

He's 51—and Getting Younger

For one lifelong athlete, middle age meant accepting aches and pains and relentless deterioration. Then he discovered CrossFit.

Paul Manfre



Getting old sucks. I'm only 51, not ancient by any means, but I can see the future, and it ain't pretty. I'm fatter than I used to be, less buffed than I used to be, even shorter than I used to be—all this, despite an active lifestyle that gives me the appearance of someone years younger than my peers. For years I've gone to the gym. I've been a runner forever; a while ago, I began doing triathlons. But things start happening that are out of your control. I went from running 10 miles a day, to running 200 yards and feeling like I couldn't run anymore. At 30, I could run 10 miles without having run in months, but not now—my knee, my ankle, my this, my that, would hurt.

By 50, you start to accumulate aches and pains that won't go away. Getting out of bed every morning, I'd wince. I could not clasp my hand behind my neck. Fifty is a deceiving age; you can feel great for months, then slip getting out of your car, and your back goes out for three weeks. It's happened to me 3 or 4 times a year. At any moment, something could happen. At 50, for no apparent reason, you might wake up with a different ache and pain every day; your knee creaks, your wrist hurts, your shoulder hurts. I'd literally limp out of bed every morning. Sometimes, I'd even use it as an excuse not to work out. Aging is a bitch.

Aging is not fair, but no use crying—we all have to deal with it. If you have the brains to be a rocket scientist, at some point you begin forgetting things. If you have the physical ability to be a professional athlete, at some point you start to notice your reflexes are slower, your



acceleration less instant. Over time we all degrade in our ability to do what we used to do so well. That is life. You're not, as they say, getting any younger.

That doesn't mean I accept it. I can't afford to. I'm a produce broker in New York City. At 2 a.m. or 4 a.m. or 5 p.m., I answer the phone—and I'm doing business all over the world. In Nogales, Arizona, people are loading watermelons, honeydews, squash, and red peppers from Mexico and California. In Florida, they're loading parsley, Dominican eggplant, and organic items that I send to different terminal markets all over the country. Different time zones, loading times, receiving times. I wake up instantly and pick up the phone. I'm always available to customers and suppliers. That's why I have to do my workout. If I don't, I won't have the energy to do my work.

I doubt many people could do—or would want to do—my schedule. My day usually starts at 1 a.m. and I am still answering phone calls in bed at 10 p.m. I usually only sleep four to five hours a night. Many days I have to pull over on the New Jersey Turnpike and take a 15-minute nap so I can make the 55-mile drive home from NYC to suburban New Jersey. But I love what I do. I eat it up. Work for me is fun. I want to do it forever.

There is only one other thing that I think I'd like as much: opening three or four CrossFit gyms—so I can work out there and spread the word.

I was dealing with the gradual pain and deterioration of aging. I accepted it. Then I hobbled into a CrossFit box last spring. Since I've been doing CrossFit my back hasn't gone out in 7 or 8 months.

I've been a runner, a biker, on the Atkins diet. CrossFit works better.

Manfre's Dirty Dozen Rules To Live By for 50+ CrossFitters

1. Don't give yourself a handicap for your age (or lobby for age groups at the CrossFit Games). Life is not fair. Not everyone wins all of the time. Get used to it!

2. Don't worry about doing the prescribed workout. At the opening day of CrossFit Firebase in Orlando, Florida, I RX'ed Fran for the first and only time. That's because my shoulders are so bad. But no matter. If I can't do 135 pounds, I do 95 pounds, maybe even 45 pounds—and I still get a great workout.

3. Work out with younger people and get your ego crushed. Working out with younger people and watching them destroy you is highly motivating. I did a workout of double-unders and burpees with two young women. They were half my age, half my size, and did the workout in half my time.

You need to know the score. It keeps you very motivated every time you start believing that you are the king of the world.

