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A CROSSFIT CALLING

Like many entrepreneurs, Lindsey Barber changed careers to follow her passion.

BY BRITTNEY SALINE



Lindsey Barber (top) couldn't decide on a career and found herself in a job she disliked. In 2011, she found CrossFit and changed paths.

Lindsey Barber gripped the wheel. Most of the 30-mile drive between Unity and Cut Knife, Saskatchewan, is open road, nothing but 360-degree field and sky, and she tried to enjoy her morning commute to a job she disliked.

She pulled into the small lot outside the chemical-and-seed supply company where she worked as a sales agronomist. Some days were spent loading pallets of seed and chemicals onto trucks; others found her visiting surrounding farms and meeting with growers. Mostly, she had to sell. Fertilizer, pesticide, seed—it was all “high-pressure sales.”

“(My) job was basically to get the farmers on our program to buy as much product as they can, telling people what they need to hear just to make the sale,” Barber said.

But Barber hated selling. She felt dishonest pushing products farmers didn’t really need and felt “like I was serving no purpose in the world,” she said.

She cut the ignition and sat in her car, fighting tears and unable to will herself to go inside. She never thought work would be like this.

“My parents always said if you really like what you’re doing, then work won’t be so bad,” she said. “And I knew that this was not something I wanted to be doing forever, that there had to be something more for me to do. But I just could not come up with something that I would love to do enough to do it for the rest of my life.”

Passionless

The younger of two siblings, Barber was raised on her parents’ cattle farm in Biggar, Saskatchewan, a town of less than 2,200 people about 60 miles from Saskatoon. Though she always helped around the farm and took odd jobs over the summers, she never gave much thought to what she really wanted to be when she grew up.

“I had a really hard time figuring it out,” she said.

After Barber graduated high school in 2006, her friends left for college, talking excitedly of majors and dream jobs. Barber stayed behind.

“I remember crying about it all the time, saying, ‘I don’t know what I’m passionate about; I’m not passionate about anything,’” she said.

She knew that she wanted to help people and that she didn’t want a desk job, but it wasn’t much to go on, so she went to the

local college’s career center to take an aptitude test. The result was business owner.

“It surprised me because it wasn’t really something I’d thought of before that,” she said.

Dismissing the results as a fluke, Barber spent the next months bouncing from job to job, working in a tire shop, in a food court and on an ambulance assembly team. In 2008, two years later and no closer to knowing what her passion might be, she enrolled in the agronomy program at the University of Saskatchewan. The decision was more about resignation than ambition.

“Where I’m from, most people go to school to be a nurse or a teacher, or the guys go work in the oil field, and I did not want to be a teacher, and I cannot handle blood,” she said. “So I was like, ‘Well, I guess I’ll just live in a small town and go into agriculture,’ which I had almost no interest in.”

She had no more interest in agriculture after graduating than when she matriculated. The only class she enjoyed out of two years of soil studies was an elective entrepreneurship class. Still, she had a degree and bills to pay, so she became a sales agronomist.

Living for the Weekend

The supply company sat on a large farmyard just outside of Cut Knife, a town with a hair more than 500 residents. Large steel grain bins occupied most of the yard, while a massive chemical storage shed and seed plant stood to the side. Barber spent most of her time in a small office next to the plant, a single open room with a few desks and a coffee pot in the back.

Spring and summer weren’t so bad. It was busy, and Barber, who had grown up loving sports—she was a competitive curler in high school—and the outdoors, didn’t mind the manual labor of loading trucks with seed and spray planes with chemicals. In fall, she visited farmers at harvest time to talk about their needs for the next year.

Winter was the worst. From 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., Barber sat at her desk making sales calls, waiting for the clock to end the day.

Barber should have been researching the company’s products, but she had something else on her mind: CrossFit.



Barber knew she wanted to help people, and now she does that every day.

“I am not a salesperson, especially (for) something I don’t care about,” she said. “I wasn’t interested in researching (the products) and telling people that they have to buy this or that product. If they don’t need it, I don’t want them to waste money on it.”

Before long, Barber found herself living for the weekends.

“Friday was great; I would be super excited,” she said. “Saturday was OK, and then Sunday I started getting this awful feeling, basically depression, every Sunday by noon. Like, ‘Oh, God, here comes the next work week. I felt so sad and bummed out every Sunday night, and it started eating me alive.’”

