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Thinking Outside the Box

Does a sun salutation have anything to do with Cindy? Mike Warkentin talks to a few CrossFitters who see a link between asanas and Angie.

By Mike Warkentin

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Image courtesy of Lisa Meer-Lewis

One smells of patchouli and incense, the other of sweat and vomit.

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Image courtesy of Amber Karnes

A yoga studio is certainly a very different place from a CrossFit box, but some CrossFitters have found the ancient discipline helps them in the gym.

The delicate flutterings of a bamboo flute usually drift through a yoga studio, while most CrossFit boxes throb with punishing rhythms cranked out by tattooed satanists from Southern California. Yoga is about peace and serenity. CrossFit is not. If you can find deep relaxation 15 minutes into Filthy 50, a small wooden seat atop a very tall mountain is probably a good place for you.

If yoga is yin, CrossFit is most certainly yang. They're opposites, to be sure, but are they separate? Some CrossFitters don't think so, including 2010 CrossFit Games champ Graham Holmberg, who was recently featured doing yoga in a video titled [Om and Holmberg](#).

"I've experienced gains from (yoga)," Holmberg said. "That's probably the biggest seller for me. I've felt my hips opening up. I can feel my ankles getting looser, my wrists. Lately I've been racking a barbell and I'm like, 'Wow, I'm not even that warmed up yet and I can get that barbell racked much better than I feel like I usually can.'"

He continued: "If you can find a yoga practice that fits into your schedule or you're willing to make some adjustments in your schedule and get involved with it, I think it can be beneficial."

Movement Is Movement

Ask a CrossFitter to tell you a little about himself and you'll hear something like this:

"I've got a 4:03 Fran and a 22-round Cindy. I deadlift 450, press 175 and squat 400."

Ask a CrossFitting yoga instructor the same question and you might get a very different answer.

"Who am I really? Who are you? Why are we here?"

The philosophical gap between the two pursuits makes the Grand Canyon look like a shallow ditch. Nevertheless, some CrossFitters are indeed able to find a sort of blissful relaxation during the savage efforts of a workout, and yoga isn't just about flexibility and chanting. It's also about breathing, alignment and mental focus.

Perhaps common ground can be found with very simple approach: CrossFit and yoga are both about moving your body.

"On a very fundamental level, movement is movement, and being able to teach someone good quality movement is generally the same, whether you're doing track and field, yoga, CrossFit or Olympic weightlifting," says Keith Wittenstein of CrossFit Virtuosity, a CrossFit trainer and registered yoga teacher. "I don't think CrossFit invented any movements. They've taken a lot of the best movements that were already around—lunges, squats, pushes, pull-ups and the weightlifting aspect—but it's all basic good human movement that people have been doing for ages.

"There's all the basic stuff like lunges and squats and overhead movements and handstands and push-ups. All those basic body movements that are found in yoga, they definitely benefit (CrossFit), and there's definitely a lot of crossover."

Some of the links between CrossFit and yoga aren't very subtle at all. Watch just about any yoga class and you'll see a multitude of postures that are very similar to movements performed every day in CrossFit boxes around the world.

In the yoga squat (malasana), the hips are lower than you would see them in an air squat or low-bar back squat, but cleaning a big weight often demands a squat that's well below parallel. Similarly, yoga's emphasis on avoiding a rounded back in the pose mirrors the instructions often heard in the CrossFit box.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Keith Wittenstein's Essential Yoga Poses for CrossFitters

Extended-hand big-toe pose

(utthita hasta padangusthasana B)

Half-moon pose

(aardha chandrasana)

Warrior 3

(virabhadrasana 3)

Chair pose

(utkatasana)

Downward-facing dog

(ardha mukha svanasana)

Upward-facing dog

(urdvha mukha svanasana)

Knee-down or knee-up crescent lunge

(anjaneeyasana)

Pyramid pose

(parsvottanasana)



Chair pose involves maintaining your lumbar curve with flexed knees and hips. With a barbell overhead, the lumbar curve is similarly essential.

“The basic chair pose, I see it more of a deadlift position,” Wittenstein says. “It’s not a full deep squat, but it’s knees bent, hips bent, back arched, and then you have an arms-overhead position that’s a good prep for an overhead squat to really get those shoulders up and open and active. It’s good to teach people how to really arch their back and maintain a good solid lumbar curve while flexing at the hip joint and the knee joint. I think it’s just a real good preparation for deadlifts, squats and kettlebell swings.”

