
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Fitness Is ... Character and Failure

Greg Glassman asked the question, "What is fitness?" Blair Morrison offers some of his own thoughts to help you discover what fitness means to you.

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Courtesy of Blair Morrison

What is fitness?

The question is one of the foundations of the CrossFit program, and asking it will make you reconsider just about everything you know about training. In answering the question, Greg Glassman created a new way of training and a new way of thinking about health and human performance. He also got people thinking and answering the question for themselves.

In this series, two-time CrossFit Games competitor Blair Morrison talks about what fitness is to him.

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Defining Character

Character.

I am overwhelmed by the indiscernability of this idea. It's something I universally respect when I encounter it in a training partner, but I can never quite determine its exact content. It seems to be independent of personality, status or origin. The people I've met and been impressed by in the last year alone cover so broad a spectrum of personality types and nationalities that I can't even begin to categorize them. Character also seems independent of the task at hand: I've walked away from a low-intensity stretch session with more respect for the guy next to me than after workouts that put us on the floor in total pain.

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I may not be able to get my head all the way around it, but I know three things about character for certain:

I know it when I see it.

I'm motivated by the individuals who have it.

CrossFit builds it.

I sat down the other day and tried to make a list of traits (as they pertain to fitness) that might be the basis of character, and I swear I couldn't find one that stood alone. It's not effort. Effort manifests itself in all kinds of spastic, ill-conceived ways that I 100 percent do not respect. It's not results. There are plenty of "goal getters" who are relatively low-quality individuals. Sure, I may have been able to narrow down a couple of qualities that were more essential than others (confidence, toughness, honesty, humility, purpose, etc.), but the relevant fact remained that none could explain it alone. Character is truly a trait nearly impossible to pin down.

Perhaps this is because character is a non-static value. Think of character like a multi-trait fluid that, like blood in the body, goes where it's needed and adjusts its shape accordingly. For example, whether a guy talks a lot during a training session says very little about his character—maybe he's good enough to date my sister or maybe he's ready to steal my wallet. But choosing to speak at the right time—when it serves to motivate someone else or to deflect attention away from himself—this quality speaks volumes.



Courtesy of Blair Morrison

The way a person deals with the difficulty of a CrossFit workout says a lot about his or her character.

The same can be said for toughness. Most times it means gritting your teeth and training through pain. But other times it means swallowing your pride and taking time off to lick your wounds. Mastering this flexibility takes a lot more than a single trait.

Having character is the ability to get this fluid equation right in every situation, even when it's not necessarily personally advantageous.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Annie Thorisdottir's determination and character make her a top CrossFitter.

At the European Regional I watched Annie Thorisdottir absolutely embarrass the pull-up bar during the third WOD, butterfly chest-to-bars like they were nothing. At one point she missed a rep and the judge didn't see

it, giving her credit for a repetition she did not complete. Now, only a few points separated the first four positions in an event where only three people would qualify for the CrossFit Games. If there was ever a moment when getting through a workout fast meant everything, this was it. Further, it was obvious Thorisdottir was capable of doing the work. She just came up half a centimeter short one time. Annie told the judge that she had missed, got back on the bar and did another one. Obviously.

Seeing this type of thing in an event of such magnitude had an interesting effect. First, it made me respect her tremendously. It wasn't even that she did the extra rep that impressed me; it was the fact that not re-doing it literally never crossed her mind. That she didn't hesitate says a lot about what Annie's made of.

Second, it motivated me to perform on a level worthy of the standard she had set. This is the more important point. The presence of one person in the room who never misses a repetition imposes an implicit expectation on everyone else to do the same. If an athlete finishes first and stays to support those finishing last, everyone in between will also feel responsible to do so. In this sense, character has gravity. It becomes much more than a quality subsumed in a single individual and begins to snowball into something far greater.

CrossFit is an avalanche. It takes a lot of mettle to throw your hat in the ring and risk failure in front of your peers, but the example of one or two willing to lay it on the line eases that burden considerably. Those are the people I respect most. They don't apologize for wanting to be the best, and they expect the same from everyone else. No shame. No excuses. In competition, they're grounded enough to take credit when they win and honest enough to give it when they get beat.

This kind of perspective in the fitness community inspires people to be better than they otherwise would be. They begin to expect from themselves the same level of confidence, toughness, honesty, humility and purpose they see in the leaders around them.

If there's one reason I was excited about going back to the CrossFit Games this past July, it was to be surrounded and inspired by a stadium full of these types of people.

