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Full Reverse, Admiral

Retired U.S. Navy Rear Adm. Bill Center was obese and in declining health. He reached his goals to achieve functional fitness by giving CrossFit a chance.

By Bill Center

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I couldn't get up from the floor.

My body—270 lb. and just 63 years old—lay prone because I lacked the strength to command it upright.

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Rising from the floor is such a basic capability, a natural motion first achieved before most of us could even walk. And it was suddenly a capability that existed only in my past. As a retired rear admiral of the U.S. Navy, this was a new and alarming experience. You don't get to command warships with hundreds or even thousands of crew because you are incapable. My career took me to such a rank precisely because I'd always been so capable. I routinely surpassed a Navy-mandated level of physical fitness decade after decade.

While I weighed 175 lb. in my prime, I was now obese and profoundly debilitated.

Now, after leading destroyers and aircraft carriers through times of war and peace, I could not lead my own body to simply stand up.

How did this happen?

The short answer is that I'd lain on the floor so I could read *Goodnight Moon* to my twin granddaughters. And, of course, I never imagined I wouldn't be able to get back up. My physical decline, while dramatic, did not happen overnight.

While I weighed 175 lb. in my prime, I was now obese and profoundly debilitated. And my steep decline came with a steep cost: my plans to travel with my wife of 40 years, my dreams of watching my granddaughters grow up, my hopes of renovating our home, my independence.

How did I ever get like this? And, if I couldn't even stand up on my own, how could I get back to being a capable, physically active person?

My Body Turns on Me

The onset was sudden.

In 1989, I was commanding the cruiser USS Reeves; we were on our third trip to the Persian Gulf during the Iran-Iraq War. Eleven laps around the deck made a mile, and I regularly ran three miles at the start of every day. One morning, after easily completing three miles just the day before, I could barely manage a couple of laps. With a war going on, it was a stressful environment, and I thought I might've been



As a rear admiral in the U.S. Navy, Center had commanded warships and thousands of crew, but at age 63 he found he couldn't get up off the floor.

coming down with a cold. By the following morning, the cold hadn't materialized, but I had no strength. It was like I just had an empty gas tank. With my assignment aboard Reeves nearing an end, I got caught up in my duties and ignored the symptoms.

In this condition, my fitness habits unsurprisingly eroded to new lows. I was depressed, and I started gaining more and more weight.

After multiple blood tests and doctor visits, a senior physician from Georgetown University examined me and offered a diagnosis, though it was hardly definitive.



One of Center's goals was to be able to get down on the floor and play with his granddaughters—and get back up again.

"It's essentially an autoimmune disorder similar to fibromyalgia, so let's treat it like fibromyalgia," he said.

The vagueness of the diagnosis, coupled with chronic pain, didn't provide me with much encouragement. Basic life functions—e.g., getting in and out of a chair—were laborious. In this condition, my fitness habits unsurprisingly eroded to new lows. I was depressed, and I started gaining more and more weight.

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Turning Back the Tide

One morning, I stepped onto the bathroom scale and the numbers stared back at me: 270. When I saw that number—roughly 80 lb. more than I'd been in the Navy—something happened. I just said to myself, "This is the end. This is just unacceptable, and I won't let this continue. It stops now."

Counting calories helped me lose a quick 30 lb.

Over the years, I'd had poor experiences with personal trainers, especially those pushing a no-pain, no-gain mentality. I had plenty of pain already! But as I started my weight loss, a close friend kept nudging me to go see a trainer he knew at a nearby CrossFit gym in Seattle. After six months of resistance, I agreed to at least try it.

The trainer immediately asked me, "What are your goals?"

At this point, all my goals were really about functional fitness and doing everyday tasks autonomously. So I told him I wanted to be able to get down on the floor and play with my granddaughters and get back up on my own. I told him I wanted to travel, to get on and off airplanes, and to get in and out of taxis without any trouble.

We took baby steps forward at every session. At first, the exercises were very moderate. Stepping up and down a few inches, pushing away from the wall, lifting a stick, basic stretching. Then the trainer gradually increased the intensity. My initial attempts at squats involved sitting on a box higher than a chair. Soon enough, though, I was squatting all the way down on a medicine ball. It was a revelation to me, because I had become stuck in the idea that I'd never recover any level of fitness.



Center wanted to travel with his wife of 40 years, something he couldn't do when he was overweight and battling chronic pain.

After a year of working with the trainer, going three times a week for the first six months and then twice weekly thereafter, my fitness improved exponentially. I even started running again. My mindset changed as well. If I got up in the morning and felt stiff and sore, I didn't think, "Oh, I can't go to the gym because I'm stiff and sore." Instead, I'd think, "I've got to go to the gym because I feel stiff and sore." More and more, I realized moving around was keeping me loose and limber. I still got tired after exercising, but I always felt better than when I walked into the workout.

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So much of my motivation has come from simply realizing it was possible to reverse my decline. I lost 5 lb. And then another 5 lb. And then another. Every pound lost boosted my confidence. Every physical ability recovered added to my resolve to keep getting better. I now keep a 30-lb. sandbag at the bottom of my stairs. Whenever I go up or down the stairs, I put that sandbag on my shoulders. I do it to remind myself what it feels like to carry around extra weight. I don't know how I did it!

Today, my basic fitness level is greater than 10 years ago when I retired.

This reminder is another effective motivator. I need this motivation because I have more work to do—more weight to lose, greater levels of fitness to achieve. The more I do this, the more my autoimmune disorder goes away. Besides, there is a joy in this journey, and regaining my ability to think positively has arguably been the most important aspect. Eating right. Sleeping well. Exercising. They're all choices I make to feel good.



Nothing Tastes as Good as Healthy Feels!

The symptoms of Center's autoimmune disorder improved as he became more fit and he started eating better, sleeping better and thinking positively.

Audacity

Every day I see the progress I've made. I just remodeled a room for my granddaughters to stay in, which was a big project. I put in new drywall, wainscoting and new crown molding and installed a new closet. At one point, when I was tearing up the old carpeting, it occurred to me that not too long ago it was the very floor I couldn't get up from! Now look at me.

Today, my basic fitness level is greater than 10 years ago when I retired. I just had my annual physical, and the doctor wrote, "These labs look great!" He underlined "great" and added some exclamation points. Seeing that was pure joy.

Perhaps I don't fit the stereotypical CrossFit mold in that I'm not a 20- or 30-year-old with a chiseled, athletic build. Or perhaps that's the point: CrossFit can be for everyone, including me, on my path to regaining functional fitness and ultimately a higher quality of living.



About the Author

*Bill Center is the author of **The Admiral's Comeback**. The unabridged version is available at Foreverathletes.com.*