

the
CrossFit
JOURNAL ARTICLES

Mental Strength

Mike Houghton

“The perspective that you acquire on facing hardship makes you stronger and tougher in a lot of ways that are unrelated to that specific endeavor.”

—Keith Bontrager



Photo courtesy of Carolina Panthers

I played professional football, which was no walk in the park, but, I tell you, CrossFit is hard. The mental demands of hitting the variety of workouts that CrossFit prescribes are as challenging as anything I've done.

All through high school, I remember working out as hard as I could every day. It was a dreaded thing to have to work out with Coach Henson. Nobody wanted to. He worked you too hard. But one day he picked me to train

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with him. At the time, I thought he was punishing me. “He doesn’t make anyone else do this.” I could easily have seen this coach as a jerk, and I could have seen myself as a victim.

I actually started out feeling that way, but the workouts began to affect me. I became stronger mentally. I was very young and naïve. I didn’t realize that he was trying to do the best thing for me. I just knew that nobody else had to work as hard as I did. It didn’t seem fair. As it turned out, he was specifically trying to get me a shot at college football.

My work with Coach Henson eventually led to me getting a shot as a “walk on” with the San Diego State University football team; so I went to the gym at the university to start working out. I thought I had a pretty good base of strength and conditioning, seeing as I had worked out with Coach Henson so hard. Then I met Dave Ohton, the strength coach for SDSU. Things got worse.

The rest of the summer that year was spent sweating and feeling like I wanted to quit and forget about playing football. I clearly remember my first day of really

working out. I was in the weight room for two full hours. It seemed like it would never end. The workouts were bad enough, but then I had to do the running part.

When all the other high school seniors were out having a grand old time, I was lying on the floor, trying to regain enough strength to do something productive with the rest of my day. Was I physically exhausted? Sure, but even more than that, I was mentally drained. I had already given my all. I had to struggle mentally every single day to get up and go back for some more. Now, this sounds something like what CrossFitters do on a daily basis. We know how hard something is going to be, and that we are going to be laid out on the floor afterwards, but we do it anyway.

That spring brought early morning workouts on the track. I woke up one morning crying. I was crying in my sleep because I was so nervous and stressed out about how hard the running was every day. I weighed over 300 pounds, and the worst workout was when we had to run eight 200-meter sprints. I know what you’re thinking, that I couldn’t have been going very fast because I was a big guy. Each effort was less than 34

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seconds, which may be slow by sprinter standards but is certainly a fast run for a 300-pounder.

Somehow, by the end of spring, I didn't dread the running so much. I felt like I knew it was going to be tough, but that I would make it and be a better athlete because of it.

This attitude change is a kind of shift that most of us go through with CrossFit. We all dread the workouts every day for a while. Then, our brains hit a point where we think, "Well, it will be hard, but fun." Who ever thought that we would find something sadistic, exercise-wise, to do to our bodies and enjoy it? I never did, but after a couple of months of CrossFit, I started finding myself looking at which workouts looked the hardest, and wanting to do them.

Why do I say all of that? What does it have to do with CrossFit? Mentally, CrossFit is hard. Physically too, of course, but I think that part of the reason so many people don't do CrossFit is because of the mental toughness it takes to complete a workout. Most guys in college would cheat through the workouts, skipping sets and reps here and there. Then they would bitch and moan about how their strength wasn't improving. Well, I quickly found out that if you cheat the system, you cheat yourself. Mentally, they weren't tough enough to make it that intensely in a workout. The same goes with CrossFit. If you cheat yourself, you suffer. When I started doing CrossFit in August of 2007, I could do two pullups. I ran my 3.4-mile course in 36 minutes. I was pretty good at jumping rope, but nowhere near what I am now. I weighed 310 pounds. At the peak of my strength, I could squat over 500 pounds, bench press 465, and power clean over 300.

I went down to talk to my strength coach just recently. He knew about CrossFit. He thought it was great that I was so into it, but he gave me a warning: "That shit is hard." He was right. He also explained that a lot of the running and working out we did in college had less

to do with gaining physical strength than with getting mentally stronger. "When you're out there, and you're ready to quit during a game, the work you put in during the offseason will determine whether you give up or push through," he said.

