

## CrossFit in Yosemite: No Walk in the Park

Carrying injured hikers down steep trails. Wrestling drunks. Raiding pot farms. Fighting forest fires. Counseling suicidal teens out of deadly whitewater. Heli-rappelling down the sheer face of El Capitan. It's all in a day's work for a super-fit national park ranger.

Steve Yu



*Photo by Dave Pope*

It's seven in the morning, the sun isn't up yet, and I open up the garage to get started on my WOD, which for today is 3-3-3-1-1-1 of power clean. I start with the CrossFit warm-up, do a round of the Burgener warm-up, a couple of warm-up sets and then my work sets, which I video and review. I'm pleased to find out I'm getting full hip extension at the top of the second lift, but note that I need to work on not pulling early with the arms when the load gets heavy.

The sun still hasn't broken the Valley rim, and it is quiet other than the sound of the Steller's Jays songbirds calling to one another, a combination of a rapid "shek-shek-shek-shek" rattle and a harsh metal-on-metal ring. The air is cool and moist and permeated with the scent of incense cedar, pine, and granitic soil. These are the quintessential sensations of our home: Yosemite Valley in Yosemite National Park.

The park itself, larger than the state of Rhode Island, ranges in elevation from 1,700' in the El Portal area to the 13,114' summit of Mount Lyell. Companion to this range in elevations is a huge variety of biotic communities and landscapes. These communities include foothills chaparral dominated by live oak, mixed oak-conifer forests of the valleys, conifer forests dominated by red and white fir, monotypic stands of lodge-pole pine, and montane tundra. The terrain itself has idyllic montane valleys and meadows, rolling hills, steep slopes, horrendous gullies filled with crumbly rock, and sheer cliffs like the ubiquitous Half-Dome and El Capitan.

Add two parts rugged terrain, 3.2 million visitors, one part inexperience, one part bad judgment, and you have a recipe for job security

As rangers and special agents for the National Park Service, we protect those who visit the park from themselves, others, and the park itself. Of course, we also protect the park from those who visit. Most are just ignorant visitors in need of education, but a few would wantonly despoil our shared national heritage.

On any given day, we can be carrying an injured hiker out from the Vernal Falls trail corridor, wrestling a drunk on the Curry Village pizza deck, raiding a marijuana cultivation site on the steep, brush-choked canyon walls of the Merced river, retrieving a body from the maelstrom at the base of Nevada Falls, heli-rappelling onto the sheer face of El Capitan, fighting a forest fire in 100-degree weather, hunting poachers on our boundary, extricating victims from the wreckage of a motor-vehicle accident, or searching for a lost hiker in a winter storm.

Often these incidents will take place contemporaneously, or they can be bizarre combinations that you wouldn't imagine possible: forest fires started by suicidal murderers; a report of "shots fired" that turns into a heli-rappel rescue; three simultaneous El Capitan rescues during a body recovery; a search for a depressed person who, when found, doesn't really want to be found or helped; a 12-year-old girl who slips into the Merced River at full melt-off – a roaring cauldron of white frothy death – and miraculously flushes out unharmed 20 yards downstream; the Half-Dome hiker saved from a sure to be fatal fall by a sweat-pants wedgie. You can't make this stuff up.



*Photo by Dan Horner*

To this day I am amazed by the trouble people can get themselves into when taken out of their element. Even more amazing is how many visitors make a bad decision, have bad luck, or just plain blow it and still make it out alive if not unscathed.

In the Yosemite Valley, the raven and the coyote are two of the most commonly seen wildlife species. Globally, the ascent of man has caused most other species to decline in range and numbers, but not these two. They have succeeded where others have declined, been extirpated, or gone extinct for one reason: because they are generalists. Specialists require a specific niche, but the raven and coyote can fill many niches. They are intelligent, adaptable, and do many things very well. They do nothing superlatively, except survive.

Like the raven and coyote, rangers are also generalists. Our jobs are all-risk; we are cops, EMT's, firefighters, resource protectors, social workers, and camp counselors all rolled into one package. Specialization is discouraged. We are the jackknives of the service. And CrossFit is practically designed for the demands of our work.