At work, when she wasn’t selling, she surfed the web. She should have been researching the company’s products, but she had something else on her mind: CrossFit.

Finding Passion at—and Above—the Bar

In 2011, a year into Barber’s agronomy position, she noticed an unusual picture on her boyfriend’s Facebook feed. It featured a woman doing a one-armed handstand—“and she had abs,” Barber added.

Barber messaged the woman, asking what she was doing in the photo.

CrossFit, she replied.

Barber opened a new tab and typed “CrossFit” into a Google video search. She clicked through the videos with the highest numbers of views, jaw on the floor as she watched Annie Sakamoto rip through **Nasty Girls** and **Elizabeth** to loud hip hop and screaming metal.

“I was like, ‘This shit is some underground stuff. This is not your typical demo video that you see on the internet,’” she recalled. “And I remember thinking, ‘Man, this music is so heavy, but I like what they’re doing.’”

The nearest CrossFit affiliate was more than 120 miles from Barber’s home in Unity, so she messaged Rob Smith—the coach who programmed for her boyfriend’s friend—who ran CrossFit Off the Chain out of his garage in Fort Belvoir, Virginia, at the time. Smith told Barber to buy a barbell and plates, a kettlebell, dumbbells and a pull-up bar. The first workout he sent her was an AMRAP of thrusters and burpees.

“It was absolutely brutal,” Barber recalled.

For the next six months, she eagerly devoured all the information



CrossFit Lair's original home was a windowless attic above a bar.

about CrossFit she could find, clandestinely reading affiliate blogs and the CrossFit Journal at work and even doing body-weight Tabata workouts on her lunch breaks.

“Once I got that barbell it just became a total obsession,” she said.

Every time Barber posted a new PR or a Zone- or Paleo-friendly recipe online, she received a flood of messages saying she had inspired someone to make a lifestyle change. It was then that she began to see CrossFit as a potential calling.

“Getting those messages gave me the feeling I had been looking for when trying to find something fulfilling to do for the rest of my life,” she said.

Her feelings were affirmed in spring 2012, when she attended a CrossFit Level 1 Certificate Course in Calgary, Alberta.

“Just being in a room of a whole bunch of people that really love everything that you love was super motivating,” she said. “I was like, ‘I wanna go to these seminars every weekend.’ After that I realized that (CrossFit) was what I wanted to do.”

After Barber earned her Level 1 Certificate, she set up meetings and phone calls with experienced affiliate owners across Canada, picking their brains about affiliation, equipment, programming and building a membership base. She signed up for a business mentorship program geared toward CrossFit affiliates. In January, 2013—just a few months after marrying the man whose Facebook page started it all—Barber went part time at her agronomy job and opened CrossFit Lair in a windowless attic above a bar in Unity owned by friends.

There was no room for rigs, and the cement floor could not withstand barbells, but the rent was free, and the members—about 10 curious people who had seen the posters Barber plastered across town—were eager to learn. Leading the small crew of moms, dads, grandmothers and 20-somethings through sets of burpees and push-ups, Barber finally had the feeling she had craved for years.

“I just realized that was the thing I had been looking for ever since Grade 10,” she said.

They did body-weight workouts in the attic for four months before CrossFit Lair moved to its own 1,200-square-foot location in May 2013, complete with a Rogue rig, barbells and bumpers. In March 2013, two months before breaking in the second location, Barber had quit her agronomy job for good.

“I felt a ton of freedom,” she said.

As of December 2014, CrossFit Lair—which now has around 90 members and three coaches in addition to Barber—is in its third iteration: a fully equipped 3,600-square-foot warehouse on the industrial side of Unity.

“So we don’t have to run down Main Street anymore,” Barber joked.

“100,000 Times Happier”

Barber’s days look a lot different now.

After rising between 5 and 6 a.m., she sits down at her computer to respond to the dozens of clients for whom she provides nutrition planning. Then comes breakfast and some mobility work before she heads to CrossFit Lair just in time for the end of the 9:30-a.m. class.

“The ladies (in the 9:30 class) are fabulous and they make my day,” said Barber, now 28.

The rest of the day is consumed with coaching, staff meetings, training, programming and errands. Even if she finishes the day’s work before the last class ends, she likes to hang around.

“I just like being there even if I’m not coaching,” she said.

She estimates she works more hours now—and makes less money—than she did at her old job. But it’s worth it, she said.

