

A CrossFit Startup Guide: Part 1

Here's a quick overview to get CrossFit beginners up to speed

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New to CrossFit and not sure where to begin? If so, then welcome. This series will address the primary concerns and focal points for a starting CrossFit athlete, orienting your use of resources throughout the entire CrossFit.com universe.

What you will find here are some tools to focus your entry into CrossFit workouts and fitness in general. Gone are the promises of easy and comfortable results. The best CrossFitters educate themselves both about movement and fitness broadly, as well as about their own individual strengths and weaknesses.

Of course, the best way to begin CrossFit is with a great trainer who uses his or her vast experience to guide you through the various phases of your fitness quest. This series is not intended to equal that. It cannot. Instead, we recognize that not everyone has access to such a trainer, and this will help those folks get the most out of the vast resources available on CrossFit.com.

Three-part Charter: Mechanics, Consistency, Intensity

The first and most important component of beginning CrossFit is to follow our charter of mechanics, consistency, and then intensity. These three aspects are intricately interrelated; CrossFit does not work to its potential unless you execute each one and understand how it is bound to the others.

Mechanics refers to technique—your ability to move properly through our core movements. For us, this



means moving yourself and external objects in the most efficient, effective, and safe manner possible.

Consistency has a two-part application: 1) That you are consistent in performing the mechanics of the movement; and 2) That you are consistent in CrossFit workouts. Both are necessary! CrossFit workouts are very potent medicine; too much too soon and you can severely hurt yourself. Luckily, the body adapts quickly, and before you know it, you will be hitting each workout with maximum personal intensity.



Intensity, as Coach Greg Glassman, founder and CEO of CrossFit, formally states, is the independent variable most commonly associated with the rate of return on favorable adaptation. More simply put, intensity brings about all the good results from working out. However, we also have to realize that intensity is relative to our physical and psychological tolerances. This is a process, and one that takes an indeterminate amount of time, so be patient. Elite-level athletes may be ready to ramp up their intensity in a couple of weeks, while de-conditioned athletes can take months or longer. The goal of CrossFit

is to improve your fitness for life; no one ever got in shape overnight. If you gradually exceed what you have done before, soon enough you will be doing the main site workouts “as prescribed.”

All three together: Now that you understand mechanics, consistency, and intensity, here’s how they all fit together under CrossFit: While many assume that safety is the main concern with proper mechanics—it is certainly the safest way to train—we can’t emphasize enough that sound technique is the most efficient and effective road to fitness. Proper movements will allow you to lift more weight, perform more repetitions faster, or both. More work in less time means higher average power (force x distance / time = power). Higher average power means higher intensity. Higher intensity means better results. Therefore, proper mechanics are the ideal supports for the bridge to fitness.

A Brief Explanation of Fitness

Fitness, most broadly defined, is the ability to handle the demands of your life. Each of us has both different and unpredictable demands. A firefighter has no idea how big the fire will be on his next call, just as Grandma has no idea how heavy each grocery bag will be the next time she goes to the store. Very different concerns, for certain, but the ability to handle each requires the same basic abilities. As Coach Glassman has said for years, “The needs of our grandparents and soldiers differ in degree, not kind.” These needs are the functional competencies to move our own bodies and external objects through three-dimensional space.



The CrossFit exercises that we use the most are what we have found to be the most effective ways to build a broad, general, and inclusive functional competence. Squatting, picking things up off the ground, putting things overhead, pulling ourselves up, running, jumping, throwing; these are the movements of life, and done with intensity, they prepare us for the demands of life.



Many people wonder why CrossFit workouts are timed. There are several reasons for this, the most important being intensity. Remember that average power is work divided by time. The same work done in less time is more power and more intensity. Your first workouts should be done at a relatively low intensity. This is essential for you to both learn the proper mechanics of the movements and to let your body acclimate to the workload. Every time you repeat a workout, you can compare your performance and see if you are increasing your power (therefore intensity). For example, if you do

exactly the same number of reps at the same loads in less time, your intensity went up. If you increased the loads and kept the same time (or finished even quicker), your intensity went up. These direct comparisons give you a quantifiable gauge to the increase of your fitness. You are measuring the changes in your capacity and scientifically proving that you are getting fitter and more capable.

CrossFit has a concise yet comprehensive definition of fitness that is a bit of a mouthful: ***Fitness is increased work capacity across broad time, modal, and age domains.*** What this means is that you have functional capacity in all different types of movements at a variety of durations of effort, throughout your life. If you are increasing this broad work capacity, you will be competent at both short bursts of activity and extended, longer workouts.

The great majority of functional movements are complex and difficult to master. But the advantages of developing proficiency in them far outweigh the inconvenience and effort required to learn them. There are physical and neurological benefits uniquely associated with these movement patterns, benefits that translate broadly into the various movements and skills of life.