Downward dog serves as a nice jumping-off point for the handstand push-up—a difficult skill that causes many firebreathers to lose their inner peace during Diane or Mary.

Crescent lunge (anjaneyasana) finds the yogi with one leg forward and the back leg powerfully extended behind while the arms are raised overhead, almost as if he’s working on the split jerk after attending an Olympic Lifting Certification with Mike Burgener.

Perhaps the position with the most in common with CrossFit is handstand (adho mukha vrksasana), though its precursor, downward facing dog (adho mukha svanasana), is also helpful in strengthening the shoulders and requires less balance.

“You’re really trying to open up that shoulder angle, and it’s a good place for a lot of people to learn how to open up the shoulders and stretch there and get weight on their hands before taking their legs up over their head,” Wittenstein says. “You can spend a lot more time in a downward dog than you can in a handstand. It’s a good place to bridge the gap and then take your legs up overhead. Once you’ve got that, it’s tremendously helpful, and you can definitely see applications when you’ve been doing a lot of handstand work to overhead pressing.”



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The handstand involves core stability and strong, active shoulders and is a precursor to the handstand push-up.

The pose can also serve as a nice jumping-off point for the handstand push-up—a difficult skill that causes many firebreathers to lose their inner peace during Diane or Mary.

“One of the problematic things about teaching handstand push-ups is most people don’t spend enough time upside down, and they freak out and you can’t explain anything to anybody when they’re upside down,” Wittenstein explains. “If you can get them being able to hold downward dog for two minutes and rest, and they’re breathing, then get them into a handstand for about 30 seconds and get them acclimated to being upside down and inverted.

“After you’ve built up a rapport with them and got them to feel comfortable and safe upside down, then you can really start to get the focus on, ‘OK, now you’re going to stay really tight, bend your elbows, touch your head to the floor and come back up.’”

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—Keith Wittenstein

Getting Looser

Can yoga help you become more proficient in many of the 10 CrossFit fitness domains? Indeed, stamina, strength, balance, coordination and flexibility are all emphasized in yoga, with flexibility being the one most people usually associate with the ancient art.

How many times have you read something like this on the [CrossFit Discussion Board](#)?

"My flexibility is absolutely horrible. On a zero-to-10 scale, I'm a minus one I have to resort to non-parallel cross-armed front squats when using weight because I can't bend my wrists back far enough to do a normal front squat, nor can I do a back squat because my chest is so tight I can barely get my arms behind my neck and onto the Olympic bar without severe pain. I also can't do many Olympic lifts because of problems with my flexibility. That kind of limits my ability to do many of the WODs."

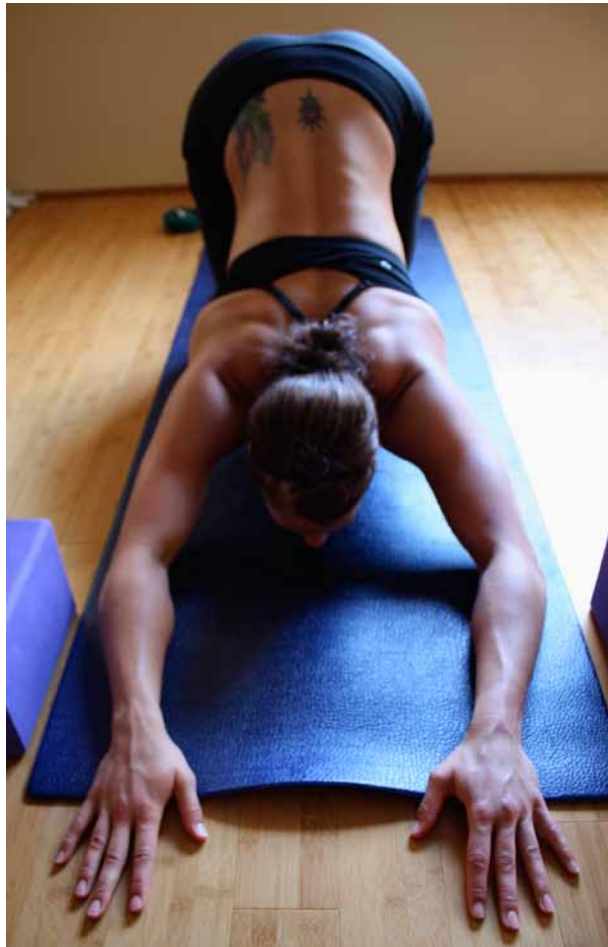


Image courtesy of Amber Karnes

Could you stretch your shoulders more often?

