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Motherhood and CrossFit

Megan Mitchell and Allison Scahill interview an all-star list of CrossFitters who also happen to be mothers.

By Megan Mitchell and Allison Scahill

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Courtesy of Tanya Wegner

The duties of motherhood are enough to keep a woman busy every minute of the day. Add an elite CrossFit training regimen to the schedule and many wonder, "How do they do it?"

1 of 5

A Balancing Act

The demands of CrossFit and parenthood combined are overwhelming to think about, but a busy timetable is just a part of life for many of CrossFit's elite athletes, competitors and diehards.

"I schedule time to work out five-to-six days a week," said Carey Kepler from CrossFit Central in Austin, Texas. "If it was not on my schedule, it would for sure get pushed off and not (be) kept as a priority."

Kepler, who has two children under the age of 5, said working out and staying active help with parenting.

"I gain energy from working out. I gain joy from working out," she said. "I know that having a baby takes work. Nine months, labor, raising children—they are all WODs in a way."

Lindsey Smith, also from CrossFit Central, named prioritization and time management as essential for juggling a training schedule with motherhood.

"I am a mother before an athlete, and at times that requires me to put my desire to train aside to care for my daughter," she explained. "However, CrossFit is as much a part of my day as food and rest. My day is not complete without taking time to fulfill my training needs."

“Before I had my 4-month-old, the best way to get my WODs done consistently was to do them in the morning—6:30 a.m.—before the kids woke up.”

—Charity Vale

Libby DiBiase, from CrossFit Omaha in Omaha, Neb., said the sleep deprivation after having her baby affected her training the most.

"After the baby came, I got hardly any sleep. I remember my first day back, working on about three hours of sleep, and I just felt sick," she said. "It was hard to imagine if I could ever get back to the way I was because I was so tired."



Courtesy of Charity Vale

Charity Vale has four children, owns a gym, homeschools her children ... and placed second in the 2009 CrossFit Games.

Charity Vale of CrossFit Snohomish in Snohomish, Wash., said the demands of training, having four children and owning a gym with her husband, Jeff, are difficult. Her children range in age from 4 months to 10-and-a-half-years-old, but being a mother didn't stop her from taking second place in the 2009 CrossFit Games.

"We also homeschool," she said. "It's been very difficult to focus on the WODs. Before I had my 4-month-old, the best way to get my WODs done consistently was to do them in the morning—6:30 a.m.—before the kids woke up. That way I knew nothing was going to get in the way of doing it. Now that I have an infant, it's been a lot more difficult. I'm usually trying to squeeze them in somewhere while he naps."

No More Burpees?

Recovery, mobility, injury and performance are all common thoughts for any CrossFitter, but a woman who's pregnant has to think about all that for two. For some, this meant a complete change in the structure behind a workout. For others, very little changed.

"I followed the main-site WODs pretty religiously," Vale said. "I scaled very little. Burpees, box jumps, GHD sit-ups, etc. looked different, but for the most part, I didn't really scale movements, reps or weights."

Vale saw a midwife to seek advice regarding how she should train.

"She said if I was doing it before, I could probably keep doing it. She just recommended I listen to my body more," she said. Vale said the differences between what her body was telling her and what her mind was telling her conflicted her the most.

Jolie Gentry, from CrossFit Oakland in Oakland, Calif., said her doctor told her not to lift more than 25 lb.

"I literally started to laugh," said the woman who won the first CrossFit Games back in 2007. "I had a second visit with a nurse practitioner who said that was dated info and the new standard is not more than 50 lb."

Gentry said she was not discouraged by that advice. She continued with her training as usual. At 21 weeks, she back-squatted up to 200 lb. At almost eight months, Gentry said she performed Grace as prescribed, and she snatched almost every week until the eighth month.

"The best advice I received was from a couple of ladies from CrossFit Central: just listen to your body because nobody knows it better and you will know when to stop if something does not feel right," Gentry said.

She noted the only thing she was very careful with was squatting.

"I didn't feel comfortable holding my breath and squeezing my stomach too hard," she said. "And running just felt awkward. I did it, but usually while holding my belly like a human sports bra."

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—Jolie Gentry

DiBiase said her training stayed pretty much the same for the first half of her pregnancy: "I trained the same way I train on a consistent basis for about four months. Then,

after I was about six months, we slowly removed the exercises that could harm the baby and slowly reduced the intensity in weight and volume."

According to the CrossFit Games veteran, scaling back on workouts was more challenging mentally even when she knew it was good for the baby.



Courtesy of Tanya Wagner

Most CrossFit moms agree that it's important to listen to your body both when pregnant and after the baby is born.

"I felt like I was defeated because I had to use lighter weights or go slower," she said. "But I got over it, because I knew it wasn't safe for the baby."

In contrast, Tanya Wagner, from CrossFit Apex in Telford, Penn., said her workouts changed dramatically from the beginning of her pregnancy.

"I (had) a whole new pace," said 2009's fittest woman on Earth. "It was a learning process as far as how hard I could push WODs, and I learned not to go out too hard for so long. I would start a WOD like I used to and then suddenly get hit with the reminder that I don't have as much oxygen as I used to."