For a more in-depth discussion on technique and its affect on fitness, read Greg Glassman's revolutionary feature CrossFit Journal article, *What Is Fitness?* <http://journal.crossfit.com/2002/10/what-is-fitness-by-greg-glassm.tpl>

Start with the Squat

"There is no better place to start an examination of functional exercise than by learning how to squat."
-Greg Glassman



Early Seminars - The Squat 4-15-05 by Greg Glassman, Oct 24, 2008, for another excellent description on the basic fundamentals of the Squat in video format from an early CrossFit Seminar. <http://journal.crossfit.com/2008/10/early-seminars---the-squat-4-15-05.tpl>

And *Air Squats*, the main page video example of our elemental movement. Video - [\[wmv\]](#)[\[mov\]](#)

Before we begin a discussion of the squat, check out these foundational explanations of our most essential movement.

Squat Clinic by Greg Glassman, Dec 01, 2002, for a quintessential article on why and how to perform the squat, with performance standards, potential faults and fixes for the movement. <http://journal.crossfit.com/2002/12/squat-clinic-by-greg-glassman.tpl>

How is your squat? Does it look like the models in the article and videos above? If not, there is no better prescription for your fitness than moving toward a perfect squat. If your squat is pretty good (going to full depth!) and you have been working out for a while, then try testing yourself with *Tabata Squats*.

The Tabata interval, adapted from Dr. Izumi Tabata, is a regularly used CrossFit training device of 20 seconds

of work followed by 10 seconds of rest, and repeat eight times. For *Tabata Squats*, perform as many full range of motion air squats as you can in 20 seconds, then rest for 10 seconds, repeated eight times consecutively. Your score is the single lowest number of repetitions in any of the eight rounds. As an approximate benchmark, if your score is 12 or above, then you have achieved a working proficiency in the squat and can move on comfortably.

If your lowest score is 11 or below, continue to try and attain a level of proficiency and capacity in the squat, the foundation of core movements. You do not need as much variety nor do you have a need for the more complex movement patterns yet. Progress in the squat is the primary need for your beginning fitness, and it will carry over into all realms of fitness.

For remediation and further information regarding the squat check out the following CrossFit resources:

1) *Coming Forward Onto Toes*. In this short clip, Nicole Carroll points out this very common fault in people's squat technique. Note what she is looking at on Anny and her cues to fix the movement. [[wmv](#)][[mov](#)]

2) *Why Heels?* This a great clip of Coach Glassman explaining why we must be so focused on keeping the heels on the ground during the squat. [[wmv](#)][[mov](#)]

3) *Squat Therapy*. Nicole and Coach take Laura through an excellent remediation exercise, referred to as Squat Therapy, used to improve the capacities within the Squat. [[wmv](#)]

4) *Going Deep* by Mark Rippetoe, CFJ Issue 49, Sep 2006; This is a detailed, anatomy-based discussion of the 'how to' and 'why' of going to the crease of the hip below the knee in a squat. <http://journal.crossfit.com/2006/09/going-deep-by-mark-rippetoe-se.tpl>

5) *You Don't Know Squat Without An "Active Hip"* by Mark Rippetoe, Nov 26, 2008; This is a very well-written article on why you need to push your knees out at the bottom of the squat, as well as turn the pelvis over hard throughout the full range of motion, actively engaging the lower lumbar spine. <http://journal.crossfit.com/2008/11/you-dont-know-squat-without-an-active-hip.tpl>



6) *CrossFit Kids – Teaching The Squat* by Jeff Martin, Oct 6, 2006; This is an excellent short video of Jeff Martin talking through some different cues to help portray movement mechanics to kids as well as adults. <http://journal.crossfit.com/2008/10/crossfit-kids---teaching-the-squat.tpl>

The Next Step: Base Proficiency Benchmarks

For those with a score of 12 or more for Tabata Squats, and who possess acceptable to excellent mechanics, I have come up with a list of "base proficiency" benchmarks. The purpose of these benchmarks is to give you a sense of the skills you need before you should embark on scaling regular CrossFit workouts. In other words, regular, scaled CrossFit workouts assume that you have achieved a certain base capacity in a variety of movements. The movements below are also a general gauge of whether or not you have those base proficiencies. The list is not perfect, but if you find that you cannot perform any of the below listed skills, working on those particular deficiencies is more important than doing regular CrossFit workouts.

- 10 overhead squat with PVC
- 10 push presses with a barbell equal to 1/3 of your bodyweight
- 5 deadlifts at 1/2 bodyweight
- 5 push-ups from knees with hands on ground (men) or on a bench (women)
- 5 jumping pull-ups
- 10 wallballs to a target two feet above your reach with an 8-lb. ball (men) or a 4-lb. ball (women)
- 10 Abmat sit-ups with feet anchored



If you are not sure what each of these is, stay tuned to future articles, for I will be covering all of these movements, as well as many more. But if you already know what they are, and have the ability to perform them, you have enough capacity in moving your body and external loads to begin scaling regular CrossFit

workouts if you want. You can find further information and tips on scaling main site workouts within the following CrossFit resources. We will also be covering techniques and approaches to scaling in future articles.