Lisa Meer-Lewis' CrossFit Yoga Class

Hero pose (virasana)—Seated on the heels to open knees and tops of feet. Ujjayi breathing technique is used to learn focus and breath control. Interlace fingers and reach arms overhead to stretch palms, wrists, forearms and shoulders (mountain pose, or parvatasana).

Child's pose (utthita balasana)—While seated on the knees, lower forehead to the mat and extend the arms with toes tucked under to stretch the broad muscles of the back, the shoulders and soles of feet.

Downward-facing dog (adho mukha svanasana)—Hands and feet on the floor with hips raised to lengthen spine and open shoulders.

Sun salutation (traditional suryanamaskar)—Standing upward stretch followed by forward bend, low lunge, plank, up dog, down dog, forward bend and a return to standing. Repeat on other leg. Warms the large joints and the spine and teaches correct movement with breath.

Chair pose (utkatasana)—Bend hips and knees with torso erect and arms overhead. Teaches the necessary structural integrity of the spine in squats, overhead squats and deadlifts. Also opens shoulders and teaches athletes to stay off their toes.

Low lunge/high lunge with back and arms lifted (anjaneyasana)—Stretches the quadriceps and the gluteus maximus, strengthens and lengthens the attachments within the knee. Tones and stretches hip abductor stabilizers. Shoulder elevation also involves glenohumeral movement in combination with scapulothoracic movement and thoracic extension, which can help with the shrugging motion in Olympic lifting. Prayer twists and eagle arms also incorporated to open lumbar tissue and stretch the rhomboids, posterior delts and upper traps.

Triangle (trikonasana)—Feet apart with legs straight, incline torso to place one hand on the floor. Extend the other skyward to lengthen hamstrings, rotate spine and lengthen lower back and waist.

CrossFit Yoga continued ...



Image courtesy of Amber Karnes

Tight muscles can limit human movement, wherever it occurs.

Todd Richards of Pennsylvania is not alone. At every single cert people discover they are very challenged by many movements. Large chests and biceps sculpted in the Globo Gym pull the shoulders forward and arms up into a T-Rex position that makes an overhead squat torture. Tight hamstrings and hip flexors earned with 40 hours a week behind a desk wreak havoc on the lumbar curve. Rack a bar on the shoulders with elbows high? Out of the question if you often find yourself tapping on a laptop in some airplane seat that's precisely designed to support the natural curves of a bag of laundry.

Lisa Meer-Lewis is a trainer at CrossFit 757 in Norfolk, Va., and offers yoga-inspired functional flexibility seminars at GSS CrossFit in Virginia Beach. She's also a yoga teacher and massage therapist at The Space Above Yoga Center in Norfolk.

CrossFit Yoga continued...

Wide-legged forward bend (prasarita padottanasana)—A wide-legged forward fold with no rounding of the spine to teach lumbar arch and open adductors and hamstrings, similar to the wide stance of a squat.

Warrior two (virabhadrasana two)—Lunging posture with both heels on the ground and arms extended in front and behind you to open hips

Warrior three (virabhadrasana three)—Balancing on one leg, the torso, arms and other leg are parallel to the floor with lumbar arch engaged. Strengthens hamstrings and hip abductor stabilizers.

Half moon (ardha chandrasana)—From warrior three, rotate the torso and place one hand on the ground. The other reaches to the ceiling.

Peacock preps (pincha mayurasana)—A plank or side plank on the forearms, or side plank on one forearm. Encourages Crossfitters to use their shoulders in different ways and increases shoulder stability.

Bow pose (dhanurasana)—Lying prone, reach back to grab the feet, raising quads and shoulders off the ground. Strengthens back body and lengthens psoas, hip flexors, quads—tight muscles on many CrossFitters.

Half-lord of the fishes twist (ardha matesyan-drasana)—While seated with right leg bent or extended, place left foot outside right leg. Place right elbow on outside of left knee and twist to stretch gluteals.

Resting pigeon (eka pada rajakapotasana)—From lunge position, bring left leg forward until it rests against the floor under the shoulders. Lower torso forward to rest with arms extended overhead to release hamstrings and piriformis.

Lying hand to foot/band pose (supta padan-ghustasana)—Lying supine, extend one straight leg and raise it as high as possible, grasping foot or assistance strap to stretch hamstring.

Corpse pose (savasana)—Supine rest, similar to post-Fran position.





Staff/CrossFit Journal

The pistol looks remarkably like the yoga pose marichyasana.

