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CrossFit: My First 10 Days

After a sedentary lifestyle, a badly injured back and other health complications, J. Rich Wilson dives into CrossFit in an attempt to better his quality of life before turning 40.

By J. Rich Wilson

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All images courtesy of CrossFit North Atlanta

As a kid, I did all the typical suburban WASP stuff—tennis, soccer, the summer swim league.

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In high school, a pair of defective knees took me off the pitch and into the pool full time. I swam year-round for a fairly competitive team and found some athletic stride for the first time. College began the slow decline of my body. For the next 15 years, I coasted on decent genetics and the residual fitness of my youth.

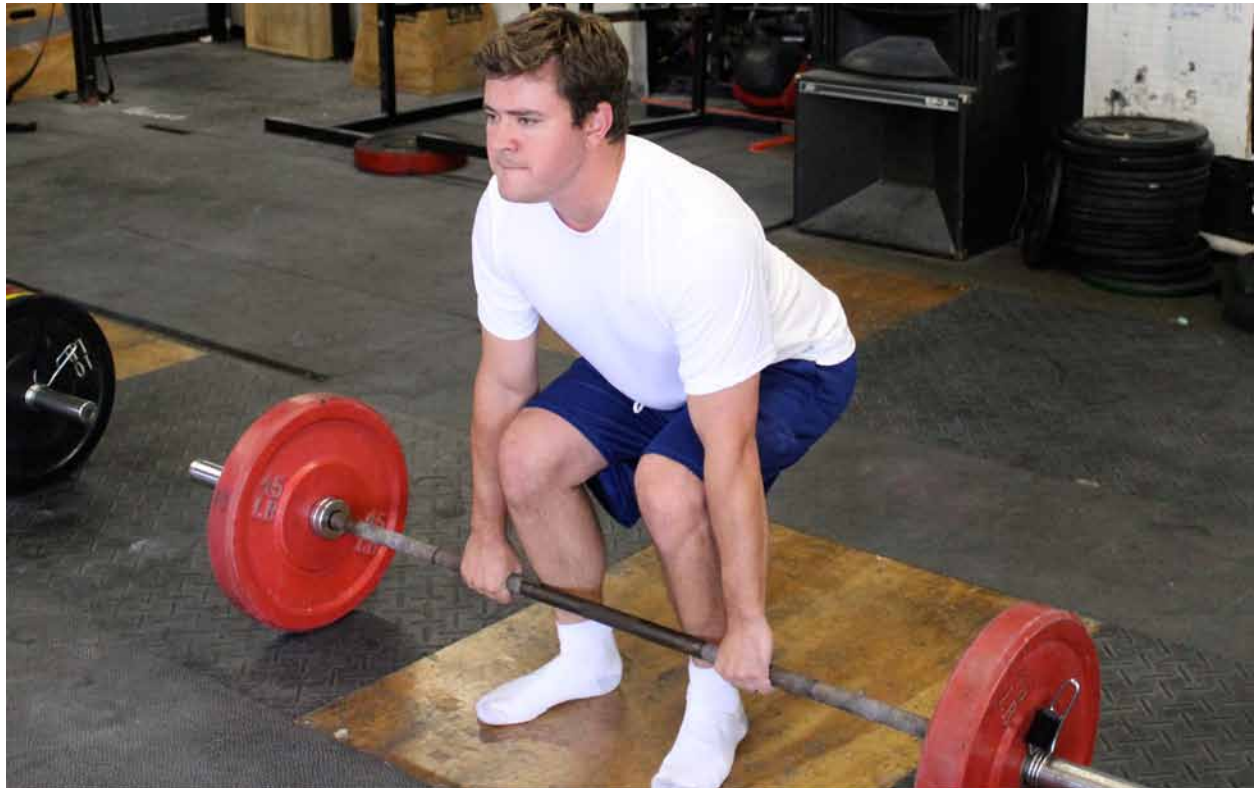
Doing nothing seemed like the way to ensure maximum suck-ness at 40.

