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Serving the Soldiers

Brian Wilson explains how CrossFit Walter Reed works to help injured veterans improve their fitness.

By **Brian Wilson** Potomac CrossFit

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Nicole Bedard Photography

CrossFit Walter Reed began as an experiment with two athletes. Just by chance, I had two injured veterans referred to me in order to take part in my Working Wounded Program at Potomac CrossFit. This class meets twice per week and is designed to keep athletes training during injury.

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Chip (left) and Pat (right) work through a warm-up chipper in Wilson's Working Wounded class.

Part 1: Working Wounded—Chip and Pat

I had been coaching a Working Wounded class for about a year using Coach Greg Glassman's [Working Wounded](#) article as my guide. Per his instructions, I had focused not on rehabbing injury but on trying to make the athletes stronger in areas where they could get stronger while letting the injured body part heal.

I thought this would be a great opportunity for me as a coach to expand my knowledge of treating injured athletes.

Capt. Chip Gabriel, fire support/field artillery officer, U.S. Army, survived multiple IED and indirect and direct fire incidents with his unit in 2009 in Afghanistan. After what he calls "some bumps and bruises" in January 2010, he was incapacitated by a vertebral-artery clot that led to a stroke.

The stroke resulted in nerve damage to his right arm and leg, significantly restricting his strength, coordination and mobility.

Cpl. Pat Murray, machine gunner, U.S. Marine Corps, was wounded during an IED blast Sept. 4, 2006, in Fallujah, Iraq. Pat is missing his right leg above the knee and sustained third-degree burns to his hands and face, two broken ulnas, three broken metacarpals, three broken ribs, blown eardrums and a collapsed lung. He has shrapnel embedded in his right side from head to hip.

Both men were referred to me separately but at the same time. I thought this would be a great opportunity for me as a coach to expand my knowledge of treating injured athletes, and I hoped I could do some good for Chip and Pat's health.

We began our first class with an explanation of what my plan was. I explained that if they wanted to do this, these classes were mandatory. If they didn't show up Tuesday/Thursday at 6 p.m. and commit to this process, then we would shut it down. After experimenting with many systems of price, payment and attendance with members prior to Chip and Pat joining, this is the system in which I saw the most benefit for both coach and athlete.

Chip and Pat agreed, and we started off with a basic assessment of their mobility using the nine foundational CrossFit movements and other common CrossFit exercises. What was especially challenging for me as a coach was the fact that their injuries were so different, but I wanted them to complete the same warm-ups, skill work, strength work and met-cons in order to foster a sense of esprit de corps and a healthy competition.

After taking them through a lengthy series of movements, we came up with the following list of what I call “green” movements in my Working Wounded Program. Green movements can be done pain-free with some amount of relative intensity and/or load.

Green Movements

Deadlift
Air squat
Push-up
Ring dip
Lunge
Pull-up
Front squat
Press
Slam-ball
Rowing
Kettlebell swing
Box step-up
Dumbbell push press (single arm for Chip as he couldn't raise his right arm overhead)
Barbell push press (for Pat only)

These movements were not all done with full range of motion, and many needed to be assisted, but we started with this group as a baseline and used these movements principally in our classes.

The classes would be structured with a warm-up chipper at low intensity in order to continually familiarize the athletes with the movements. We would follow this with a strength or skill portion where we would take one or two of the movements and progressively add loading or volume based on basic volume-training practices (see [Volume Training for Goats](#)) or basic barbell strength progressions. Lastly, we would do a met-con with some of these movements as well.

When we started out, a typical class looked like this:

Warm-Up

2 rounds, 8 reps at “warm-up speed” of:

Deadlifts, 15 lb.

Pull-ups (sub ring row)

Air squat (use squat rack for balance)

Deadlifts, 15 lb.

Ring dips (use feet to assist)

Lunges (use squat rack for balance)

Front squats (use PVC and try for greatest depth)

Presses, PVC or 15 lb.

Strength/Skill

Every minute on the minute for 8 minutes:

2 pull-ups or 10 seconds of flexed-arm hang

Met-Con

21-, 15-, and 9-rep rounds of:

Deadlifts, 85 lb.

Dumbbell push presses (30 lb. single arm for Chip, 20 lb. each arm for Pat)

Slam-balls, 10 lb.

As Chip and Pat improved, we added more dynamic movements, such as sumo deadlift high pulls, power cleans and wall-balls. We also continued to add load to our baseline green movements.

You can watch a video of Pat performing a scaled version of Elizabeth [here](#).

You can see a sample of warm-ups, skill work and met-cons [here](#).

I wanted to focus especially on the deadlift for its demands on the central nervous system as well as my belief that doing so would give the athletes a significant degree of confidence moving forward. The back squat, front squat and overhead squat would be significant challenges due to mobility issues, and overhead strength would be an issue for both as well because of Chip's ROM issues with his right arm and the fact that Pat cannot re-bend his artificial knee in movements like the push jerk. We decided that the deadlift would be our primary strength focus.

