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Defenders of the Realm

Hilary Achauer talks with the world's best trainers about CrossFit culture at the annual Training Staff Summit.

By Hilary Achauer

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Dave Castro stood in front of the CrossFit Level 1 Training Staff from around the world. It was the last day of the annual Training Staff Summit, and he had just described their team workout, which included power cleans, burpees, kettlebell swings and handstand push-ups.

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"And then," Castro said, "Each of you will take the new and revised Level 1 written test. Your time will end when everyone in the group has finished the test."

He paused and smiled.

"Let's have some fun," he said.

The annual Training Staff Summit is truly a celebration of CrossFit culture, and the final workout of the Summit was a snapshot of what makes CrossFit unique—its mix of the competitive and the supportive, the technical and philosophical, the silly and the serious.

Explosive Growth

The Training Staff Summit, held this year in San Diego, is a yearly gathering that is part family reunion, part retreat and part conference. It brings together the Level 1 Training Staff from around the world to build camaraderie, refine points of technique and hone coaching skills.



Nicole Carroll was a member of the team when Coach Glassman himself led all the seminars, and now she and Dave Castro oversee 133 Level 1 Seminar Staff members.

Just like the 2011 and 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games, the 2012 Training Staff Summit started off with a beach workout.

The Level 1 staff gathered on Monday, Sept. 24, at one of San Diego's beaches for an oceanfront WOD. The group began with a run in the sand, then did team hill sprints for time interspersed with air squats.

"You are the greatest trainers on Earth. That's a fact. I am so proud of you."

—Coach Greg Glassman

"The workouts are an important part of who we are. We practice what we preach, and it builds our community," Miranda Oldroyd said of the workouts that are part of each day of the Summit.

On Wednesday, Director of Training Nicole Carroll was the first to speak to the group, giving the trainers a sense of the history of the gathering. The first Training Staff Summit was in 2009, and 30 trainers attended. The CrossFit Training Directors saw the number of trainers growing, and "we realized we should get everyone together, standardize and go over course material, work out, have East Coast teams meet West Coast teams, hang out together," Carroll said.

"The feedback from our crew after the Summit was great," she continued. "They loved it. And as we looked around post-Summit, we saw a better understanding of the material, sharper delivery and more refined group training. But we also noticed something else: the camaraderie that pervaded the crew normally was kicked into an even higher gear by the Summit. It was apparent that this group of people had become much more than a group of co-workers. They'd become a tight-knit team," Carroll said.

The numbers grew steadily every year, and now, just three years later, there are 133 Level 1 staff members around the globe, including significant groups in Europe and Australia.

"Now," Carroll said, "we have grown together to the point where it's an understatement to call this 'a team.' Really, we are a family. This week is job training but also a family gathering and a celebration."



Coach Greg Glassman explains why the members of the Level 1 Seminar Staff are guardians of CrossFit culture.

After that introduction, Carroll brought up CrossFit Founder and CEO Greg Glassman, who took to the stage to a standing ovation. Glassman looked around and smiled at a room filled with Games athletes and affiliate owners, veteran Training Staff members who have been around since the beginning, Level 1 Training Staff members attending their first Summit, subject-matter experts, and HQ support staff.

“Where do we start?” he asked. “You are the greatest trainers on Earth. That’s a fact. I am so proud of you.”

Glassman talked about the explosive growth of CrossFit, easily measured by the increase of Level 1 seminars held each year. In 2006, CrossFit ran 12 Level 1 seminars during the year. 2012 is not over yet, and HQ projects that they will have run 400 seminars by the end of October.

Glassman told the assembled group, a gathering that included Matt Chan, Chris Spealler, Jason Khalipa, Lindsey Smith, Katie Hogan and many more, that he considers them what he calls “defenders of the realm.”

“All that is valuable to the ecosystem is guarded, protected by you,” Glassman said.

“A transmission of our culture happens at the Level 1 Seminar. ... The Level 1 Seminar is about learning who we are.”

—Coach Greg Glassman

Glassman reiterated that the two pillars of CrossFit are stimulus—constantly varied functional movement performed at high intensity—and the affiliate model.

"A transmission of our culture happens at the Level 1 Seminar. The culture wasn't designed by me," Glassman said. "It was created by you. The Level 1 Seminar is about learning who we are."

