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## CrossFit Akwesasne: Done With the Blame Game

The affiliate is the first on a First Nations reservation in Canada, and it's giving new fitness options to the country's indigenous people. Emily Beers reports.

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By **Emily Beers** CrossFit Vancouver

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All images: Courtesy of Josee Quenneville

There's no point in sugarcoating the truth: Life for many indigenous people in Canada is rough.

Diseases like diabetes are four times more prevalent among the indigenous population than the rest of the country. Life expectancy on a reservation is eight years less in men and five-and-a-half years less in women. Suicide rates are also three times as high among indigenous people. Alcoholism is rampant and so is obesity. And proper nutrition is often not understood, let alone followed.

Where do we place the blame? We have asked, analyzed and beat the crap out of this question for decades. Time and time again, the answer comes down to the history of the country.

Indigenous people in Canada have been through years of tremendous oppression. It culminated with the disaster that was the residential school system, a national program started in the 19th century and aimed at assimilating indigenous children into European-Canadian society. Indigenous children were taken from their parents at a young age, put into Canadian schools, and forced to abandon their native languages and cultures. Often, they were abused.

The residential-school system was abandoned in the 1960s, but its legacy has left indigenous people with permanent scars and non-indigenous Canadians with a guilty conscience.

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Perhaps feeling indebted to indigenous communities and because of successful lobbying by Aboriginal people across the country, the Canadian government coughs up billions of dollars each year to First Nations communities. Despite federal incentives and funding to improve the living conditions and health of First Nations people, year after year statistics show that, as a whole, they rank low in most socio-economic measurements.

But on at least one First Nations reservation in Canada, you'll find a group who are tired of the blame game, tired of spending time analyzing exactly why and how their people got where they are today. The members of this group are choosing to take problems into their own hands and are committing to improving their lives.



***The first CrossFit affiliate on a Canadian First Nations reservation is doing battle with obesity, diabetes and overall poor health.***

This place is found on Cornwall Island, Ont. The people are members of the Mohawk Nation, a community with a population of 14,000. Cornwall Island is home to the first CrossFit affiliate on a Canadian First Nations reservation: CrossFit Akwesasne.

### **A Different Kind of Reservation**

In her living room on the Akwesasne reservation, 34-year-old Tasha Thompson does not serve her children Kraft Dinner or feel sorry for herself for having grown up in a community where diabetes and alcoholism are almost an accepted part of the culture.

You'll find her, her 11-year-old twin boys and her 12-year-old daughter busting out burpees during commercial breaks of their favorite TV shows while meat and vegetables simmer in the kitchen.

It wasn't always this way.

A year-and-a-half ago, Thompson, a nurse, was almost 40 lb. heavier. Like most families, she and her husband work full time. After a long day at work, they return home to their second full-time job: raising their three young children. Proper nutrition and fitness used to fall by the wayside.

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“Back then, if I was having a busy day, I’d just bring pizza home for the family,” Thompson said. “I wouldn’t have even thought twice about it.”



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All this changed in January 2010, when Tyler Touchette opened CrossFit Akwesasne.

Things quickly started to change—not just for Thompson and her family, but also for many children and parents in her community.

### **A Different Kind of CrossFit Box**

Five-and-a-half years ago, Touchette, owner of Caveman Strong (also known as Cornwall CrossFit), was hired by Diabetes Canada to coach a series of bootcamps for indigenous people who lived in the Cornwall area. Once he had success there, he came up with the idea to open an affiliate on the Akwesasne reservation on Cornwall Island.

Getting government funding for the new affiliate was a lengthy process. Touchette wrote and submitted a proposal to Akwesasne’s governing body, the Mohawk Council. Eventually, Touchette’s proposal was approved, and the council agreed to subsidize 50 percent of its members’ CrossFit fees.

So began CrossFit Akwesasne.

At first, only a couple of people showed up, but in just a few short months his classes of two eager CrossFitters became a class of 40.

