
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Accessing Athleticism

Trainer Anna Woods reports great success adapting the CrossFit program to clients with disabilities, whose PRs are measured not in seconds or pounds but improved daily function.

By Anna Woods

February 2013



Anna Woods

Training partners Amy Klein and Debbie Hostetler.

When I tell people I am a CrossFit trainer, the first assumption is that I work with skilled athletes. I usually respond that I work with a different kind of athlete. I train athletes with more determination, fearlessness, ability and competitiveness than most any other trainer I know.

The athletes I train have developmental disabilities—disabilities such as Down syndrome, autism and Asperger syndrome—while others are bound to a wheelchair.

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What's so unique about training this population is that their fitness routine is truly a lifeline to their ability to function in life. Their days outside the gym are often filled with little variance, low intensity and varying levels of function. Conversely, CrossFit is the prescription that counteracts the routine of their day-to-day lives.

CrossFit: Infinitely Scalable

One of the benefits of training my clients with the CrossFit methodology is the ability to keep workout times short. In these short and focused workouts, my clients have seen increased strength and mobility, improved cardiovascular endurance, and improved function and movement efficiency.

But the effects go beyond the 10 general physical skills. For one, CrossFit workouts help address sensory-specific stimuli many of my clients need. Some of them suffer from sensory integration dysfunction, meaning they either receive too much sensory stimuli and their brains become



Courtesy of Anna Woods

This is CrossFit: universally scalable, constantly varied and functional.

overloaded, or they receive too little sensory stimuli and they crave information from the senses. In addition, some of my clients' tactile, vestibular and proprioceptive systems may be under- or over-reactive, which affects their touch, movement, balance and body awareness.

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And, of course, CrossFit provides an atmosphere of competitiveness that drives my clients to get up each day and work harder, as well as a social setting that is so important to happiness.

When it comes to the universally scalable aspect of CrossFit, working with my clients is no different than working with anyone else. Workouts are easily modified for a client with no use of his or her limbs, or for an individual who does not have the ability to understand and apply the more technical movements.

That being said, programming for my clients takes creativity and is always an interesting challenge. I take my "toolbox" of equipment to the workout session with me, knowing that various factors will influence our workout for that day.

I base the prescribed workout for each session on the noise level in the room, the response to my arrival, the willingness to do the warm-up correctly, the day of the week, how close the week is to a holiday, as well as what I can sense from my client's demeanor that day.

The constantly varied aspect of the workouts is part of the therapy I use to expose clients to different stimuli and environments, which enable opportunity for exploration and movement.

I have had great success programming workouts with pushing and pulling heavy loads, wearing weighted vests, and lifting and carrying sand bags. All these exercises provide a calming sense to the body and the mind through deep pressure stimuli. On the other hand, striking a bag, ball slams and medicine-ball throws allow for the release of aggression that the individual has often kept bottled up.

Friendly Rivalries

Two of my clients—Amy Klein and Debbie Hostetler—have Down syndrome and are also workout partners. They are two of my most competitive clients. Because low muscle tone is prevalent in people with Down syndrome, we do a lot of work with both body-weight movements and strength training. We do a strength movement of various reps and weights in every session, and I prescribe a strength element in every WOD. Amy and Debbie are two of my most flexible clients as well, so issues related to hyper mobility are always a concern.

Running and step-ups probably get the biggest moans and groans when I announce the WOD to Amy and Debbie.

Not only do I train the physical aspects of CrossFit with Amy and Debbie, but I also work to incorporate mental training. Beyond mental toughness, we work on counting our own reps, reading the workouts off the log book and recalling to memory the previous workout, and they explain and show me where they were sore from the previous session, as well as how they feel about the workout after we finish.

Their biggest physical achievement was learning to jump from the floor to a small box, which is very hard to master for a client with a developmental delay.

“I like to try to beat Debbie in the workout,” said Amy, who plays basketball and is a cheerleader in the Special Olympics, as well as an avid CrossFit athlete.