### **From body-building to rock climbing to CrossFit**

I first came to Yosemite in 1989 as a climber. Although no great shakes as a climber (I have a couple of El Capitan routes on my resume and a couple of other routes that I'm kind of proud of), I quickly fell in love with the place in a way that transcended my climber's love of the Valley's cliffs and walls. Splitting my time as a carpenter, wildlife researcher and climbing bum, I migrated back and forth between my home in Wisconsin and the west for the

next several years. In 1995 I worked on the Yosemite Valley Search and Rescue Site. The Rescue Site, or SAR Site, is a patch of dirt in the back of Camp 4, the home for emergency hire climbers. The climbers get to stay on Site for the summer, and in return they carry pagers and respond to search and rescue and other missions for the National Park Service.

While on the Site, I realized that being a ranger was pretty darn cool and went to the seasonal ranger academy in Petaluma, California. I then worked as a seasonal ranger for a few years in several parks (Yosemite, Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, Denali, Joshua Tree) until coming to Yosemite's Valley District full-time in January of 2000. CrossFit came five years later.

I had always been into fitness, or what I thought was fitness. When I was a teen-ager in the 80s, Arnold Schwarzenegger, the king of the box office, had an inordinate influence on my hormone-addled adolescent brain. Arnold-wanna-be-ism (patently ridiculous given my slight frame) led me to the "Muscle and Fitness" globo-gym and 20 years of futility using the body-builder paradigm: isolation movements, split routines, overuse injuries, and very few tangible results.

Going to the University of Wisconsin-Madison opened many doors for me, including the door to rock-climbing. As an undergrad I spent every climbable weekend at the local crag, Devil's Lake, a quartzite remnant of the old Baraboo range, the oldest exposed rock in North America. Devil's Lake's purple quartzite played to my strengths as



*Photo by Steve Yu*



Photos by Steve Yu

a climber, with its short, powerful face routes requiring athleticism, finger-strength, and a high strength to weight ratio.

I climbed, virtually to the exclusion of any other physical activity, until the mid-90s, when the demands of being a rookie park ranger and a savage case of medial epicondylitis limited my climbing time. From the mid-90s until 2004, my fitness regime consisted of martial arts, climbing, weight-training and a little running.

When I returned to Yosemite in June of 2005 from the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, the thought of going to the weight room for 3 sets of 10 and a split routine simply depressed me. I had felt for years that something was missing from my training regimen, but couldn't quite put my finger on it. I felt continually frustrated by what I was doing fitness-wise, never seeming to make long-term gains, always battling one injury or another, and having trouble staying on a consistent program.

Our friend Chris Robinson, who had been suggesting CrossFit to my wife Laurie for months, finally convinced me to try it. After CrossFitting out of our garage gym for a few months, Laurie (a strong climber in her own right and a better CrossFitter than me) and I went bouldering at Camp 4. We proceeded to fire off problem after problem without having climbed for almost a year (I had torn my labrum in 2003 which required surgery in 2004). This display of CrossFit's conditioning effect sold us on the efficacy of the methodology and the soundness of its theories.

Since then, time and again, the functional strength and fitness we have developed from CrossFitting have had real and tangible benefits to our work, our play, and our day-to-day lives. Whether creeping into a marijuana garden, jumping over giant logs, breaking up concrete, picking up a full cooler of food, or cleaning a filing cabinet to my chest and pressing it into a dumpster, I am more prepared than ever to face the challenges of the day, mentally as well as physically.

After becoming believers, like many CrossFitters, we became zealots, preaching the gospel of CrossFit to whatever poor soul crossed our path. Woe upon any who wouldn't listen, for they would suffer the eternal hell-fire of over-use injuries, peaked biceps, and general lame-itude.

Once we got the zealotry out of our system (I was the greater offender), people would start to come over to work out, sometimes as many as four or five in addition to Laurie or me. People would look to me for advice and pointers, but I always felt somewhat inadequate providing the answers. Attendance ebbed and flowed, and I finally attended a Level I cert in San Diego in early May of this year. (Note: A Level I cert does not a trainer make; I have a LONG way to go as a trainer.)

The day after we got home from the cert I gave my first class with three attendees. Since then, word has spread; I still have my three original trainees and now have 15 regulars, not counting Laurie and myself.

In many ways, the system is tailor-made for National Park Service rangers. The diversity of challenges we face in our environment, the number of hats we wear, and the unpredictability of the call-load all favor the prepared. CrossFit prepares us for these challenges like no other system that I know of. This statement is validated time and again in real-life-out-of-the-gym tests.