“I love absolutely every minute of it,” she said. “I am 100,000 times happier. Some days I have trouble getting enough sleep as I just love being awake in my life.”

“Some days I have trouble getting enough sleep as I just love being awake in my life.” —Lindsey Barber

Barber made it clear that it’s not about getting to hang around in a gym and work out all day. It’s about seeing the changes in people’s lives. She recounts struggling with body image as a teenager, obsessed with the scale and the latest fad diets.

“I spent so much money on it and I was so confused,” she said “I see all the bullshit out there that people fall for, especially women. ... My goal in life is to get people to see the bullshit and learn to love themselves.”

Barber’s athletes appreciate her candor.

“She shares personal stories and it makes it so real that she has struggles, too, and there were things that she had to deal with and work around,” said 42-year-old Shauna Hammer, who is in her third year at CrossFit Lair.

After helping Hammer set a personal goal of achieving an unassisted pull-up, Barber wrote special accessory programming for her to follow, offering daily encouragement. When Hammer got her first pull-up in a recent workout, “(Barber) celebrated that with me just like it was her own first pull-up,” Hammer said.

Sherrie Berrecloth, a 53-year-old grandmother of four, had a similar experience after deadlifting 245 lb.

“(Barber) was as excited for me as I was,” she said. “She has a passion that I don’t think I’ve seen in too many people. She is always there to make me want to do more and do better. I can tell that she’s proud of the stuff I’m doing, and that just means the world to me.”

For Barber, these stories confirm her decision to go all in on CrossFit.

“When people say their favorite time of the day is CrossFit or they used to worry how they looked in a swimsuit and now they just want to squat 200 lb., that kind of stuff is what makes me feel like I’m finally doing something,” she said. “Instead of floating through life day to day, I now have a purpose. I feel so fortunate to be able to work with these people. Every day is just so frickin’ fantastic.”

The Price of Passion

Still, good things rarely come without sacrifice.

The closer Barber grew to her newfound passion, the further she felt from her husband and in-laws. Before CrossFit, she’d been heading full steam toward a life of work, children and house-keeping. But then she became more excited about staying late at the gym weeding weaknesses instead of the garden.

“(My husband) worked during the day, and he was always like, ‘When are you going to come home at night?’” Barber said. “But I didn’t want to come home and do nothing or cut the grass.”



Her dramatic career change didn’t come without cost, but Barber is certain she made the right decision to move from sales agronomist to gym owner.

At holidays and family meals, her mother and father-in-law would admonish her to have more work-life balance and not to be at the gym so much.

“I was like, ‘No. If this is what I love doing, why do I have to do less of it?’” Barber recalled. “And they both have jobs they hate. I’m like, ‘Of course you think I need balance,’ because to them (work) is something that’s awful, but to me, I’m like, ‘Don’t take me away from it. I love it here.’”

In December 2014, Barber separated from her husband, and by April 2015 they were divorced.

“He was a good guy, but it was through CrossFit that I learned that that wasn’t the life for me,” Barber said. “I wasn’t OK with living on the farm, having babies, cutting grass and working a

job I didn’t like so I could buy a bunch of stuff that did nothing but sit there. I realized maybe there was more for me and I could actually make an impact on the world.”

She moved out of the 1,600-square-foot home she and her husband had built and into a small trailer home, which she shares with a roommate.

Concerned family members questioned whether she was making the right choice, but Barber had no doubt at all.

“There was never a time when I was like, ‘This is not right,’” she said. “Even now I can sit here and say I would rather be single and doing this and helping people than be in that marriage just going through life doing what I was supposed to be doing from other people’s perspectives.”

Just One Life

It’s been more than three years since Barber first opened CrossFit Lair, and she still thinks she’s dreaming.

“Even still, every day now I’m like, ‘I can’t believe this is my job,’” she said. “I started this little gym, and I always said if I can change just one life, I’ll be happy.”

She recalled overhearing a conversation as three potential new members left the gym after a recent intro session she conducted.

“One of the guys said, ‘Well, my life is forever changed,’” Barber said.

She grinned.

“I frickin’ love my job.” ■

About the Author: Brittney Saline is a freelance writer contributing to the CrossFit Journal and the CrossFit Games website. She trains at [CrossFit St. Paul](#). To contact her, visit [brittneysaline.com](#).