Eventually, the workouts started to look less hard. I knew they were just as hard as ever, but I no longer looked at it and asked whether I would be able to finish. The question now was just how long it would take. I knew without a doubt that I would finish a workout, no matter which one came up.

If I apply this to CrossFit, he's absolutely right. When I first looked at the website and saw people doing hundreds of pull-ups, I refused to believe that it was possible. I talked to my buddy and we discussed how people said that the "300" workout was not very hard. We just thought people were talking out of their asses. The same thing happened with workouts like "Murph." Run a mile, then do all that stuff (100 pull-ups, 200 pushups, 300 squats), and then run another mile? Yeah, right.

I kept telling myself how I was too big to do these types of workouts, how I would injure myself. I felt myself making excuses for why I shouldn't try it. I firmly believe that the background I had in sports—and in training for mental toughness—is what pushed me forward to try it finally. I was the first at my the middleschool campus where I teach to try CrossFit. I remember taking more than a half an hour to complete any workout. It was hard. But I just kept going with it, no matter how tired I was. People would see me after a workout and say, "You're crazy." During this same time, I was adjusting my diet. I lightened up on how much I was eating, and cleaned up what I was eating. I heard from many people in my life how I didn't need to lose weight, how I was wasting away to nothing, etc.

As I moved along with the program, I started looking at the workouts like they weren't so bad. I just recently did 20 kipping pull-ups in a row. I couldn't believe that I wasn't getting tired! I have lost 45 pounds and now weigh around 270. My 3.4-mile time is at around 28 minutes or so. I can row 5000 meters in 17:51, and my 2000-meter row time on the Concept2 is 6:50. My deadlift, which I had never done before CrossFit, recently maxed out at 475 pounds. And, oh yeah, I can do muscle-ups. I did the "30 muscle-ups for time" workout in 20:03. Sure, this

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isn't the greatest time, but it's still pretty good for a big guy. I can climb a rope, which I could never do even as a little kid. It really is possible for a big heavy guy to do these things—and to be better and fitter as a result.

It seemed like all of a sudden one day I woke up and started thinking about what workout I could do that would really hurt. This is bizarre thinking. But it's also what I think most CrossFitters start doing when they really get into the program. I started lying in bed at night thinking about fixing my kip. I remember one night sitting up and saying to myself "Got it." The next workout, I had the kip. I had become obsessed. Why this change? It's not just the results. Don't get me wrong: the results are great. But the results are not the reason that the workouts started to look less hard. I knew they were just as hard as ever, but I no longer looked at it and asked whether I would be able to finish. The question now was just how long it would take. I knew without a doubt that I would finish a workout, no matter which one came up.

Mentally, I have become an animal. I have always been mentally strong but CrossFit enhances what you already have. If someone who quits easily tries CrossFit, they may just quit. If they stick to it, though, they begin to change their mentality. They may begin to see that 50 pull-ups are not really that much. I think that the reason some trainers push their clients so hard and sometimes rhabdomyolysis rears its ugly head is because of this—because the trainers get used to it and can forget how

hard CrossFit really is. They see "Fran" and say "Yeah it's hard, but it only takes a few minutes and you're done." Other people see 45 pull-ups and 45 thrusters and say "Oh my god, that's hard!"

How does this mental toughness relate to life? Everything in CrossFit is about functionality. Perhaps it's been covered, but I believe that the mental toughness that comes out of CrossFit is also functional. Mentally, you become more fit. And, as Mark Rippetoe says in *Strong Enough?*, "Strong people are harder to kill." Mentally strong people are harder to kill too. It has become very clear to me that we are training for the mental toughness to survive as well as the physical toughness to survive. The will to do that last push-up, that last pull-up, that last squat before time runs out is the same will that drives us to run one step farther if we're being chased, to pull up and jump over one more fence, or to hit that attacker just one more time to get him away from us. In fact, is there anything in life that doesn't benefit from this mental and physical strength?



Mike Houghton played high school, college, and professional (Green Bay Packers, Buffalo Bills, and Carolina Panthers) football for a total of 11 years. He is the co-owner, with Sean Murray, of [CrossFit951](#) in Menifee, California. He is also a high school offensive line coach and a middle-school history teacher and runs a fitness club based on CrossFit principles at the middle school.