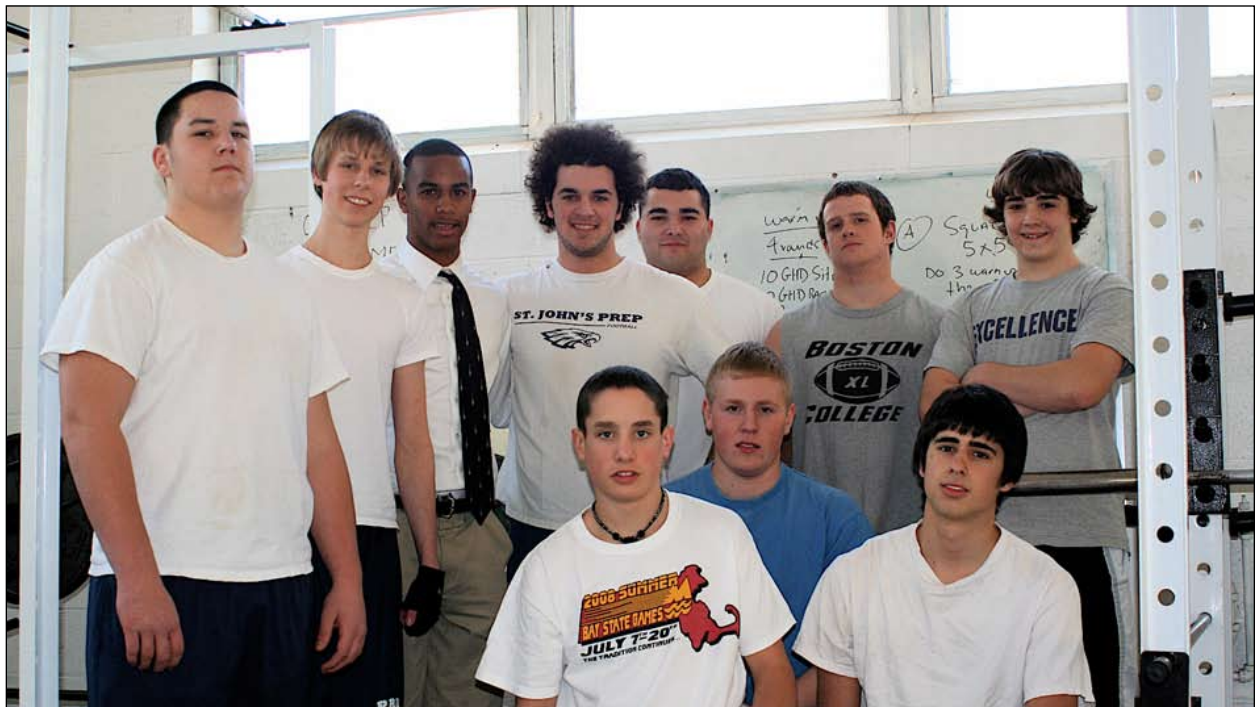


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Getting an "A" in CrossFit

A Massachusetts high school is set to offer the first class to teach constantly-varied, high-intensity functional movements

Vince Miserandino, M.Ed.



As a Physical Education teacher and strength coach for the last 10 years, I've long had a vision of what I believed a high-school physical education program should be. I've found it in CrossFit, which has had an immediate positive impact on athlete performance here at the St. John's Preparatory School, an all-male, Xavieran Brothers-sponsored Catholic academy of 1,300 students in Danvers, Massachusetts. Next fall, we will take it a step further, becoming what I think will be the first high school in the world to officially offer CrossFit 101 as a for-credit elective.

