
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

From Iraq to Kilimanjaro

An IED survivor suffers through an amputation and PTSD.
Now CrossFit is his therapy. Emily Beers reports.

By **Emily Beers** CrossFit Vancouver

September 2011



Courtesy of Ben Lumak

The first successful climb of Mount Kilimanjaro, Africa's tallest mountain, was in 1889.

It took climbers six weeks to arrive at the top. Today, most can reach the summit in five or six days.

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Trekkers can buy beer at some of the mountain camps along the way. Once, someone climbed Kilimanjaro dressed as a rhinoceros.

It's not difficult to find obscure facts about Kilimanjaro.

One that is more elusive, however, is the number of climbers who attempted to reach the summit with one leg.

Ben Lunak, a 27-year-old Iraq War veteran and devout CrossFitter from Arizona, is one of them.

“What he went through 99 percent of people will never experience. ... I can't even imagine. I mean, he's the only survivor of all his friends.”

—Cherity Spence

Post-Iraq Challenges

Lunak, the subject of the *CrossFit Journal* video [Why Do I CrossFit](#), returned home from Iraq in 2006 after serving in the 3rd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment. He immediately faced daunting challenges.

An IED blast had launched Lunak off the road and killed two of his closest friends. After the explosion, he was quickly transported to a hospital and stabilized thanks to a direct blood pour from a friend.

When he awoke from a coma, he discovered his leg was seriously injured.

“I asked them why my leg was still there. I knew it was useless,” Lunak said.

Without hesitation, he said, he asked to have his leg amputated.

Like many war veterans, Lunak soon began suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. For months, he had night terrors and woke up in a cold sweat, shaking.

But an amputated leg and PTSD, he said, weren't what vexed him most.

Most frustrating was answering the frequent question, “Was it worth it?”

Lunak said he simply didn't understand. To him, fighting for freedom was a no-brainer, he said.

“That made me so mad. I can't even describe how mad it made me,” he said. “Obviously it was worth it. Fighting for freedom is (why) I'm a Marine.”

Today, five years after his return from Iraq, Lunak still periodically suffers from residual PTSD effects.

“Large crowds give me anxiety,” he said. “I never had that before I left (for war).”

Lunak's girlfriend, Cherity Spence, explained her boyfriend's PTSD is just something to which she has grown accustomed.

“He still has his moments, but you just learn to ride it out. It's a matter of patience and giving him some space. What he went through 99 percent of people will never experience,” she said.

Spence added: “I can't even imagine. I mean, he's the only survivor of all his friends.”

Lunak's Therapy

Lunak said he remembers his first CrossFit workout.

It was a Fight Gone Bad event he attended with the [Wounded Warrior Project](#), the same non-profit that eventually took him to Kilimanjaro.

“I noticed that with the healthy eating and exercise ... that the night terrors started to go away. They pretty much subsided. Since finding CrossFit, my life definitely took a 180-degree turn.”

—Ben Lunak



The Kilimanjaro crew on the slopes of Africa's highest peak.

"The workout we did was modified. I remember doing box jumps and burpees," Lunak said. "I was still scared to run on my prosthetic leg then. And jumping was hard for me mentally. I was really intimidated, so I jumped onto a 12-inch box. I didn't want to be a wimp and not do it."

Lunak indeed did the workout, hard as it was.

"It definitely threw me to the wolves right away. My hamstrings and lower back tightened right up," added Lunak, who joined CrossFit Southwest shortly after the event.

The more he got into CrossFit, the easier it became for him. And the better his life became.

"I noticed that with the healthy eating and exercise ... that the night terrors started to go away. They pretty much subsided," Lunak said. "Since finding CrossFit, my life definitely took a 180-degree turn."

Soon, CrossFit and the people around him became his post-war therapy, he said. He refused to take painkillers or anxiety medication of any kind; CrossFit was a more effective drug, he said.

"People would tell me I should go see a shrink, but I never felt like a shrink knew me. If I wanted to talk to someone, I'd talk to a friend or my girlfriend," Lunak said.

