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Take a Leap!

Dina Widlake takes a risk and learns how to grab life by the pull-up bars.

By Dina Widlake

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That pull-up bar mocks me. I cannot be the only one who experiences it.

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Messages pour like party confetti, scrappy little echoes from the distant past as I look up—only I'm not celebrating. I am being mocked.

I hear those words: "Girls aren't built to do pull-ups. They aren't designed to have that kind of upper-body strength. It's unnatural for girls to do pull-ups. *You can't do them.*"

Why?

It was my first WOD on a casual "come try out CrossFit" invitation, and there I was, staring at that bar.



Devin Carr

After nervously trying CrossFit, Dina Widlake found the program was a great fit for her life.

Pull-ups were on the board. I tried one, as requested, and there it was: my first CrossFit failure. I was cheerfully assured not to worry: I could start doing pull-ups using a big, thick band with someone right there. Honestly, at that point, those messages from the past suddenly made sense. The bar seemed so far away, and pull-ups, band or no band, seemed beyond that: unattainable. So why even try? I wondered why I had come.

As, the saying goes, "Careful what you ask for ..."

For months prior to my first CrossFit workout, maybe closer to a year, I had been sharing with friends my desire to find a way to be healthier and to increase my fitness.

It was early one Saturday morning, maybe in January 2010, when I found myself walking down a long driveway to a house I did not know to meet people I did not know to do something I did not know.

With each step toward the house, random and unsettling questions ping-ponged through my mind, things like: "What am I doing? Did I hear right: this CrossFit thing involves Olympic weightlifting? What is that exactly? Is this the right house number? What if I can't do the workout? Am I late?"

I signed paperwork and was shown to the garage. I was suddenly back in my kindergarten self, peering through a classroom door where other kids had already arrived, seemed to know each other and had already found their places; they already knew things. I didn't know what I was supposed to do. A fine experience for a five-year-old. Not so for a 40-year-old.

But then again, maybe it is. For this girl, expectations (known and unknown) are awfully intimidating; they always have been.

As with most things that loom big, hairy and scary in one's mind, the reality of that thing often possesses only a fraction of its imagined bite. The biggest fear, and indeed the biggest challenge, is in actually moving forward, crossing the threshold. That Saturday morning I stepped through and met a group of welcoming, interesting and diverse people. I completed a scaled (thankfully) workout that left me sweating on a garage floor so cold that sweat had no business making an appearance. With my eyes closed and breath struggling to find its desired pace, I heard folks congratulating each other's accomplishments, praising each other's efforts and encouraging others with unmet goals.

My CrossFit flirting days were numbered, and as it goes with all meaningful relationships, I would have to choose to invest fully or not at all.

I was fascinated, curious and still unsure. Fascination and curiosity overruled uncertainty, and I periodically showed up to WODs over the next few months.

As winter gave way to spring, a grand transition paralleling the seasonal shift was underway for this community—and for me too, apparently. My CrossFit flirting days were numbered, and as it goes with all meaningful relationships, I would have to choose to invest fully or not at all.

The new box was opening. The reasons not to join came easily: single parent, limited finances, reasonably demanding job, age, other commitments and activities, etc. In the end, it just seemed out of reach, as unrealistic and unattainable as those pull-ups.

For all my rational and certainly valid reasons not to join, I struggled. The struggle was deeper than “this is something I want and I can’t make it work.” Looking back, the struggle was about being afraid.

I was afraid I was not capable to do this full force. I was afraid I did not fit in. I was afraid of breaking with those past and present societal messages about my gender, age and life circumstance. I was intimidated by the references to those who were, as I perceived, “real CrossFitters.” Who was I? I was not serving in the military or firefighting, and while I am a life-long soccer player, I am certainly no elite athlete.

“CrossFit was designed for someone else, not me,” I thought. “I am nothing more than a fortysomething single mother who really needs to focus on being a parent and working.”