**"We have a common goal:
to be the best of the best."**

—Mel Ockerby

Indeed, going to a Level 1 Seminar is a rite of passage for most CrossFitters, and friendships made during the sessions inevitably continue after the last squat is done and everyone heads home to teach others how to deadlift. Some athletes go to many Level 1s long after they can recite the lectures themselves simply because they're a great place to hang out with other CrossFitters and get better at CrossFit.

As he has in recent *CrossFit Journal* videos, Glassman also talked about the affiliate model, which is unique within the fitness industry.

"The affiliate model is the entrepreneur's dream expressed in all its magnificence," Glassman said. "We don't want to be in their way. Affiliates have the freedom to fail or to succeed."

Addressing the relatively low cost of affiliation, Glassman said, "There isn't a governing body of gyms that does more than we do. We even invented a sport for our affiliates—how about that? I also don't know of a governing body that charges less."

Glassman feels that the combination of the affiliate model, the community, and the philosophy of constantly varied functional movement performed at high intensity is what will drive CrossFit's popularity.

"You are going to dismantle the entire fucking industry," he said. "It's going to be CrossFit and CrossFit imitators."

CrossFit Culture

After breakout sessions and another presentation, the group gathered for lunch. Discussion turned to Coach Glassman's idea that an important component of the Level 1 Seminars is the "transmission of culture."

Melissa Henderson, a Level 1 staff member from the United Kingdom, said that for her, Level 1 Seminars are a chance for trainers to work on their own movement and find out what CrossFit is all about straight from the source.

"I've had people come to a Level 1 Seminar who started CrossFit three days before," Henderson said. "They want to know what it's all about."

At a Level 1 Seminar, CrossFit athletes and coaches "can learn straight from the horse's mouth," said Brett Fforde of Australia. "It's a chance for them to neaten things up and interact with other trainers."

Kevin Lim, a staff member from Singapore, agreed that communicating the culture of CrossFit is one of the most important aspects of the Seminars.



The Level 1 team contains a host of top CrossFit Games athletes, including 2012 second-place finisher Matt Chan.



In breakout sessions, Seminar Staff members shared their best techniques for helping athletes move better.

While Lim was talking, Fforde picked up the entire mound of wasabi on the appetizer plate and popped it in his mouth.

“Did you see that? He just ate all of that wasabi!” Henderson shouted.

Fforde looked completely calm except for a single tear running down his face.

Many on the Level 1 staff soon found out this was actually a minor food stunt for the friendly Australian trainer. Castro showed some of his favorite CrossFit-related YouTube videos to the staff during breaks throughout the Summit. One of them was of [Fforde meticulously eating an entire, live octopus](#).

It’s universal the world over: CrossFitters are a little bit crazy. And they have a great time.

Veterans and Newcomers Working Together

Aside from the lectures, the Summit is a chance for the new Seminar Staff trainers to hang out—and learn from—the seasoned veterans. Part of the two-day Summit included breakout groups where the staff members took turns being evaluated on their coaching.

Mel Ockerby of CrossFit New England was attending her first Summit. She stood in front of a small group that included Chuck Carswell, Jason Khalipa and Josh Everett and practiced seeing and correcting Olympic-lifting technique while Carroll, Adrian Bozman and Olympic-lifting expert Mike Burgener walked around the room observing.

Ockerby said what was most valuable for her about the Summit was “putting a face to the name, especially the travel staff who help set everything up.” For her, the highlight of the weekend was listening to Coach Glassman’s talk.

“We have a common goal: to be the best of the best,” Ockerby said.

Leah Polaski, also a newcomer to the group, said that rather than being intimidating, the environment was friendly and supportive.

“We’re all here to learn,” Polaski said, and indeed the breakout groups were characterized by constructive criticism, exchanges of cues and suggestions for improving movement instruction.

Polaski's sentiments were echoed by the veterans. Todd Widman is a member of the "200 Club," meaning he has taught more than 200 Level 1 Seminars in his career. That's a lot of weekends away from home, but Widman said he loves his job.

"This group touches every trainer and affiliate in the community."

—Nicole Carroll

"The reason we are all here, and the reason we do what we do, is the power to change someone's life," he said.

Widman said he's heard some of the newer staff admit that, as first-time attendees to the Summit, they felt a little out of their element. These trainers are used to being the top authority in their box, and at the Summit they find themselves among trainers even more experienced than they are. By that same token, Widman said these leaders and trainers enjoy focusing on their own personal development.

"They mostly focus on other people, and they enjoy focusing on themselves," he said. "They enjoy the critique. We critique in a positive, encouraging way."