Now, at 33, I've noticed the view of my feet from above is increasingly obscured by a disappointingly solid belly. A sedentary lifestyle has resulted in a mildly arthritic back, an inability to do yard work when hung over and a reputation for having a large head that I don't remember having prior to 26. Instead of fighting nature, I went with it. I even named my consulting company Big Scary Cranium.

It wasn't long before I felt like Indiana Jones running away from a giant boulder emblazoned with the ominous number "40." I only had a few years before it caught up to my increasingly soft body and flattened my chances to rebuild a base of fitness that could last into my middle years. I figured by the time that boulder catches up, I need to be strong enough to take the hit. Doing nothing seemed like the way to ensure maximum suck-ness at 40. It wasn't until a critical mass of those around me started drinking the CrossFit Kool-Aid that I convinced myself there was hope for my neglected shell.

Day 1

My foray into CrossFit began under the serene guise of an elements class. I showed up at 6:30 a.m., even though noon and 4:30 p.m. were options. My instructor, Kim, welcomed the three newbs and explained the class was designed to teach us how to move naturally to avoid injury. We learned how to swing a kettlebell and, more importantly for my back, how to squat properly.



With proper instruction, Wilson learned how to deadlift in spite of back pain that had slowed him down before.

Two years ago, a so-called trainer at a Globo Gym tossed my uneducated ass into a set of weighted squats while he was busy admiring a female member two machines over. Down I went, straight as a board. We both heard the pop. I spent two years seeing chiropractors, a physical therapist and multiple doctors, and I even endured two rounds of spinal injections. Today there is a bulge in my L5 disc and continued swelling in the facets.

Kim demonstrated how the butt-out, shoulders-back method of maintaining the spine's natural curve was key to proper squat form. Rather than tossing a few hundred pounds onto our shoulders, she had us practice the movement for overhead and front squats with PVC pipe. After a few dozen reps, I had zero pain in my back—a good start.

Next: the push-up. I always thought I knew how to do a proper push-up, but the CrossFit method emphasizes the chest touching the ground first. Apparently I've been cheating for decades.

After more instruction, Kim took us to the main workout area for a training-wheels regimen. We moved out of a quiet room with a petite instructor carefully detailing body movements to a high-energy lair of clanging iron, screaming heavy metal and splotchy faces that suggested the distinct possibility of losing the morning's protein shake, even after years of training. I must admit I was a little intimidated.

I remember thinking that admitting to that kind of weakness must be some sort of CrossFit no-no. Instead, Kim and another trainer, Kyri, kept giving words of encouragement.

I was inordinately focused on the sound the barbells-plus-plates made when dropped on the plywood-and-rubber platforms. I assumed everyone who wasn't in the elements class was following a pre-determined course or circuit, but it just seemed like a bunch of people repeatedly pumping large amounts of steel into the air and letting them drop once they reached exhaustion. However, I did notice everyone was keeping the exaggerated posture. Even amid the chaos of Wolf Mother's latest hit song, grunts, clangs and the beeping of electronic timers, people seemed to follow the rules Kim had laid out. Our workout was:

AMRAP in 20 minutes of:

- 5 pull-ups
- 10 push-ups
- 15 overhead squats (PVC)
- 1 widow-maker
(50-yard sprint up and down a hill)

I completed three rounds. Almost.



Trading the sedentary lifestyle for fitness, Wilson rediscovered his inner athlete.



After struggling through his early workouts, Wilson found a love for the tough work of a CrossFit WOD.

Clearly I was the most out-of-shape person there. As I climbed into the band that alleviated my weight during the final set of pull-ups, Kim showed me how to further modify the exercise by using one foot on a block. I let slip, "Man, I'm embarrassed." I remember thinking that admitting to that kind of weakness must be some sort of CrossFit no-no. Instead, Kim and Kyri kept giving words of encouragement.

Kim was gracious enough to point out to all three of us that no one should be embarrassed for pushing themselves. It's those who weren't there who should be embarrassed, she said. She told us we might feel like we want to die after many workouts and that almost every CrossFitter modifies an exercise at least once. That made me feel better—like I wouldn't be shunned for lack of early performance. Still, the competitor in me had a hard time coming to grips that I was at the bottom of the class.