4. You are the competition. Try to beat your last endeavor. Don't judge yourself against the elite of our sport; judge yourself on the basis of how you did last time compared to this time. Better yet, how do you feel now as opposed to last month or last year? That's why it's good to keep a log of your workouts, so you can jot your times and feelings down. I know I have not felt as good as I do now for many years.

5. Don't make excuses. Just do something—and don't ever quit. Don't use aches and pains as reasons not to work out. Don't use lack of equipment not to work out. Do air squats. Handstand push-ups. You can do bodyweight exercises until you drop.

And whatever workout you do—lighter weights, your own creation, whatever—finish it. Yes, CrossFit is VERY demanding and quitting a WOD early is a temptation almost every day. But don't do it. QUITTING IS FOR LOSERS!

6. Get your kids involved. I have one grown daughter, a son in college, and a seven-year-old girl. My 19-year-old son Chris is on the ASU cycling team. Last summer, after doing CrossFit and CrossFit Endurance for a while, I beat him on three 2-mile sprints. At first he acted like he hadn't felt well. I said, "You can say anything you want, but I beat you." Soon after that he started CrossFitting, lost 10-12 pounds, got a lot faster on the bike, and I can't beat him at anything anymore.

From 5-foot-10, 175 at 20 to 5-foot-9, 180 at 51

First, a little history: about 25 years ago, I was in the Army's Special Forces. We did extensive training. That, without question, was the best shape I have ever been in my life. I was 5-foot-10, 175, big and ripped. Looking back, we did CrossFit, Army-style, back then. We ran, did push-ups, pull-ups, sit-ups, burpees, mountain climbing, all at a high rate of speed. If we did it slow, we did more. When I came out of SF training, I felt that there was nothing I couldn't do, physically and mentally—a belief I hold until this day.

When I was in my 20s, I became an avid runner. In 1977-78, while in school for computer programming, I picked up "The Complete Book of Running" and a pair of Nike Waffle Trainers. I'd run up and down a hill at school during lunch hours. For Christmas, I'd go out and run 1.2 miles in slushy snow in 12-13 minutes. By March, I was running 18 miles a day. I'd run 10 miles in the morning, 8 miles at night, every day. I could run 8 miles in 40 minutes. I could run a mile in five minutes. I am not a naturally fast person. But all the miles and that hill training gave me the five-minute mile. I'd take one day a week off, and do a 20-24 mile run the other day. I'd give my girlfriend the car and run home, like Forrest Gump.

So I was super-athletic. But by 38, I was 5-foot-10, 220 pounds.

In your 40's—kids, family, work—you don't realize it, but you're heading south. The de-conditioning, the strange unexplainable aches and pains, are starting to creep in. To fight it, to keep up my self-image, I hit the weights. I had previously worked out with weights for many years. When I was 45, I bench pressed 405 for two reps, but the day afterwards I could not move my wrists, a condition that lasted for several months. The next five years, every time I came close to a 300-pound bench press I hurt something. That is when I decided to try another endeavor, triathlon.

Earlier this year, while training for a race, I read an article about CrossFit being an excellent off-season workout for triathletes.

At 51 years old, with 195 pounds that I think is muscle, and in what I think is great shape except for a bad lower back and terrible shoulders, I walk into this CrossFit box. I'm this former warrior, with a never-quit attitude, ready to show this CrossFit trainer what I got. And I quickly find out that I GOT NOTHING!

A lot of our conversations are about CrossFit. He's become a student of it already. He's an avid reader, a literature major. When I need something explained, I ask him. He has become my coach. I just brought him a scale to weigh his food for the Zone.

I am waiting for an affiliate to open up near my oldest daughter's home so I can get her and her boyfriend involved, too.

7. Do "Tabata Racing." My youngest daughter and I race—that's right, my little girl and I do a Tabata together, she on her bike and me running. We race to the corner. It takes 20 seconds. Then we rest for ten seconds and do it again for a total of eight times. She does not know she is working out; she is just having fun with her Dad.