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JOURNAL ARTICLES

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It all began in September of 2007. Like many, I stumbled upon CrossFit from the movie, “300,” in which a vastly outnumbered handful of strikingly muscular Spartan soldiers repelled the Persian Empire’s invasion of their Greek homeland. Having heard that the actors and stuntmen who played the ripped Spartans got themselves into shape by flipping tires and swinging kettlebells, I found the main CrossFit site and did a few self-coached WODs. I then downloaded almost every free CrossFit journal article from the site, and spent hours soaking in all this new information. I have a three-ring binder that is two inches thick with all the journals on my work desk that I still reference.

As a triathlete, I knew instantly that CrossFit’s constantly-varied, high-intensity functional movements were going to make me faster and stronger. In past races, I never had problems with my cardiovascular system; my issue was with my muscular system. Bottom line: I was weak—but wouldn’t be for much longer. And as the Chairman of St. John’s P.E. Department and the main instructor in our special after-school, intramural strength-training unit, I knew I had to share CrossFit with my students and athletes.

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For years, every afternoon from 3 to 5 p.m., I’d been teaching my student strength-trainers some basic body-building exercises: bench presses, squats, and a few exercises for biceps and triceps, pull-downs, etc. I even bought some exercise balls (don’t laugh, you probably have one, too). We’d been using the Salt Lake City-based “Bigger Stronger Faster” program of basic power and strength exercises, which included the Olympic lifts and others. This was great for gaining mass and power, but I felt it did not develop enough balance and agility. I’d been looking for a more effective program to implement into the curriculum for a long time, but I couldn’t find

one that I felt confident using with everyone I taught and coached until I ran into CrossFit. The scalability of every aspect of it was key, because the same workout could work for everyone, from my Division 1 football prospects to a 14-year-old freshman with no strength-training experience.

I found a local affiliate, North Shore CrossFit, and took their three-day elements class to see if this was the way to go or not. Trainer Greg Damigella worked with me and a police officer friend of mine, teaching us the fundamental exercises that we were going to need to start CrossFitting. This training reinforced my thirst for more knowledge.

Impressed by some positive feedback from athletes, St. John’s paid my way to fly out to a Level I certification in Camp Pendleton, California in January ‘08. I sat in the auditorium surrounded by CrossFit HQ elites, including the main presenter, Coach Greg Glassman, and instructors Adrian Bozman, Nicole Carroll, Mike Collins, Jimi Letchford, Andy Stumpf, Greg Amundson, and others. I was fortunate to be in the company of Lt. Col. Dan Wilson and his dedicated Marines. I even witnessed Brian Chontosh and a Navy SEAL duke it out with Helen; Tosh won. During one of the breaks, I introduced myself to Coach Glassman and Nicole and told them I was interested in making St. John’s Prep an affiliate. They both responded, “Yes.” They told me whatever I needed, just ask. (Several months later, they waived the \$1000 affiliation fee, making affiliation a slam-dunk.) With my Level I Cert, I returned to Boston “wicked psyched” to make St. John’s Prep CrossFit a reality.

Plywood weights, no more Nautilus, and immediate impact

SJP CrossFit became an official CrossFit Club Affiliate on April 9, 2008. Any given day, from 15 to 40 athletes show up after school at the weight room, including individuals and the sport teams that use the facility during their seasons. CrossFit is voluntary; most do it. I post the WOD and teach the kids the exercises as needed, constantly correcting improper form and giving feedback to reinforce both intensity and perfect technique. I train athletes in almost every sport the Prep offers: fencing, rugby, wrestling, football, basketball, skiing, and so on.

In less than a year, CrossFit has brought several success stories to SJP. The team that CrossFits the most is the track team. I’ve trained a bunch of athletes in the

off-season and they are running and jumping much better with no injury. The rugby team works out at North Shore CrossFit in nearby Topsfield, Massachusetts. The Football team now has a "functional/dynamic" warm up. No more static stretching. Other teams look at them funny during their warm up.

Coaches come up to me from all sports commenting that the guys who have been CrossFitting are in great shape and ask what I did. Parents thank me for working with their sons; I point out that it's their son's commitment and hard work that got him in shape. I have alumni that come back to the Prep on their college break and workout with the boys. I get emails from alumni telling me that they follow the WOD on the [SJP CrossFit blog](#).