Afterward, I got in my car, panting and wondering if a good puke was in my future (I have a stomach hernia that makes vomiting extremely painful). After a good four minutes, I

started the car and talked my arms through the process of shifting gears and steering so I could get home and back to bed.

It was tough, but nothing compared to the unmodified exercises I knew awaited me if I continued on this path. At that moment, I realized I had turned into a true pussy.

That thought alone motivated me for at least three weeks.

Once More Unto the Breach

The next time I went into the box, the new recruits and I exchanged greetings and I inquired about their athletic history. Apparently my inner pussy had returned and I wanted to confirm my suspicions they were starting the game a few notches above me. One woman had indeed been a CrossFitter at a different box but had to quit because of a hip injury. She mentioned she already liked CrossFit North Atlanta better because of the mere fact there was an elements class to show her proper form. The other guy in the group said he had been pretty active in working out but had taken an 18-month break. Aha! I knew it. They weren't lazy asses like me.

Kim assembled us in the quieter room and began teaching us weightlifting. The first lesson was a proper deadlift. Next, she showed us how to power clean. When I had watched Olympic weightlifters in the past, it looked as if they were nudging the weight upward, quickly squatting down and pushing the bar up. This was a major oversimplification. I didn't realize the movement relies on the legs building momentum for the weight and the shrug and squat getting the body under the bar.

Kim explained we needed to embrace our "inner stripper" and make the motion fluid with the butt way out, not down. My inability to grasp this concept was somewhat concerning as it was central to preventing further back injury.

After about 15 minutes of instruction and repetition, I was again the F student in the class. Thankfully, neither Kim nor my newb peers showed frustration.

We moved into the main workout area for the WOD. Although time was being recorded, I think this was an introduction to the concept of being competitive with one's self. In my mind, I had to tie this lesson to my strong desire to obtain the perfect flipped cup in only one try at a University of Georgia tailgate party. Our workout was:

15-12-9 reps of:

Deadlifts (95 lb.)

Box jumps

Sit-ups

I remembered the bright yellow weights as the ones used by the women in the previous class. The inner pussy grumbled a bit, but I went with it. I've had way too much back pain to attempt some sort of bravado when it comes to something like deadlifts.



After injuring himself while squatting years ago, the author fixed his form and learned to enjoy the foundational movement.

I asked Kim to watch my lifts; she continued to correct and give instruction. I was really focused on keeping the natural curve of my spine accentuated, and I found the first set to be fairly easy. Round 2 wasn't too bad, though I was terrified that failing leg muscles would cause a failure in reaching proper box height. By Round 3, the deadlifts were extremely tough. I felt the natural curve of my spine start to give out, which greatly concerned me. Moving onto the final set of 9 box jumps, I felt a slight pinch in my back on impact, but nothing dramatic. The sit-ups were easy, something I attribute to years of sucking in an increasingly weighty gut.

I found comical the amount of effort it took to take off my shirt, shift gears in my car or reach for a box of cereal from the top shelf. I damn near dumped the whole thing on my face.

After the workout, Kim asked if we had any questions. I, of course, took more than my share of time inquiring about methods of back protection. Belts are out because they don't encourage proper natural form. The short answer: take your time. Made sense. The inner pressure to perform kept me from stopping between deadlifts to shake out my back and do it right. Kim told us to tell the trainers about any problems we had so they could keep an eye on us and give us proper modifications. She even said it might take two, three or more tries at the proper mod before finding something that works. I appreciated her advice.

Later in the day, I found comical the amount of effort it took to take off my shirt, shift gears in my car or reach for a box of cereal from the top shelf. I damn near dumped the whole thing on my face.

What was key for me was the fact that my back was doing OK and I was getting more excited about my new workout regimen.

First Official WOD

This day started with Kim teaching us the shoulder press, push press and jerk. Man, I sucked at the jerk.

