CrossFit Kids) training," said Mikki Martin, CrossFit director of youth programs.

Jeff and Mikki Martin—who also own and operate CrossFit Brand X in Ramona, Calif.—assisted MVHS with implementing its training program.



Instructors get creative to work around large groups and limited equipment.

CrossFit Kids PreTeen and Teen Lesson Plans

Roll

Run one lap

Speed and agility work

Plyometrics—met-con

Skill—demo/practice (stay with skill until they get it)

WOD—Focus on strength and conditioning (constantly varied functional movement done at high intensity)

Results

Stretches

Announcements

Activity

"We did a training day to help with implementation this past year. We went with staff who do after-school programs and who also teach CrossFit in physical-education departments in San Diego County. We focused on the needs of school settings, including pairing low-skill (movements) with one complex movement so coaching can be focused within large groups, for example," Martin said.

Instructors and coaches Mike Abruzzo, Roger Gutierrez, BriAnna Raphael and Chris Findell all hold numerous certificates and certifications from CrossFit and other organizations. Raphael played volleyball in college, and Findell played rugby at the international level. Their enthusiasm is palpable. They collaborate daily, continually assessing progress of the program.

"We have a living lab before our eyes each day," Abruzzo says.

Each teacher has a certain WOD he or she uses as a benchmark, to be repeated several times during the term to assess progress. Abruzzo's is Barbara.

What's really amazing is how they are able to accomplish so much and sustain such variety and enthusiasm with the little equipment they have to work with. Their programming is challenged by class size, facilities and equipment.

"We have become very good at designing workouts using body weight and maybe one implement," Abruzzo said.

He continued: "Our weight room is still relatively barren. . . . We were able to buy a rig, and we have a few bars. But we operate primarily with eight sandbags, 10 boxes, 24 sets of dumbbells, 25 medicine balls, 24 kettlebells, 15 truck tires and 96 jump ropes. With that, we train 500 students daily."

"The variety and versatility of CrossFit workouts enables us to accomplish our goal of a fitness-based physical-education program with very little equipment."

—Mike Abruzzo

Abruzzo understands very well the economic realities of all schools in 2012. Like any good CrossFit trainer, he focuses on what he can do, and CrossFit allows a lot of creativity.

"The variety and versatility of CrossFit workouts enables us to accomplish our goal of a fitness-based physical-education program with very little equipment," he said.

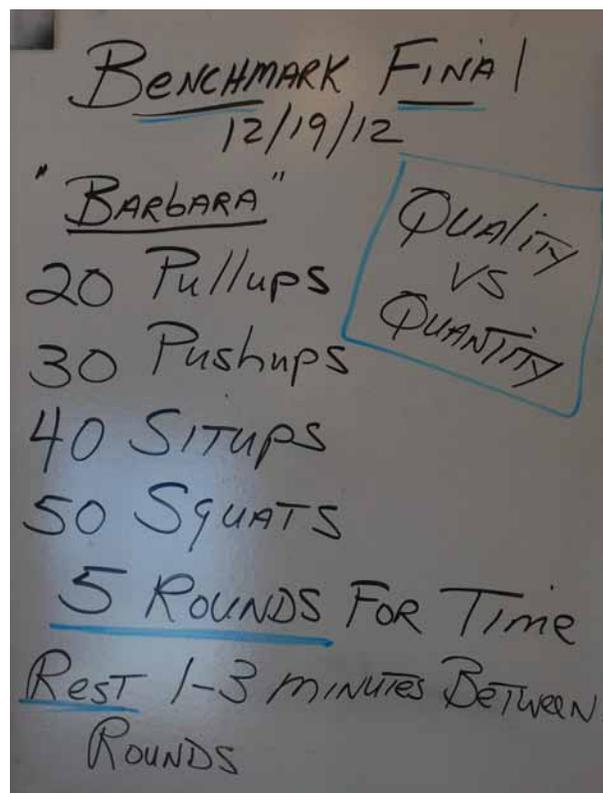
My Buddy Burg

The MVHS program probably wouldn't exist without Abruzzo. In 2007, he started using CrossFit programming in general physical-education classes for middle-school students at the Vista Academy for the Visual and Performing Arts for grades 6 through 8. He began by teaching an elective class that started as a weight-training and fitness class and evolved into CrossFit.

The more he learned by watching his son Matt, now 14, train at Brand X, the more Abruzzo integrated what he learned into his elective class. From there, he expanded the application of new concepts and techniques to all his middle-school classes. He transferred to MVHS last year.

"A good friend who is well known in the CrossFit community, Mike Burgener, exposed me to CrossFit," Abruzzo said. "We taught at Vista High School together in the early '80s, and Mike has been a friend and mentor to me for 30 years. It was Mike who encouraged me to pursue strength training, and because of his encouragement over the years I looked into all aspects of training."

He continued: "In 2005 and 2006, Mike kept telling me to check out Brand X in Ramona, where I lived at the time. My son was playing little league with Jeff and Mikki Martin's son Duncan, and that led to conversations with the Martins, which led me to take my son to a (CrossFit) Kids class. From there, my involvement grew."



Your exam: Barbara.



What if CrossFit was taught in your child's school?

"I started doing the workouts myself, modifying them due to a neck fusion and the need for a knee replacement. Six years later, I'm still doing air and dumbbell squats on that knee and enjoying my old-man workouts."

Abruzzo has lost 25 lb. and said that both exercise and nutritional changes were the key. For Abruzzo, however, watching his son's progress has been the real privilege.

"He's extremely strong for his age," Abruzzo said. "As he blossoms, his training becomes more evident in his success at basketball and baseball."

Spreading the Seeds

Even while training 500 young athletes daily, Abruzzo and his team are not content to rest. In January 2013, MVHS will host a professional-development day for all the secondary-school teachers in the district. The day will be dedicated specifically to introducing CrossFit to roughly 35 P.E. educators. Alison Patenaude of CrossFit Kids is scheduled to present.

"Even though we will only have four to five hours with them," Abruzzo said, "it's a step in the right direction. It will show educators how to integrate CrossFit principles into their P.E. classes and show them where to go to learn more about it."

He added: "It is my hope that someday there will be a CrossFit certification for educators. The public-school classroom is a very different environment than a box. Accessing the school environment will address a significant need on the part of students," he said.

Abruzzo also believes the interest on the part of schools and teachers is very real.

"Schools in my district are looking for grants to send their teachers to certs," he said.



About the Author

E.M. Burton is a CrossFit Journal staff writer.