I'm looking forward to seeing two wrestlers, the Harding brothers, have a record-setting season. The older brother, Ryan, has a shot at becoming the New England champion in his weight class. Younger brother, Doug, is coming off an injury but has high hopes for a great season. SJP Rugby won the New England Championship last year. We had a two football players do "Football Fran," which can be seen on the SJP CrossFit blogspot and on YouTube.

Starting last March, the Prep made a real, material commitment to CrossFit by refitting the gym. Putting my head together with Athletic Director and Head Football Coach, Jim O'Leary, we got rid of all the old Nautilus machines that were taking up so much weight-room space and ordered five new squat racks, which include built-in pull-up bars. Now we are able to accommodate more students and teach them the "functional lifts" in a much safer space. We still don't have any kettlebells, using dumbbells instead. Over the summer, I made training plates out of plywood so the younger, less experienced students can learn and practice their lifts. Using the directions from the CrossFit Journal, I also had our maintenance staff build eight plyometric boxes for the students. I even made a set of homemade rings. In June and July, I taught a five-week CrossFit fitness boot camp that was very successful in the school's summer institute.

On a personal note, CrossFit has also been very successful for me. In April, I attended Brian Mackenzie's Run/Endurance Certification at North Shore CrossFit, not only giving me a better understanding how to incorporate CF in the school's track and field program, but contributing to my best year of triathlon racing ever.



This past season, I had three sprint-distance 1st place wins and two 2nd places in the 35-to-39 age group. I was voted CrossFit Endurance's "Triathlete of the Year."

Next Fall: CrossFit 101

In September, I attended Mark Rippetoe's Basic Barbell Certification at CrossFit Boston. I now stress to my students the importance of the basic barbell exercises for strength and power. In November, I went to CrossFit South Brooklyn to attend Robb Wolf's Nutrition Certification. I've adopted the Paleo/Zone approach in my own training. Now the challenge is to get teenage boys to give it a try. This won't be easy.

All of this knowledge has made me a better athlete, teacher, and coach. I plan on attending a Level II certification in the future to further enhance my teaching and training skills.

I recently submitted a new course proposal from the Physical Education Department to the administration for the 2009-2010 school years. I sat down with principal Ed Hardiman and told him that I thought it was time that SJP gave students a chance to take an advanced Physical Education elective during the school year and get accelerated credit for it. He agreed, and CrossFit 101 will be offered as an elective next fall.

Won't it be exciting when a college admissions counselor asks one of our students, "So, can you tell me more about this CrossFit elective on your transcript?" Imagine the look on his face when the boy responds, "Sure, CrossFit is a functional strength training program that is constantly varied, performed at high intensity."

CrossFit 101 is an opportunity for students to better improve their mental, physical, and spiritual well being through kinesthetic movement along with relative academic literature.

In CrossFit 101, students will be required to keep a portfolio in which they will record their progress and times throughout the entire semester. The students will start the semester with a few personal goals in mind: weight loss, athletic improvement, strength, etc., and will use relevant literature and a CrossFit training regimen to attain their goals. Students will be encouraged to buy a subscription to the CrossFit Journal. The Journal will be their bible for the semester. The students will be required to hand in their portfolios for review along with a detailed report of the progress they made

during the semester. The training techniques and the knowledge the students will learn in this course can and will be taken with them for the rest of their lives so that they can choose to live a healthy and productive life.

I believe that CrossFit can be the future of Physical Education curricula and that every high school should have it as their strength and conditioning program. After all, it's all about improving the quality of life of our teens. Can St. John's Prep be the seed that helps to grow affiliate clubs in high schools all around the country and even the world? That's my dream.



About the Author

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Check out St. John's CrossFit at www.sjp-CrossFit.blogspot.com

