

---

# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

---

## Grief and Pull-Ups

Natalie Taylor uses CrossFit to confront—and beat—her monsters.

---

By Natalie Taylor Stay Strong CrossFit

January 2012

---



Courtesy of Natalie Taylor

*The Power of One*, by Bryce Courtenay, is about a little boy named Peekay, who has some very, very big problems. At school, the bigger, stronger bullies incessantly harass him. Similarly, when Peekay looks out at the real world, the same power system exists.

---

1 of 3

His story is set in South Africa in the 1940s—amidst apartheid, English-Dutch clashes and World War II. On all scales, both at school and in the world, the big seem to crush the small. Majorities destroy minorities. But then Peekay discovers the sport of boxing and things start to change.

Courtenay refers to Peekay's boxing gloves as "the great equalizers." Once Peekay begins competing, both he and the reader come to understand what the phrase means: boxing gloves don't care what color your skin is, what language you speak, how tall you are, or where you land in the social pecking order. They only care how hard you can hit and with what level of skill you can wield them.

Two years ago when I found CrossFit, the phrase "the great equalizers" came back to me. So first of all, yes, I confess, I am a book nerd who compares things like exercise and fitness to literature. But because I am an English teacher, literature never leaves my head. Ever. And though I've never boxed a day in my life, Courtenay's novel is one of my all-time favorites. The thing I love most about *The Power of One* is that although it is an intensely complex story, at the root of it is the most basic concept of life, literature and athletics: facing monsters.

### From Pity to Burpees

Three-and-a-half years ago, I slammed into my first real-life monster. I lost my husband, Josh, in an accident. At the time of his death, I was 24 years old and five months pregnant with our first son. The year following my husband's death was a lot of things—confusing and sad at first, and then exhausting and sad once I had my son. I spent a lot of time crying in my bathrobe and feeling like I was aging at an exponential rate. I loved my new baby, but my own identity was deteriorating at an alarming speed.

---

Somehow, I realized that  
exercise was an essential part  
of recovering my former self.

---

Somehow, I realized that exercise was an essential part of recovering my former self and that internal strength and endurance were directly proportional to external strength and endurance. I started jogging and biking, and I felt like I was at least moving in a forward direction, but there were still many monsters lingering.

My older sister Moo (her name is Sarah, but no one calls her that) kept pushing me to start CrossFit. When she was home for the holidays, I couldn't believe how much stronger she looked from just a few months of CrossFit. I chalked it up to her natural physique. She has always been taller and thinner than me.

"You're just built for stuff like that," I told her. "No matter what I do, I can never look like you."

And for the first time since my husband died, she stopped feeling sorry for me.

"I look this way because I work my ass off," she said. "And if you worked as hard as I did, you could change too."

This was not the sort of pity I was used to. I was annoyed but challenged.

Slowly Moo got me started on CrossFit, despite the fact that I had every excuse in the book: no time, no money for a gym, no equipment, no space. But for every reason I had, she had a response.

No time? Most workouts are under 25 minutes.

You don't need a gym, she told me.

No space? Get your car out of your garage.

No equipment? I'll never forget when she said, "Let me show you what a burpee is."

Just like that, it started. As months passed, I bought one more small thing to add to my gym. And while my son slept, I would be in my garage using some pretty awful form to try to resurrect my broken body and soul. The craziest part is that it actually started to work.

### Strong—Inside and Out

It does seem odd to say that working out has helped me with the complex mental issue of grief and surviving after a loss. The two seem completely unrelated. But like Peekay, and like so many great stories, sports and competition are parallel to life's greatest successes and failures.



Bob Gibson/Joust CrossFit

*Through CrossFit, Natalie Taylor found a way to overcome any obstacle she faces.*

---

The pull-up bar, the kettlebell  
and the wall-ball don't care  
if I'm tired, if I'm a single  
parent, if I'm a woman or  
if I've had a baby. They want  
to know how many and  
how fast.

---

The pull-up bar, the kettlebell, the wall-ball (man, do I hate the wall-ball), the Olympic bar, are all my great equalizers. They don't care if I'm tired, if I didn't sleep through the night, if I'm a single parent, if I'm a woman or if I've had a baby. They pay no mind to these things. They want to know how many and how fast. That's all they care about.

Although I find these items unforgiving, there is a huge sense of relief in knowing that none of the issues of my life matters when I start a WOD. When I go to work out, everything that plagues my head disappears because if I don't focus 100 percent of my attention on that bar or that ball, it's going to get the best of me.

Even if you're not a book nerd like me, it's hard to deny the connection between performed WODs and printed words. Every English student knows there are two types of conflict in literature—internal and external. And every heroic journey shows that no matter how big the monsters are on the outside, the biggest ones are on the inside. From Luke Skywalker to Harry Potter to Peekay, the only way we are strong enough to slay the dragon at the end is if we have conquered the one in our own brain. CrossFit works under this same premise.

Two years after starting CrossFit in my garage, things in my life have drastically improved. I recently joined an actual box (and now cannot imagine my life without it), and I started working out with my co-workers at lunch. And although you may never see "Natalie Taylor on today's WOD" on CrossFit.com, that hardly matters.

All of us know that every single person who walks into a box or a garage on a daily basis is there for a reason: we are there to prove something to ourselves. We are there to slowly and patiently face the monsters on the outside, but all of it is done in an effort to defeat those within.

I am hugely relieved I have found my great equalizers. Just like Peekay, it is the first act in liberating myself from the things that stand in my way.



#### About the Author

Natalie Taylor has her master's degree in education and currently teaches 11<sup>th</sup>-grade English at Berkley High School in Berkley, Mich. Her first book, *Signs of Life: A Memoir*, was released in April 2011. Natalie works out at Stay Strong CrossFit in Troy, Mich.