After positive feedback from Pat and Chip on their progress in the WOD classes, they no longer attend my Working Wounded classes.

After several months of work, both athletes now pull a 300-lb. deadlift and continue to see progress.

For a video of Chip's successful one-rep-max deadlift in October 2011, click [here](#).

After six months of two-on-one training in a closed class, Pat and Chip started attending our normal workout-of-the-day classes. At that point, we had gone over substituting movements and how to scale, and I felt confident they were ready to proceed. We still did our Working Wounded classes twice per week for another month, but after positive feedback from Pat and Chip on their progress in the WOD classes, they no longer attend my Working Wounded classes. After a little over a year of training hard, they perform the WODs with minimal substitutions and scaling.

For more info on Chip and Pat, click [here](#).

Part 2: CrossFit Walter Reed

Dillon Behr has been an athlete at Potomac CrossFit since August 2010. I knew a little about Dillon's background, but as I got to know him I found out more from him, his girlfriend, and a *CrossFit Journal* article by Russell Berger titled *Athletes—Always*.

Dillon was a sergeant first class, 3rd Group, U.S. Army Special Forces. He suffered several gunshot wounds during a six-hour firefight in the Shok Valley, Afghanistan, on April 6, 2008. He was awarded the [Silver Star](#) for his actions. He was transported to Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington, D.C., and underwent hip-replacement surgery and several other procedures.

In February 2011, after seeing me working with Chip and Pat, Dillon approached me about shadowing my Working Wounded classes. Dillon wanted to take some of the techniques and programming I was using to Walter Reed and teach CrossFit there. After shadowing several sessions, Dillon began a regular CrossFit class at Walter Reed, and I began assisting him after the first few weeks.

With the congressionally mandated Base Realignment and Closure Act, Walter Reed Army Hospital has shut down, and the wounded receiving treatment have moved to Bethesda Navy Medical Center, which was renamed Walter Reed Military Medical Center.



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After six months in the Working Wounded class, Pat and Chip joined the regular classes with very little substitutions and scaling.

Courtesy of Brian Wilson/Potomac CrossFit



CrossFit Walter Reed is a military non-profit affiliate focused on training wounded athletes.

We moved with the wounded athletes and have continued to train in the fitness facilities offered on base. We have also started a military non-profit affiliate, CrossFit Walter Reed, and have been joined by other local affiliates in staffing the classes. Some of those involved include John Main and Christy Phillips of CrossFit MPH and Judd Borakave of CrossFit Bethesda.

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Establishing CrossFit Walter Reed has been challenging for several reasons. First, as anyone who has ever been in the military knows, the bureaucracy can be hard to navigate. Second, we have no dedicated space in which to train, so we use whatever space and equipment are available. CrossFit Headquarters has been very gracious in offering to provide gear for our venture; however, we are still negotiating with the Navy Morale, Welfare and Recreation personnel as to where that gear will be stored.

Third, we are targeting an athlete demographic that is transient. Many wounded service personnel undergo multiple surgeries and extensive physical therapy, all the while on powerful painkillers and other drugs. Once they are through their main treatment phase and likely ready to take on a CrossFit workout regiment, they are worried about re-injuring themselves, re-entering treatment and hence postponing their future plans, and they're also focused on moving on with their lives by either leaving the service or getting back to their unit.

We have significant evidence that a measured dose of constantly varied functional movement will improve overall health and mental well-being of severely injured athletes. We also have a small but dedicated number of wounded athletes who train with us every week. However, we still have not been able to communicate effectively to the large number of wounded service personnel that CrossFit is a viable and beneficial method of improving their fitness.

Part 3: The Working Wounded Games

With these challenges in mind, we have decided to pull the rope instead of trying to push it. In conjunction with the United States Veteran's Administration Office of National Sports Programs and Special Events, we are planning on holding the first annual Working Wounded Games at Patriot CrossFit in Arlington, Va., in the fall of 2012.

Due to the fact that many wounded veterans leave the national-capital region after their treatment, we're going to hold both a live and online competition similar to the Reebok CrossFit Games Open.

We'll continue to post recommended WODs on our [CrossFit Walter Reed](#) website and publicize the event. We hope this approach will encourage wounded veterans to try CrossFit and compete. We also hope this article and the content on our blog and Facebook page will serve as an open-source fitness model for training wounded veterans. We look forward to collaborating with other trainers and affiliates on best practices.



Courtesy of Brian Wilson/Potomac CrossFit

About the Author

Brian Wilson is the co-owner of [Potomac CrossFit](#) and [Patriot CrossFit](#), both located in Arlington, Va. He is a major in the United States Marine Corps Reserve. He holds a bachelor of science in mechanical engineering from the U.S. Naval Academy and has been "between semesters" as a student at the Graduate Institute, St. John's College in Annapolis, Md., since Potomac CrossFit opened in August 2008. He is projected to graduate from St. John's as soon as this owning/operating affiliates thing demands less of his time. For more information about the Wounded Warrior Games, please email brian@crossfitwalterreed.com.