

The Broke-Back Comeback

Female Fire Fighters are Less Rare in Flagstaff Due to a Unique CrossFit Rehab

Tara Paprocki



In August of 2006, while at the Fire Academy trying to successfully train and test to become one of the only female fire fighters in Flagstaff, Arizona, I broke my back. I was in full “turnouts” and air-dragging a rescue dummy when I tripped and fell backwards, landing on my back and airpack with the rescue dummy on top of me. At the time it certainly hurt, but I didn’t realize the severity of the incident. I continued on at the Academy for another week and a half or so before the pain got to be too much to handle, and I decided to go get it checked out.

1 of 3

Indeed, there was a reason for the pain: a fractured L2 vertebra. I was asked to leave the Academy due to the injury, and was told that I could return to the next Academy in February if I was cleared by both my doctor and the city's doctor. I truly believe that they never thought six months was enough time to be ready, and that there was no chance they would have to let me come back in February.

The challenge – and the race against the clock – was on! I would be back! They would have to honor their word and let me back in!



Enter Lisa Ray and CrossFit Flagstaff

At the time I met Lisa and told her what I was up against, she was actually a volunteer at another fire department in town and was working on her fire 1 & 2 certification. She was well aware of the rigors of the job and the kind of shape I needed to be in before I could return to the Fire Academy.

I can't remember the exact date I began working with Lisa, but it was after being in a brace 24 hours a day for four to six weeks and doing nothing. It drove me nuts! It's hard going from an active lifestyle to not being able to do much of anything.

To protect my back and re-build my strength, proper form and technique (with little to no weight) were stressed in the Ray's garage of pain. One exercise, while I was still wearing my back brace, was band pull-ups on the rowing machine. I am ashamed to admit this, but I could not do one pull-up before I met Lisa.

How could I call myself "fit" and think I was strong enough to complete the Fire Academy when I couldn't perform even one pull-up? So that was one of my first goals: do pull-ups. I was obsessed, addicted. I bought a doorway pull-up bar for my house and my own rubber band. Every time I passed the doorway, I would "grease the groove" as Lisa called it—do a set number of band pull-ups. I will never forget the day I got my first pull-up on that bar. I called Lisa like a little kid, so proud. Next on my list: dead-lifting with proper form, then adding weight so I could lift the 200-pound rescue dummy that was my nemesis.

Every time I worked out with Lisa and learned new exercises and proper form, I wished I had met her and CrossFit before the Academy. So much of what she was teaching me was so relevant to many things that I had struggled with at the Academy. All hail Cross Fit. I have said it earlier and I will say it again: I was hooked, addicted, sold. This was amazing stuff. I was gaining strength and doing things with a back that was less than 100%. Things that I could not do before, when I was in good shape and with a back that was 100%.

I was taking my brace off and doing workouts long before I was supposed to by conventional thinking. My form was being watched like a hawk, so if there was ever a time I was not doing something correctly, I was stopped and the form was fixed. I was not supposed to be lifting more than ten pounds from table height, according to my conservative doctor, but I was doing push-presses and cleans with...uggghh...no more than ten pounds, and learning overhead squats—to this day my favorite lift!

We got ourselves a "retired dummy" and "rebuilt" him with some old sand-filled hose and a pair of Carhart coveralls. He became my new best friend! I eventually moved on to live bodies—some of Lisa's other clients and her husband Mike—who were closer to the 200-pound mark. It was quite fun dragging them around the garage and gym. We decided Mike had the best "hand holds" for dragging. (Just ask him or Lisa to see the pictures!)

I could praise CrossFit Flagstaff and the coaching they gave me until I am blue in the face. They are amazing coaches, with incredible knowledge and passion for what they are doing. This stuff works! I can tell you story after story, and goal after goal attained, without end.

I started the next Academy in February, much to the surprise of the city's fire department. I was ready.

My PR was 12 kipping pull-ups. I could lift and drag that 200-pound dummy; no problem. I could get a ladder from above my head off the truck and carry it. (Being five-foot-four, that was a challenge before CrossFit, when I didn't have the overhead strength.)

Word had gotten out about this "CrossFit stuff" I was rehabbing with. When I did my squats they said, "Oh, that's right—you work out at "that place," as they called it. "You can go below parallel on your squats if you want, I guess."

My pull-up PR could have been in the running for best number at the beginning of the Academy, but "kipping" was considered cheating, and I wasn't allowed to do it. So, despite all of the efforts I put into rehab and gaining more strength, they asked me to leave the Academy once again. Not due to injury, but because they didn't think I was strong enough to perform the job of a firefighter. Lisa believes that Flagstaff City Fire allowed their own political agenda to stand in my way.

I know the truth though: CrossFit helped me to come through a broken back injury that would have made many people unable to continue in the fire service. CrossFit and Lisa Ray's coaching have made me able to pursue the career I have always wanted. I am stronger than I ever have been and continue to be addicted to this crazy thing called CrossFit. And, now, I am a fire fighter.

Today, I am the only woman working for Summit Fire Department, Flagstaff's other fire department. I trained even harder and passed a physical and agility test known for its difficulty. Many people here think that I am crazy because of the large tractor tires at my station that I flip all over the place—plus my ring push-ups, penchant for throwing around weighted basketballs, and doing workouts in full turnouts, to name a few things. But the people at Summit let me do kipping pull-ups and even join me once in a while in my "crazy" workouts. They may not understand CrossFit yet, but this fire department does believe in me and in my strength and ability to perform the job as a fire fighter.



About The Author

Tara just finished her probationary year with Summit Fire Department in Flagstaff, Arizona. "I want to thank my husband Dennis, Cross Fit Flagstaff, and Summit Fire Department for believing in me and my strength to do the job when many others didn't," she says. When not working as a firefighter, she is an avid Adventure Racer, in 2008 having completed what she calls, "the hardest thing I've ever done, mentally and physically:" the Primal Quest, a 550-mile round-the-clock expedition race held in Montana. For 2009, she plans to take on the Badlands, which would be her fifth PQ.