For the warm-up, we hit the rowers. Next, Kim showed us double-under jump-rope technique. I found that executing consecutive double-unders was more of a coordination problem than an athletic one. I'm sure mastering this movement will come in handy when I join Mario and Luigi on our next grand adventure. Next was the WOD:

6-8-10-8-6 reps of:

Shoulder presses

Kettlebell swings

Burpees

This was my introduction to burpees. While the shoulder presses were extremely difficult and the kettlebell swings a bit challenging, the burpees were absolutely grueling. My first burpee looked good. My 20th burpee involved falling onto the floor in a way that minimized bone damage. Next, I peeled myself off the floor in whatever way possible, all while my inner pussy screamed, reminding me gravity is a law set forth by God and I am best to obey and remain on the floor. When I managed to scrape myself from Earth, I proceeded to bounce in a way that resembled a three-year-old throwing a tantrum. If I was lucky, my hands met somewhere in the air and made a wet smacking noise.

After the WOD, Kim invited us to fall into a puddle on the floor. I already had perched myself on an 18-inch box, head in hand, wondering if last night's wine and pretzels were going to return for an encore. Recovery from immediate dizziness took about three minutes; minor nausea continued for another 10.

At that moment, I decided to take the weekend off.

Later that day, alone in my living room, I had a ridiculous happy moment where I pumped my fists toward the ground, half hunched over like some sort of ape and lightly screaming "heheheee!" Five minutes earlier, I had stepped in the door from my first official CrossFit workout. I didn't think I would finish it. I did.

We Can Rebuild Him

Justin was my trainer on this particular day. I had detailed my back injury to him, as well as my desire to start easy so I could continue CrossFit beyond an experience that could be summed up at a cocktail party: “Yep, I tried CrossFit for about two weeks. Killed my back. Now I just walk the dogs when I can.”

Justin gathered the crew for the warm-up: an 800-meter run. It was the longest I had run in about a decade. I ran the Atlanta Peachtree 5K when I was 23 but ended up severely injuring my knees. That’s when I found out about my kneecaps being off track and rubbing through my IT band. Still, I was surprised at how easy the 800-meter run actually was. Could it be the elements class was already paying off?



Knees out, Rich!

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We got back and did some active stretching—lunges, whip kicks and some sort of jog where you kick your feet to your butt. Next we used PVC pipe to loosen the arms, shoulders and back by moving the pipe horizontally overhead back and forth for a few minutes. Then Justin unveiled the workout:

21-15-9 reps of:

Push presses

Ring dips

Burpees

Kettlebell sumo deadlift high pulls

Not surprisingly, but somewhat dishearteningly, I had the least amount of weight on the bar of anyone in the class, including the women. I started doing the push presses with 95 lb.—same as the women—but had to move down to 65 lb. I just couldn’t keep up and Justin was quick to move over the lighter weights. He also carefully watched my form and made corrections. I was more thankful for this than he likely knew. I had no pain in my spine; the muscles around it were a different story.

The burpees were predictably challenging and the dips were impossible. I swear the rings sensed my weakness upon approach and wobbled intentionally just to screw with me. Two dips into the routine, I switched to box dips. Again, my inordinate weakness only allowed for 4-5 dips at a time. I’d pause, look at everyone else grunting but performing around me and do a few more. At one point, I found myself sitting on a box with a strobe effect in my vision. I was sure I was going to puke and had zero confidence in my ability to reach a trash can or the bushes outside before the gastric volcano erupted. I sat still. Sound faded and I kept telling myself it would subside shortly. It didn’t. I felt embarrassed about not working out and for what was sure to be a disgusting mess on the floor for my first “big boy” session. Justin came over and recommended burping a few times. Unfortunately, I have a hiatal hernia in my esophagus which makes this difficult on command. Puking is incredibly painful with this problem as well. I told Justin about it and said, “Sorry, I’m just not built well.” Justin patted me on the shoulder, carved a wicked grin across his face and said, “We’re going to fix that.”

With Intensity Comes Euphoria

I've learned that a good CrossFit workout keeps you on the edge of that sick feeling for a good 20 minutes. It's the intensity that brings the quick results. The harder you push during that 20 minutes, the better you'll feel for the rest of the day and, conceivably, the rest of your life. Each workout has been one of the most intense experiences I've had. I've also noticed that after the first hour, I feel more mentally balanced, more alert and excited about doing it again.