In her dual role as yoga teacher and CrossFit trainer, Meer-Lewis has found many CrossFitters limited by shoulder and hip tightness, and she believes their work in the box would improve with looser muscles.

Meer-Lewis is right: many CrossFitters, and athletes in general, are about as flexible as an iron rod.

“One of the issues I see in a lot of CrossFitters is a lack of shoulder flexibility and hip flexibility,” she says. “I’ve been working on that with the CrossFitters because handstand push-ups are impossible for some people due to a lack of flexibility. For me personally, I think that yoga gives you a lot more flexibility work, lengthening of the muscle tissue. With CrossFit it’s a little more strengthening. So I think they balance each other out that way.”

Yin and yang, as it were—but many kinds of yoga aren’t just about reclining on a mat, chanting mantras and waiting for flexibility to descend from the heavens on the wings of a dove.

“One aspect of yoga that’s misunderstood in its application is the idea that yoga is merely just passive stretching, where you just sort of sit there and you stretch,” Wittenstein says. “There’s more to it than that. There’s a lot of different yoga styles that are more active, that involve more movement. There’s a mobility aspect, not just a static, sit-there-and-stretch aspect.”



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Some yoga poses change little when a barbell is added.

"You'll see the [Kelly Starrett](#) video where he talks about PNF stretching. PNF stretching is something that you can incorporate and that is incorporated a lot of times in a yoga practice where you contract and release, contract and release, and actively move through greater ranges of motion and stretch yourself more than just sitting there, not doing anything and hoping that your hamstrings stretch.

"When you bring these practices into your yoga practices and your CrossFit practice, you can get a lot more flexibility more quickly than just merely doing overhead squats every day with a PVC pipe, which might work but will work over a longer period of time. If you start to put in some more aspects of controlled breathing and controlled contraction and relaxation and different things, you'll push the ball forward and see greater gains."

Learning to Breathe

The average person doesn't think about breathing, but athletes are more aware of their respiration. Swimmers obviously have to time their breaths appropriately, but other sports such as running, boxing and mixed martial arts incorporate breathing techniques to increase performance. In CrossFit a breathing technique called "gaspings" is often found at the end of a nasty WOD, but many powerlifting and Olympic-lifting coaches encourage holding of the breath with Valsalva maneuver. By closing the glottis and trapping air inside the body, athletes increase intra-abdominal pressure and vertebral support, which can help during big lifts. Breathing ladders also exist to train athletes to avoid panic breathing during exertion.

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—Keith Wittenstein

Yoga views the Valsalva maneuver in much the same way your family doctor does, but the principles of breath control might transfer from the studio to the box. In the simplest terms, yoga is about coordinating breath with movement. Once you learn to pay attention to your respiration, you might be able control it and use it to increase performance during heavy lifting or maximum exertion.

For example, at Coach Mike Burgener's Oly Cert you'll discover that unplanned breathing is unacceptable. While you have a good deal of weight racked on your shoulders, Coach B will ask you to take a quick breath and hold it for the jerk. While it may sound like a simple task, 225 lb. of bumpers gives you something with which to occupy your mind, and breath control is often neglected. That can lead to a loose core, missed lifts and burpees from Burgener.

Wittenstein has written about the importance of breathing on CrossFitVirtuosity.com and believes it's an important part of performance.

"Good yoga can teach you how to breathe," he wrote in the [CrossFit Discussion Board](http://CrossFitDiscussionBoard.com) way back in 2006. "That doesn't get discussed enough in CrossFit-land, but it is important. Knowing how to breathe can help you lift. It can help you run. It can help you recover There are hundreds of yoga breathing exercises, some of which mirror the power breathing or martial-arts-type breathing that is needed for strength work. But most importantly, learning how to breathe is learning how to focus, which will help you in all facets of your life."

No Chanting

No one's expecting CrossFit boxes to start doubling as yoga studios. The chanting of mantras will not occur before a WOD. Sanskrit will never appear on a whiteboard. But the name "CrossFit" implies the program is a mixture of other disciplines—the best of gymnastics, running, rowing, weightlifting and more. Some might suggest it's time to add yoga to that list. Others will certainly disagree. At the very least, CrossFitters are always encouraged to try new things to see what works and what does not.

If nothing else, yoga has a lot of great relaxation and recovery poses, all of which will come in handy after one of the Hero WODs.



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About the Author

Mike Warkentin is the managing editor of the CrossFit Journal. He enjoyed doing a little yoga with Keith Wittenstein at a certification in Oakville, Ont., in 2009.