8. Go to a Cert. You'll go from not doing exercises correctly to perfect technique. I added 15-20 pounds to my deadlift overnight

9. Work-out with other CrossFitters. Being around CrossFit workouts will take seconds off your workout and pounds off your weight. There is no better motivational force anywhere!

10. Go to a CrossFit gym. At a CrossFit gym, you can work out your way without hassle. One example: you can drop the weights. That alone lets your scores get better. At regular gyms, people come up and say, "You're dangerous." My CrossFit gym is 35 minutes from my house. I only get there once or twice a week. But it's worth it. At a CrossFit gym, the weights feel lighter, your speed is faster, and your times are better.

11. Work out and eat right as often as possible. The days that I don't do my workouts are the days I feel the most tired. I have done workouts with broken fingers and I swear my hand felt better when I was done. I have done them when my back hurts and my shoulders always hurt, but I always do something. Even though you can make significant gains in health and appearance on less than the 3-on-1-off format, that's the best, the optimum. Without being a crazed diet fiend, staying away from processed food and making good food decisions will make your health and appearance skyrocket.

12. Finally, be real. If you are in your mid- to late-40s and above and you wake up and something does not hurt you, you are probably dead. Or not trying hard enough.

I can't go down more than halfway on the air squat. I can't do more than three pull-ups. Thank God I can still do push-ups.

Being crushed, I think, could cause many people to be embarrassed or intimidated or, worse, quit. But I sucked it up. I substituted scaled Workouts of the Day (WODs) for those I knew I could not do or would be terrible doing. I became a student again. For the next several weeks, as we went through foundations, I learned to do the movements more correctly.

And when I do, an amazing thing happens: I notice that I don't limp any more when I get out of bed. My shoulder still hurts all the time but I have a much improved range of motion. I can actually get my arms above my head, something that a short time ago was impossible. I'm doing the WOD scaled, but I suddenly do one as RX'd, and I get better and better.

Am I ready for the CrossFit games? NOT. You check your scores on the main site and you find that all the top males in this sport *crushed* your scores. And the real ego crusher is that *all the women* did, too.

I told you life was not fair.

But, hell, you start to realize that YOU are the competition—not the elite people you read about. You try to beat your last endeavor. Better yet, you ask yourself, "How do I feel now as opposed to last month or last year?"

I know personally I had not felt as good as I do now for many years.

Back in Special Forces in the late 70s, I was 175 pounds of iron. I thought bullets would bounce off me. Well, my body's not much different now. I thought I was in great shape four or five months ago at 195. Now, after doing CrossFit 4-5 times a week (usually not the prescribed workout), with a modified Zone diet (I cheat, but I eat better than most people—fresh foods, nothing processed), the love handles are a lot smaller. I feel great—leaner, faster, stronger than I've been in 25 years, and I do it in much less time than I used to spend in a gym.

I'm 180. Five pounds over my Special Forces weight—although I am only 5'9" now. (You older guys know what I am talking about; we shrink with age.)

I have tried many programs over the years. I consider myself a common-sense type of person. I don't get caught up in all the fads. I will try something if it makes sense, and if it works for me I insert it into my life.

Six years ago we moved into our new home. Back then, I was bench pressing around 400 pounds. In the last few months we moved again. I can tell you that objects I could not move six years ago are easily moved now, and I am obviously older. What is even more astounding now is that maybe I can now bench only 225. I have functional strength, not BS strength.

I hadn't been to Nogales, Arizona since last February. When I just went this month, they said to me, "Wow, you look younger. What the hell are you doing?"

And I thought to myself that it was more than that. I don't just look younger. I'm actually getting younger.



About The Author

Paul Manfre CrossFits at Guerrilla Fitness in Montclair, NJ. "I've always been an athlete, and always will be," he says. "I'm living past 100—and it's not going to be in a wheelchair. I don't just want to live; I want to live well! Take the E out of Ego and you know what you get? 3... 2... 1... GO."