Wagner said the difference in lung capacity affected her the most.

"If anyone is curious how it feels, here you go: work out with a bag over your head for nine months with just a pinhole of air to breath through. That's what it feels like," she said. "Then, for the last four months, strap on a weight vest all day and dissect your abs straight down the middle about three inches wide, and have at it."

Kepler was four months pregnant with her first child when she received her Level 1 Certificate.

"I was not sure how to totally do the transition as I had just been introduced to this new training," she said. Kepler kept her training regimen to her old lifting styles, as well as running.

"I recall running wind sprints up and down a football field the day before going into labor."

—Lindsey Smith

Smith said scaling weights and limiting exercises were mainly isolated to workouts that could increase separation in her abdominal wall. But the rest stayed pretty much the same.

"In fact, I recall running wind sprints up and down a football field the day before going into labor," she said.



Web Smith

Perennial CrossFit Games competitor Lindsey Smith and her daughter, Alexis—future CrossFit star?

Many said that being a CrossFitter helped throughout pregnancy.

"I wish all expectant mothers could experience the same benefits (CrossFitting) has physically and mentally on your body," DiBiase said. "I really think it helped me in labor. It made it super fast. It was just like a workout."

Kepler credits CrossFit and maintaining a healthy lifestyle for her "perfect" pregnancy.

"My first baby, Savannah, now 4-and-a-half, was about as perfect as perfect could be," she said. "I was not sick at all. I gained 30 lb., stayed very active and had her at home with my midwife."

She said it was important for her to not let the pregnancy stop her from doing what she loves: CrossFitting.

Time for Mommy to Work Out

After pregnancy, many athletes were looking forward to getting back in the gym right away. However, when that actually happened varied from woman to woman.

"I started about three weeks after giving birth," Vale said. "I got very antsy about two weeks postpartum."

Wagner said she started planning her post-pregnancy workouts even before she'd had her baby. And DiBiase waited only 10 days to get back into her routine.

"As a mother, I think I take my job as a role model very seriously, and I look forward to the day we can work out together."

—Lindsey Smith

"I couldn't take not doing anything for six weeks," she explained. "I knew I needed to get my strength back, too. Regionals were about seven weeks away. I gradually started lifting heavier and getting met-cons in. It was very, very hard to deal with, especially mentally."

Smith said her doctor was very understanding about working out.

"Fortunately, my doctor was pretty generous in allowing me to return to working out," she said. "He thoroughly explained my body's need to heal, and I really took that to heart, but he also encouraged me to enjoy a healthy and active lifestyle."

Smith, who's finished as high as fifth in the CrossFit Games and was 16th in 2011, started about two weeks after having her daughter with walking, jogging and some light-weight work.

"I remember trying to push too hard at first and felt my body resisting. I decided to listen to my body as best I could, and I think I really benefitted from that in the long run," she said.

Kepler said CrossFitting is too important in her life to allow anything to get in the way of it—even children, which are an obvious priority.

"My husband and I both agree that we will not let our children stop us from living our lives, so we make sure that we do what we love and include them in every bit of it."

Smith said it's important for her to stay true to herself and recommends that for other CrossFitting moms.

"Take challenges, risk embarrassment, do what is right, make a difference, prove someone wrong, love others first, set goals, dream, and constantly evaluate your priorities, not by what you want them to be, but by what reality is proving them to be."

Kepler said her perspective changed after having children.

"I have always liked competition, but after having a child, I think you really realize everything else that you do in your life holds a different type of responsibility," she said. "It is more about if you are having fun doing it, keep doing it. If it sucks, get out of it no matter what."

Smith said she hopes to share her passion for CrossFit with her daughter.

"As a mother, I think I take my job as a role model very seriously, and I look forward to the day we can work out together," she said. "I look at CrossFit competitor and HQ coach Heather Bergeron working out with her daughter, Maya, and think to myself, 'Wow, I want that for Alexis and me.'"



Pregnancies vary greatly between women. Women should check with their doctor, ob-gyn or other specialist regarding the health of their fetus and their family history to ensure they're well informed about what they can and cannot do safely during pregnancy.

About the Authors

Megan Mitchell is a staff writer for CrossFit Media and the CrossFit Games website. At the urging of her high-school English teacher, Megan started CrossFitting at the original box in 2005. There, she witnessed Annie Sakamoto's training throughout the nine months of her pregnancy with her first child, Dylan. After studying biology at Carleton College in Northfield, Minn., Megan has returned to her hometown of Santa Cruz, Calif., and trains at CrossFit Santa Cruz.



Courtesy of Megan Mitchell

Allison Scahill is a writer and copy editor for CrossFit Media. She earned a journalism degree in 2006 at Baker University and a master's degree in administration in 2009 from Bowling Green State University. She began CrossFitting in January 2010 in Houston, Texas. In April 2011, she had the opportunity to combine her love of writing and CrossFit to work for HQ. She resides in Santa Cruz, Calif., and trains at CrossFit Santa Cruz.



Courtesy of Allison Scahill