That doesn't mean that some of the attendees weren't a little star-struck. Carlos Andrade, from Ecuador, walked around taking pictures of himself with well-known CrossFit athletes such as Khalipa and James Hobart.

Sebastian Rieder asked Spealler to sign a T-shirt.



Some Seminar Staff members were asked to display suboptimal mechanics and resist correction, forcing their colleagues to work hard for a fix.



Group workouts were a highlight of the Summit, giving the trainers and staff a chance to bond and sweat together.

"It's for my brother," Rieder said. "He's a huge Spealler fan."

This was Rieder's second Summit. The trainer from Austria said he enjoys the gatherings because in Europe they have such a small crew.

"It's huge to connect," Rieder said. He said he enjoys the chance to reaffirm his commitment to CrossFit and exchange ideas.

At the end of the first day, Carroll took to the stage again to emphasize the importance of the Seminars.

"This group touches every trainer and affiliate in the community," Carroll said. "It is an important job. We expect you to embody our goals and be the best of who we are. We expect you to leave a deep and lasting impression and teach not only CrossFit methodology but what it means to be a CrossFitter. The primary goal is the transmission of culture."

The linchpin of that culture is the WOD. After a day of sitting still and listening, the trainers eagerly anticipated the end-of-day workout.

"I love the workout we do together," Katie Hogan said. Indeed, some Training Staff members spend so much time on the road that their usual training partners are other staff members and their workouts take place in different cities each weekend. It's not unusual to see athletes such as Spealler training hard for the CrossFit Games after teaching a seminar, and, as always, the Seminar Staff workouts are a great chance to bond.

At the Summit, the women and men divided into teams of three to take on thrusters and muscle-ups (toes-to-rings for the women). They started and ended the WOD with a run around the hotel grounds, dodging business travelers and vacationers staying at the Marriott.

After the workout, the pre-workout nervousness was replaced with a post-workout endorphin rush. The group smiled and chatted, red-faced and happy.

When asked what CrossFit means to her, Jenn Hunter-Marshall thought for a moment.

"CrossFit is everything possible," she said. "What do I want it to be? It's community, movement. It's what you create."

Getting Silly—With a Purpose

The Level 1 Training Staff are not only extraordinary athletes and coaches, but they are also engaging public speakers who are able to convey complex topics clearly and concisely.

For most of the lectures, the Level 1 Seminar content was addressed in precise detail, but on Thursday afternoon, Joe Alexander told the group they were going to break into smaller groups and run through some fun exercises that would help them be more confident speakers.

The exercises "are gonna make you feel silly," he warned.

In one of the drills, the staff had to make up an entire identity for the person next to him or her on the spot. Their task was to describe this fictional human to the group, all while addressing each person in the group, speaking slowly and confidently, and not using too many filler words.

Kimo Kockelman of Hawaii stood next to Cherie Chan.

"This is Natasha," he said. "You may not know Natasha is a tree climber."



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Chan struggled to keep a straight face while Kockelman spun a tale of her tree-climbing adventures.

The next drill required the trainers to be even sillier. One by one, they stood in front of the group and portrayed whatever emotion the group leader shouted out—sad, happy, angry, frustrated. The catch was they had to do it using a nonsense word or sound.

The conference room filled with the noise of fit humans in Reebok gear happily, angrily and sadly shouting gibberish while the rest of the group provided support and encouragement.

So much about CrossFit is trying new things in front of other people. Things that you're afraid will make you look silly. Things that you might do badly. Like gibbering happily to a group of your fellow trainers. But using creativity to get around a communication problem is an important skill—especially as CrossFit spreads around the globe—and the members of the Seminar Staff are adept when it comes to getting their point across, whether they're explaining why they want your shoulders over the bar in a deadlift or trying to get your weight in your heels in a squat.

Then, finally, it was the end of the Summit, and the only thing left to do before the after-party at the Hard Rock Hotel was a workout. Everyone divided into coed groups of six, and Castro gathered them together to describe the workout and the revised Level 1 test at the end.

As they did all week, the group attacked the challenge with gusto. It didn't matter that their time or scores wouldn't count for anything, or that the conference hall at the Marriott suddenly became all about power output instead of presentations. Every person in the room worked as hard as he or she could and cheered on teammates—and competitors—just as loudly.

Coach Glassman's opening remarks rang true again as the groups sprinted to test booklets and pencils to complete the workout:

"CrossFit is about health and camaraderie. This is a group experience, and people derive extraordinary value from that."