Fail Your Way to Success

Failure.

Get comfortable with it. If you're not failing, you're not getting better. And if you're not getting better, you're getting worse.

The basis of this idea is sometimes referred to as the SAID principle: specific adaptation to imposed demand. It means your body will only adapt to the exact demands you place upon it, and it will only do so until it can meet those demands comfortably. As soon as the work can be done with ease, your body will stop adapting. Therefore, the only way to keep improving is to continue to fail.

**The bottom line
is that fitness
requires failure.**

This idea represents two important things to me.

First, intensity is everything. Why? Because that's where the results are, plain and simple. A properly balanced program will vary its workouts in terms of style, movement pattern and volume—but not in intensity. Whether the focus is strength, endurance or metabolic conditioning, whether you're working deadlifts, yoga or distance running, the intensity has to be consistent.

This is not to say every workout must put you on the floor. Intensity isn't necessarily about exhaustion. It's about focus, will and the commitment to a full effort, regardless of the challenge. For example, my grandmother is training to lose weight through a combination of cardiovascular training, group strength classes and Pilates. Needless to say, her ideal post-workout position is not sprawled on the floor next to a trashcan. Her approach to fitness should, however, mirror that level of physical intensity in her concentration and dedication to completing her routine with maximum effort. This attitude will force her to test her limits on hikes, with weights and on the Pilates mat, ultimately pushing her to the point of failure in many respects. This is a good thing.

The same can be said for more extreme athletes like Crossfitters, just in a more obvious way. WODs are designed to test limits in a wide range of physical and mental capacities. So test them! The people who get the most out of workouts are not the ones who complete them easily or those who zone out halfway through in an effort to "just get through it." If you ever find this to be the case during a workout, you're missing the point.



Failing will teach a good athlete a great many lessons.

One inarguable beauty of exercise is that, regardless of ability, every workout can be met with the same level of effort and focus and thus can produce the same physical and mental adaptations. The biggest beneficiaries are the people who maintain their intensity and fail over and over and over during the course of a workout, and then get up to fail some more.



Courtesy of Blair Morrison

Failure on the path to success should motivate you, not defeat you.

Too often, people claim to seek improvement yet continually pick and choose WODs based on their perceived capacity to succeed. This blatantly illogical decision is the symptom of a very common disease: fear. People are so afraid to fail. This fact, combined with the knowledge that failure is essential to our ultimate success, makes this fear one of the toughest paradoxes for our psyche to overcome.

I, for one, know this emotion too well. Before football games I would get this deep, paralyzing self-doubt regarding my own ability. Every week, I was certain the defensive back opposite me was stronger than I was, faster than I was and, in general, better than I was. This usually didn't subside until the first major collision of the game, when the intensity level became so high that I no longer had time to doubt myself, only to act.

This happens in gyms and fitness centers all the time. People too embarrassed to bench press next to the guy lifting 300 lb. choose instead to chain themselves to the treadmill. People who don't feel comfortable entering a yoga class with a few advanced participants will hover by the window wishing they had the courage to enter. All are terrified of failing in front of their peers when they should be afraid of what will happen when they never try.

How to conquer this phenomenon? We have to celebrate failure. We have to know that unless we succeed in finding our limit during the course of a workout, we didn't succeed at all. Rather than focusing on the competition with other athletes, we must seek to realize the individual potential for failure in every session, and then, when we really need it, when we're just about to quit, when we've been pressed to the brink of failure and can't take any more, then we use the

abilities of those around us to will ourselves to take the next step. That's when the community leans on itself, pushes its collective limits and builds itself stronger than before.

The bottom line is that fitness requires failure. Your body adapts to challenges it cannot meet in order to better prepare itself for the future. This process involves levels of intensity and fear that are typically uncomfortable but absolutely necessary. If you're not outside your comfort zone, you will not improve. And if you're not trying to improve, what exactly are you doing?



Courtesy of Blair Morrison

About the Author:

Blair Morrison is 28 years old. He was born and raised in Sacramento, Calif., where his family still lives. He received his undergraduate history degree from Princeton University and his master's degree at Universiteit Leiden, the Sorbonne and Oxford. Formerly a personal trainer from Balance Gym in Washington, D.C., Blair placed seventh in the 2009 Crossfit Games and 23rd in 2010. He now owns and operates CrossFit Anywhere out of Sacramento. He is dedicated to the pursuit of physical challenges and the mental fortitude that comes from the ability to overcome them.