Please understand I am not a push-it-to-the-limit kind of person. The idea of making myself nauseous on purpose has been an anathema to me my entire life. It's just that now I see the value of that kind of sacrifice. What's preferable to you? Feeling so-so all day and watching yourself degrade slowly over the years or feeling like you want to die for 20 minutes so you can feel fantastic the rest of the day—all while watching yourself improve physically?

I hope to be more productive, happier and alert. Overcoming the "big boy" WOD was a huge step for me. I may have heavily modified it, but I finished.

That's something I wondered if I could do for a long time.

I'm Bleeding. Yup, I Did It Right.

I stuck with Justin as my trainer for the initial sessions because of my back trauma. I also appreciated his joyful sadism.

"Man, this has gotta be what cocaine feels like," he exclaimed during a pre-warm-up speech in reference to that day's WOD. Although I'd never tried cocaine, I've known people who have and I seem to remember the experience being tied more to annoying chatter than physical exertion.

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The WOD was:

5x3 bench press

5x3 squats

Then:

200-meter run

50 knees-to-elbows

200-meter run

40 knees-to-elbows

200-meter run

30 knees-to-elbows

200-meter run

20 knees-to-elbows

200-meter run

10 knees-to-elbows

Simple, right? I asked Justin what knees-to-elbows was and he jumped at the chance to demonstrate. Now I was pretty sure I could do a few, but 50 in a row wasn't even scary—it was ridiculous. For a moment I developed a split personality and heard my mind tell my body, "Good luck, dipshit."

My bench-press weight was embarrassing. I could only put up 125 lb. for all 15 reps. Squats were even lower. I can't bring myself to write the number. Suffice it to say it was less than most of the women. I think there was one other man there who apparently had similar back problems and was only moving the bar, though I might have made that up to make myself feel better in a nausea-induced state. Assuming it did exist, it made me happy to see Justin equally as supportive for another injured CrossFitter.

Justin spent a lot of time examining and correcting my squat. I felt like an attention hog but imagined all newbs got their share of instruction at some point.

The bench presses and squats were the warm-up. Beer-drinking, couch-sitting Rich would have considered that to be a complete workout just two weeks earlier.

The first run was a breeze, but then came the knees-to-elbows. Like most movements, the first few looked good. After about five, I noticed my hands starting to feel as if someone had dripped acid onto the bar prior to my workout. My previously soft, velvety hands were being touched inappropriately by this iron bar with a bit of dirty tape wrapped around it. It hurt.

After 10 reps, the knees were no longer touching elbows. Hell, it might have been 7 reps. I managed to complete 17 before letting go of the bar. The sensation of blood returning to my hands stuck in half-grip position reminded me of fifth-grade monkey bars. I popped back up and did 5 more, dropped to the floor and started breathing heavy, welcoming nausea as if it were an old friend, "Oh, there you are."

I'm not sure what hurt worse: the attempts to bring my thighs above my waistline or my hands gripping the bar. I was warned about this by many a CrossFitter. Calluses and split hands are typical. Pumice stone didn't help much, or maybe it did and I would be writing a much more dramatic tale had I not used one.

Having finally plowed through 50 knees-to-elbows in far longer time than anyone else, I went for the second sprint. By the time I reached the top of the hill, I could tell I was doing something right because I felt like absolute shit. It was time for 40 knees-to-elbows.

Knees-and-elbows remained strangers. Justin told me to do them in sets of 5. This actually helped a lot. The idea of having smaller mental increments was a big part of what got me through.

It's amazing how my mind allows an intensity of commitment for CrossFit that I've not seen in past athletic endeavors.



Everyone deserves a Gatorade shower after a big win.

Third set: more nausea and more pathetic attempts while hanging from the bar. For this and subsequent sets my knees were barely breaking my midline. By the end, it was a Herculean effort just to attempt the motion. I felt like Rambo being electrocuted by the Russians in *First Blood Part 2*. There was a lot of clenching and grunting, but not a whole lot of movement.