Still, I took note of other descriptors like “broad, general and inclusive” and of declarations like “the needs of Olympic athletes and our grandparents differ by degree not kind” from CrossFit.com. It seemed I did not have to be an elite athlete. Heck, I didn’t seem to have to be an athlete

at all to CrossFit. If I wasn’t one at the start, CrossFit would make me one. But still, could I make it work in my life with all its complexities and demands?

I could never fully know at that point. I had no crystal ball. It would take a leap of faith and some risk in crossing another threshold into what I did not know. After much angst, I jumped.

The Right Choices

It is over a year later, and with the luxury of hindsight there could not have been a better fit for this girl and her family at this stage in their lives. The WODs, I’ve discovered, can be invitations to approach little thresholds: both physical and mental. I am challenged almost daily to dig deeper and explore my physical capacity, which is much greater than I ever imagined. I have also come to appreciate much more fully the value of being part of and contributing to a strong and authentic community.



Devin Carr

**Can a fortysomething mother learn Olympic weightlifting?
Absolutely!**

In a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps culture, we often operate as if what one accomplishes he or she accomplishes alone, and a requirement for individual effort is certainly present in all our endeavors. However, I believe the greatest and most long-living achievements we attain are those that involve the influence and the give-and-take of community.

**“It is not from ourselves
that we learn to be
better than we are.”**

—Wendell Berry

The writer and poet Wendell Berry said it beautifully: “It is not from ourselves that we learn to be better than we are.”

Springboarding from this experience, I am emboldened to challenge myself in other areas in my life in ways I never considered. I risk more. I live more fully and with more focus. CrossFit is constantly reminding me to live in this world as I am intended, as we are all intended: with strength and power. For me, that begins in the physical domain, which ultimately integrates into the emotional and intellectual aspects of my life.

My children, who I once feared would feel abandoned for the time I made for CrossFit at their expense, have experienced something else. It turns out it’s true: nothing is more powerful than action. I could give advice to my children day in and day out about living well, being physically active, eating right, challenging themselves, risking, going to failure and doing what makes them the most alive, and it would never compare to having a living example of that advice in front of them. They have noticed. They are learning. They are benefitting. They have not been abandoned. They do not feel so either.

Back to the Bar

It was Wednesday, May 19, 2010, four months after first trying CrossFit and two months after going full force into the sport. The WOD included 40 pull-ups; that was all I really noticed. Thirty-six minutes after I heard, “3, 2, 1 ... Go!” I completed that WOD. It was far from pretty, and I

was reduced to one pull-up at a time at the end. Yet for some reason I decided it was my last WOD using a band for pull-ups. Lack of oxygen may have been a factor. It seemed like a safe decision at the time as I guessed pull-ups wouldn’t be in a WOD again any time soon. Well.

It was Friday, May 21, 2010, and the WOD was Nicole (20 minutes of 400-meter runs and max pull-ups). I stumbled mentally, reconsidering my position on the whole no-band approach. I read a rule on the board, “Don’t cheat yourself!” I took a deep breath and decided that at worst I would get to that bar and do no pull-ups. I would run a lot. I understood clearly by then that crossing thresholds is never easy, and they never cease to present themselves. You have to step through and welcome whatever comes.

Less than a minute after “Go!” my body unexpectedly kicked into gear and I strung together six pull-ups. Six! In pure shock and excitement, I finished the WOD with up to eight pull-ups strung together between each run. I left the box that day, hands bleeding and throbbing, feeling elated. Girls *are* made to do pull-ups and I *can* do them!

And so it goes.

I wonder what’s next? A WOD that seems impossible? Job loss? A career change? My children transitioning to middle school?

I welcome it all and the fear and struggle that will come with it.



About the Author

Dina Widlake lives in Virginia with her two sons and dog and is a member of Hammer Down CrossFit in Chantilly, Va. She is an instructional designer by trade, developing end-user online training solutions for various types of software applications. At this point in her life, a fitting description would be an Episcopalian, single parent, teacher, traveler and CrossFitter who plays and coaches soccer. She recently earned her Level 1 trainer certificate and is looking forward to deepening her experience with CrossFit.