- A couple of weeks ago, one of my trainees climbed the northwest face of Half-Dome in a day, part of the Yosemite Hard-Man circuit. Although he had done this previously, he felt stronger than before on the approach, the route, and the descent because of CrossFit. This trainee believes that the high volume of squats were especially instrumental in keeping him strong throughout the day.
- Another trainee, a 55-year-old ranger, told me that although he hasn't been climbing much, when he does climb, it feels like he HAS been climbing a lot. He believes this is a function of a stronger core, developed by CrossFitting, which is critical during climbing movements.
- Another trainee unloaded three pallets of rock before training with us. The DOMS she suffered as a result of this job crippled her for days afterward. After working out with us, she performed the same task with no accompanying soreness. She attributes this partly to better conditioning, and partly to a greater awareness of her hips and the proper lifting technique developed in our CrossFit workouts.
- Another trainee couldn't do a push-up when she first came to me. During a goal-challenge a month ago, four months after starting CrossFit, she busted out 42 push-ups in a minute.

### Stronger is Better

As outdoors people and park rangers, much of our training time has been spent hiking, running, biking, climbing, kayaking, and the like. Much of it is skills-based training, which is critical for accomplishing our mission; if a trainee opts for a skills day over a CrossFit day, I support that decision. The drawback to training these skills and techniques is that for the most part it is time spent in the oxidative pathway, with only some time spent in the glycolytic pathway.



*Photo by Dan Horner*



*Photo by Dave Pope*



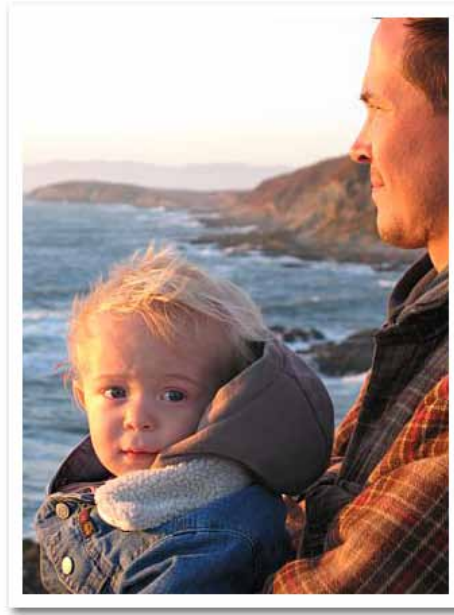
*Photo by Dave Pope*

Is this a problem? Maybe, maybe not. I have been at many multi-agency incidents where the disparity between NPS ranger fitness and the fitness of other agencies' personnel is striking; rangers can just plain hike or run other agencies into the ground. On the flip side, put everyone into the gym under iron and the rangers will get crushed. People aren't dying because rangers as a whole aren't that strong; the job still gets done, regardless of what a ranger's bench press is. Yet I can't shake the feeling that we will be better off as an Agency if we as a group get stronger. My conviction is strengthened when virtually all of my ranger trainees want to "get stronger."

In the end, form follows function: we rangers are a lean, wiry bunch because of what we face in the mountains. Those with excessive bulk get punished, badly. For good or ill, the ranger with a 300-pound back-squat is the exception, not the rule. My primary objective for most of my trainees is to make them stronger without sacrificing mountain functionality and endurance. From my own experience, getting stronger, lifting heavy (relatively), and Olympic lifting all have broadened me and made me better in the hills, jumping logs, crossing streams, and hiking up talus fields.

As a trainer, I have a long way to go. People keep coming back, no one's left the gym once they started in earnest, no one has been hurt, and more and more people are coming to me for training. It's a good start. But like CrossFit itself, for a trainer there is always room for improvement and there is always more to learn.

The day I did the 3-3-3-1-1-1 power-clean workout I hiked to a suspected poacher's hide site. The access to this site included climbing 800' up a hill in less than half a mile, an average 38% grade. I had to do this twice in less than 24 hours, once for size-up, once for the operation itself at 0300 hours. I felt strong both times; it just kind of felt easy and I don't remember that stuff being "easy" before. Perhaps the most germane moment came after I popped over a fallen 3.5-foot diameter tree: behind me I heard my partner mutter, "Damn CrossFit" as he struggled to find a way around the log.



*Photo of the author by Laurie Yu*

*Steve Yu lives in Yosemite National Park with his wife, Laurie and two-year old son, Atticus. An alum of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Steve has worked for the National Park Service since 1992 as a biological science technician, fee collector, Search-and-Rescue technician, park ranger and special agent. Steve is a former rock-jock whose who has been CrossFitting since 2005, been a CrossFit instructor since May of 2008, and trains people out of his garage gym five to six days a week.*