1) *Scaled Workout Demo*. This is a perfect video example of how everybody does the same workout (preserves the same stimulus) but there are infinite ways to scale the workout, designing each specifically for the athlete's capabilities and limitations. [[wmv](#)][[mov](#)]

2) *A Beginners Guide To CrossFit* by Greg Glassman, Oct 01, 2004. This is an excellent article written by Coach pointing out the relevance of CrossFit for all athletes, regardless of age or fitness level; the key being scaling and preserving the stimulus of functional movement. <http://journal.crossfit.com/2004/10/a-beginners-guide-to-crossfit.tpl>

3) *Assistance for Bodyweight Exercises* by Greg Glassman, Aug 01, 2004. This article is an easy to follow breakdown of how to scale for gymnastic exercises, replete with numerous pictures to demonstrate the description. <http://journal.crossfit.com/2004/08/assistance-for-bodyweight-exer.tpl>

4) *Seniors and Kids* by Greg Glassman, Feb 01, 2003. Another great article briefly explaining the basics of scaling for all levels of fitness. <http://journal.crossfit.com/2003/02/seniors-and-kids-feb-03-cfj-1.tpl>

5) *CrossFit SV Beginners' Ladder* by Judd Xavier and Tom Rankin, Oct 21, 2008. A fantastic scaling and benchmark tool written up by the owners of CrossFit Silicon Valley to aid beginners in attaining the goal of using the WOD's off the main site. <http://journal.crossfit.com/2008/10/crossfit-sv-beginners-ladder.tpl>

6) *Training For The Aged* by Mark Rippetoe, June 01, 2003. An excellent, no-holds-barred discussion of the importance of working out and lifting weights for all, especially the elderly. <http://journal.crossfit.com/2007/06/training-for-the-aged-by-mark.tpl>

7) *The Girls For Grandmas* by Greg Glassman, Oct 01, 2004. This is a write-up by Coach showing some concrete examples of how to scale CrossFit Benchmark Girl workouts. <http://journal.crossfit.com/2004/10/the-girls-for-grandmas-by-greg.tpl>

8) *A CrossFit Grandma* by Mary Conover, Oct 01, 2004. This is an amazing personal account written by one of Coach's elderly clients, talking through how she has found innumerable gains in fitness through scaling CrossFit workouts, as well as some of the scaling that has taken place for her workouts. <http://journal.crossfit.com/2004/10/a-crossfit-grandma-by-mary-con>

9) *CrossFit Induced Rhabdo* by Greg Glassman, Oct 01, 2005. This is a very important article addressing one of the very real potential dangers of hitting the WOD before you are fit by the standards of CrossFit; a must read for anyone thinking about scaling or attempting the main site workouts, particularly without a gradual introduction to functional movements and intensity. <http://journal.crossfit.com/2005/10/crossfit-induced-rhabdo-by-gre>



Finally, A Word about Nutrition

Oh, if only we could eat whatever we wanted and still get great results. But the simple and unavoidable truth is that without eating a balanced, moderate diet, you will fall far short of your potential. In fact, the first question that experienced trainers ask when people don't see normal gains with CrossFit is, "What are you eating?"

When speaking of nutrition one must think of it as fuel, not a diet. What you put in is what you get out, and you will not get the results you deserve without addressing nutrition. Of all the things you hear about nutrition, however, the one that must remain at the forefront of your dietary decisions is the fact that you

must eliminate chronically elevated insulin levels by controlling excess carbohydrate intake. Think of fuel in three macronutrient categories: carbohydrates, protein, and fat; and balance them for every meal with a ratio of 40-30-30 respectively.

For two video clips chocked full of more in-depth information on the basics of nutrition check out the two links below.

1) *Hyperinsulinism and Diet* by Robb Wolf, Sept 07, 2008. This is a perfect introductory lecture on nutrition and the effects of elevated carbohydrates on the body given by CrossFit's top nutrition expert. <http://journal.crossfit.com/2008/09/hyperinsulinism-and-diet>

2) *Nutrition: The Teeter-Totter* by Nicole Carroll, March 01, 2008. A second must-watch clip featuring director of training and CrossFit superstar Nicole breaking down nutrition and its importance to your fitness. <http://journal.crossfit.com/2008/03/nutrition-the-teetertotter-by>

And, for two athletes' personal accounts of sticking to a balanced diet, check out these two Journal articles:

1) *Getting off the Crack* by Nicole Carroll, October 1, 2005. The insulin spike that comes after eating too much or too many carbs is as addicting as crack. Eating a balanced diet changes your view of that forever. <http://journal.crossfit.com/2005/10/getting-off-the-crack-by-nicol>

2) *Diet Secrets of the Tupperware Man* by Greg Amundson, December 29, 2008. Greg describes his experience implementing the Zone while being a full time Sheriff's Deputy. <http://journal.crossfit.com/2008/12/diet-secrets-of-the-tupperware-man>



About the Author

Todd Widman is a former Marine, and one of CrossFit's top trainers. He spends a significant portion of his time traveling around the country (and world) working the CrossFit Level 1 and Level 2 certification seminars. Todd is also a coach at [CrossFit Flathead](#) in Kalispell, MT.