"And CrossFit. I can't repay CrossFit enough for how it has helped," added Lunak, who is in the process of opening an affiliate. He's also finishing school at a community college, where's he's studying strength and conditioning and nutrition.

CrossFit is where Lunak and Spence met.

Spence said she remembers the first time she saw him. He was working out.

"I remember asking Ken Urakawa (owner of CrossFit Southwest) about him," Spence said. "He mentioned he was a war vet."

She was immediately impressed with Lunak's drive, she said.

"It would be so easy for him to sit down and feel sorry for himself, but he's doing anything but that," she said. "His injury and PTSD doesn't get in his way. I mean, he still breaks down when he talks about his buddies, but it's just because he cares so much."

Spence continued: "I'm so proud of what he's done, so it doesn't get old to tell people why he's missing a leg. I'm proud of what he gave up. He gave up a lot for people he doesn't even know."

Part of the reason he's been able to remain so positive is because of his experience in Iraq, Lunak explained.

"I'm a Marine, and it's in our blood to adapt and overcome, to hold our head high when we go through shitty situations, and to get through them," he said.

**"I can't repay CrossFit enough
for how it has helped."**

—Ben Lunak

The Climb

Lunak and six others began their journey to climb Africa's tallest mountain in May. Three other wounded warriors and former NFL players Jeff Fisher (also a head coach), Tedy Bruschi and Chad Lewis accompanied him.

"It was beautiful. We were on the roof of Africa, so we could see everything: other mountain ranges, villages. Words can't even describe the view," Lunak said.

The journey wasn't without obstacles.



Notice the prosthetic on the left has a lifting shoe on it.

"I had to stop the day before we went to the top," he said. "I brought an extra leg with me in case my 'everyday leg' broke. ... It caused me to get really bad open sores on my stump, and I can't tell you how excruciating the pain is when you get sores on your stump."

It was tough for Lunak to watch the rest of the team trek to the summit on the last day.

"I felt like I let the team down. I'm embarrassed to talk about it," he admitted. "It was highly disappointing."

But his girlfriend wasn't disappointed.

Spence called him the most determined person she knows.

"And in all of his actions, he knows how to follow through," she said.

"Sometimes it seems like society expects someone in my situation just to give up. I'm always going to have PTSD, and there's nothing I can do about that. Accepting this, I am able to move forward in my life ... and to enjoy a healthy and exciting life."

—Ben Lunak

Lunak is already saying he wants to go back one day to make it all the way to the summit, to "finish what I started."

The rewards his African adventure brought him were plenty, he said.

"During the climb, I thought about my fallen brothers a lot," Lunak said. "I thought about Iraq every day. I think about Iraq every day. It was such a big turning point in my life."

He continued: "Losing a leg has made me work a lot harder to obtain a normal life. I want people to see that."

"Sometimes it seems like society expects someone in my situation just to give up. I'm always going to have PTSD, and there's nothing I can do about that. Accepting this, I am able to move forward in my life ... and to enjoy a healthy and exciting life."

Accepting this also allows him to turn everything in his life into a positive situation.

"I wouldn't be doing the things I do today without that experience (in Iraq)," he said.

"Everything I do now is for them, for the Marines."



Courtesy of Emily Beers

About the Author

Emily Beers finished a master's degree in journalism at the University of Western Ontario in the spring of 2009. Upon graduation, she worked as a sportswriter at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games, where she covered figure skating and short-track speed skating. Currently, she hosts *WOD HOG*, a not-always-PG publication featuring the CrossFit community in Canada West.

As an athlete and CrossFitter, Beers started out as a gymnast, competing to the national level. After growing too tall for gymnastics, she played NCAA Division 1 basketball for the University of Idaho, then returned home and played for the University of British Columbia. After three years of playing basketball, she started rowing, competing at the varsity level at the University of Western Ontario for two years. While trying to make the National Rowing Team in 2009, she discovered CrossFit and became utterly addicted. Soon, CrossFit was meant to be a way to cross-train for rowing but became her greatest passion. She moved back to Vancouver in September 2009 and found CrossFit Vancouver, where she now both trains and works as an apprentice coach.