The drive home was in heavy traffic with a rising sun directly in my face. It was as if God was picking up where Justin had left off, "Yeah, that's right, the pain doesn't matter. The pain doesn't matter." I was three-quarters of the way into my trip home before the really uncomfortable nausea subsided.

What's strange is even while I feared imminent puking, I still questioned whether I pushed hard enough. I wondered if I let the pain in my hands get the better of my movement. One look to my left hand revealed a crack and a spot of blood. Nah, I did it right. Still, it's amazing how my mind allowed an intensity of commitment for CrossFit that I've not seen in past athletic endeavors.

What Will Become of Me?

For several weeks, we did CrossFit Football workouts in honor of football season starting. This meant less cardio and more focus on power. Bench presses aren't a core CrossFit movement, but we were doing them for "funnies."

After a warm-up run, we started on 5x3 weighted squats. This time trainers Travis Harkey, Ian and Steve took turns critiquing my movement, which helped a lot. Travis pointed to one of the women who was pushing tons of weight using correct form. He then made me take off my

running shoes. I got some good information on why the cushy heels are bad for lifting and why Chuck Taylors, other flat shoes or bare feet are preferable.

I started to feel more comfortable with my squat. Steve told me it was looking nearly perfect. Travis was even able to guess that my left leg was longer than my right based on my stance. He was correct. After some active stretching, the workout began:

Max bench press

Then:

4 rounds for time of:

15 dead-hang pull-ups

15 sit-up med-ball throws (10 lb.)

If ever I'm stuck dangling from the side of a building in a movie-like setting, the bad guy won't have to start stepping on my fingers to get me to fall. I believe I'll just dangle for a bit, fail at a few attempts to lift myself and just fall to the sound of the antagonist's echoing laughter. My pull-ups suck more intensely than the black hole at the center of our galaxy. Unaided I can do two, maybe three. With a rubber band assisting the motion, I might get five, but probably not. I eventually resorted to putting one foot on a box, which still made me nauseous.

I was much better at the med-ball sit-ups. The last set was the only one that had me doubting my ability to finish. As a high school swimmer, I always had strong core muscles. While my shoulders lacked muscle tissue to the point of ridicule, I always could push a full stack of weights on the sit-up machine.

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After the WOD, Ian showed me how to use the foam rollers and lacrosse balls. He spent a good 10 minutes demonstrating how to roll out muscle soreness and how the lacrosse ball can help increase range of motion. Very cool stuff.

Steven, Ian and Travis were key on this day. I felt very watched over and there still is zero pain in my back. I'm not sure if this is due to a true lack of damage or the fact that the brain can process only so much pain and the various beat-up muscles are taking more of their share of synaptic input. Either way, I felt terrific when I got home—other than the persisting nausea.

Here's the weird part: midway through my first round, I felt like I wasn't working as hard and didn't feel any sickness. No sooner did I realize this sense of normal bodily function than I found myself jogging to the next workout station and hitting the movements harder than I normally would. I *wanted* the intensity. I *craved* the nausea as a confirmation I was working as hard as I could. I cannot stress how utterly bizarre this is for me.

People, I love me some couch. Video games and beer had previously defined the full extent of my planned activities for the post-lottery-winning lifestyle I dream about daily. In this gym, I'm pushing myself harder because I want the feeling of intensity.

Now I wonder: was this a one-off or a normal part of what I may become?



About the Author

Atlanta native J. Rich Wilson is a digital content strategist who has been CrossFitting for four weeks at [CrossFit North Atlanta](#). The 33-year-old described himself as "the kid who always got hurt." Tired of waking up every morning with back pain, he now is making a last-ditch effort to feel good every day. Four weeks into CrossFit, Wilson has become addicted to the training methodology. His back feels stronger and hurts less, and he's slowly changing his outlook on what he can expect from his body. He credits the oversight and support of the CrossFit regimen for his lack of injury and excitement for seeing what he eventually will become. Follow Wilson's progress at www.gettingcrossed.com.