After lots of hard work, Amy and Debbie have both worked up to squatting and benching 65 lb. on a regular basis. They clean and press about 30 or 35 lb., and they are learning the hang clean and the split jerk. They have both progressed from wall push-ups to knee push-ups and can now do one or two full push-ups.

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Rachel McGee, a client of Disability Supports of the Great Plains (DSGP), has lived the majority of her adult life in a wheelchair after being hit by a drunk driver in high school. She was very active before her accident, and due to the nature of her brain injury, when she looks in the mirror she still views herself as an active, healthy, ambulatory adult.

For Rachel, CrossFit helps fill the competitive void. After several months of CrossFit workouts, she can now strict press a 10 lb. dumbbell with her one functioning arm. She does one-armed pull-ups and push-ups with the use of a PVC pipe and my assistance.



Anna Woods

For someone like Rachel McGee, getting stronger can lead to life-changing improvements such as getting out of a wheelchair independently.

Her favorite workouts involve wall-balls, where she punches the 6 lb. Dynamax ball I'm holding in my hand into the air over and over again. She sometimes pairs this workout with rope pulls, where a kettlebell is tied to the end of a rope that she pulls toward her with the use of her neck and arm.

To my clients, these accomplishments are as big a deal as an elite CrossFit athlete achieving a 300 lb. snatch.

But nothing makes her blood pump and jacks her heart rate like a good conditioning WOD against her workout partner, Janna Frank. Janna is another wheelchair-bound client at DSGP. Unlike Rachel, Janna has the use of both of her arms but not her legs, as she was born with cerebral palsy. With Janna, we focus on various forms of upper-body and core work using a PVC pipe.

As a substitute for pull-ups, she pulls herself forward out of her chair. She does push-ups by pushing against my body resistance. And we incorporate the arm bicycle into workouts for additional conditioning, as well as boxing for 30-second rounds. The winner is determined by who throws the most strikes during the 30-second round. Each week we determine a winner of the WOD, who gets bragging rights until our following session.



Courtesy of Anna Woods

Janna Frank's main motivation is to beat her workout partner, Rachel, in the WOD.

Throughout workouts, Janna repeatedly reminds me how hard she is working and how out of breath she is. This is another benefit of CrossFit for a person in a wheelchair: it is the most effective tool for providing cardiovascular endurance for a person who generally does not have quick enough body movements to elicit a faster heart rate and breathing pattern.

"I feel really good about myself, and my weight is down," Janna explained. "I like to do them (the exercises) because my arm muscles are stronger. I can tell just by looking at them."

When we name the benchmark workouts after Janna and my other clients, it only helps to motivate them even more.

Celebrating Victory

There's a saying that it doesn't matter what level you're at because the feeling of accomplishment is the same. This couldn't be more true than when it comes to the group of people I work with. Progress may not be highly recognized by common standards in the fitness world, but for my clients, their progress is something we celebrate.

Waking up with less pain, having the newfound ability to comb your own hair, regaining the ability to transfer yourself from the wheelchair to the bed, losing enough weight to fit into a new wheelchair or climbing an entire flight of stairs without assistance are the kinds of achievements we celebrate every day. To my clients, these accomplishments are as big a deal as an elite CrossFit athlete achieving a 300 lb. snatch.



About the Author

Anna Woods took her first steps into a gym when her mom taught aerobics in the '80s and since then has always felt destined to be involved in fitness. She grew up in Hutchinson, Kan., where she played high-school and collegiate sports. She earned her bachelor of science degree in exercise science from Northwestern Oklahoma State University in 2005. After graduating, she moved to Kansas and opened her own training business in 2007: Woods Wellness. Soon, she added CrossFit to her triathlon and marathon training regimen. Today, she can't imagine life without it. She earned her CrossFit Level 1 Certificate in November 2012 and is currently a trainer at CrossFit Pathos in McPherson, Kan. She also continues to run her own personal-training business.