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Today, the majority of CrossFit Akwesasne’s members are children in grades six, seven and eight who come for group classes after school. Now, 80 children from four schools are involved, and the adult clientele is on the rise. About 30 adults regularly come to the evening classes.

One of the main challenges for the people of Cornwall Island is nutrition education, Touchette said.

"They've been fed bad information for years," said Touchette, who has spent a lot of time educating his clients about the Paleo Diet. "There's a night-and-day awareness now. They actually believe health is obtainable now. We've lost 240 lb. this year between 40 kids."

Touchette pointed to people like Tasha Thompson and 27-year-old Nate Thompson as role models who are helping improve lives. Nate Thompson, a father of two, grew up on Cornwall Island. He started CrossFit at the beginning of the year and said he is amazed by the changes he has seen in himself and others at the box. He agreed with Touchette that the key component has been the nutrition focus.

"The biggest thing I've paid attention to is diet," he said. "The Paleo Diet just really makes a lot of sense. That's how indigenous people used to eat, and we didn't use to have these health problems."

As soon as he transitioned to the Paleo Diet, Thompson said he lost 7 lb. in the first seven days.

"I noticed that I felt alive again. And being around individuals who are constantly pushing to better themselves," he said, "it makes me work harder, and I feel inspired to try to get to Tyler's (Touchette's) fitness level."

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Thompson, who holds a bachelor's degree in science and psychology, recently completed the CrossFit Level 1 Seminar and now coaches.

"The younger you can reach children about the importance of fitness and nutrition, the better," Thompson said.



***Once people see their friends and family looking and feeling better, they want the same for themselves.***

"Kids do what you do. So I try to set a positive role model and remain healthy. With my children, if they see I'm active, they'll follow suit," he said.

Another CrossFit Akwesasne coach who said she has seen the benefits of working with children is 28-year-old Josee Quenneville.

"I like what we're creating with these kids," she said. "We're building confidence in them. We're helping them grow to become greater and healthier people."

Working with indigenous people has been rewarding, Quenneville said. She said she has been inspired by their sense of community.

"They all knew each other even before they started coming to CrossFit. And they all know each other's families," she said. "They're a community outside of the box, too."

"I never thought I'd fit in because it's a native community and they're kind of separate. I thought they'd be hard on me, but from Day 1 ... they accepted me with open arms," she added. "There are a lot of warm people who live here. They've touched my life as much as I've touched theirs."

## A Long Way to Go

Tasha Thompson is the first to admit that although having a CrossFit box on the reservation has helped drive positive change, it's only one step in the right direction.

"My people are not healthy. They're obese; they're diabetic. Our reservation isn't very big, so we're overpopulated here, and we don't have gardens and farms like we used to," she said. "So it's easier for most people to buy a box of something processed."

There's no point in focusing on who or what is blame for her people's poor health, Thompson said. She'd rather focus on action to improve lives, she said. For her, a large part of the solution is the CrossFit way of life.

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"When I walk through those doors, I know I'm going to be supported and encouraged. Nothing bad will happen in there. We're all on the same page," Thompson said. "We all want to be clean and healthy there, but not everyone in our community thinks like that—yet."

Both Thompson and Touchette said they are committed to getting more people on board.

"It's not about blaming anymore. It's not their fault. It's not our fault. Here's where they're at, and with hard work, awareness and proper eating protocols, we can see some real change," Touchette said. "It takes a while to get through to people, but it's starting to happen."

As for Nate Thompson, he's not shying away from the challenge.

"We're a very proud community," he said. "And this community won't go down without a fight."



Courtesy of Emily Beers

## About the Author

*Emily Beers has a master's degree in journalism from the University of Western Ontario. She worked as a sportswriter at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games, where she covered figure skating and short-track speed skating. Beers now hosts WOD HOG, a not-always-PG publication featuring Canada West's CrossFit community.*

*As an athlete and CrossFitter, Beers started as a gymnast, competing at the national level. After growing too tall for gymnastics, she played NCAA Division 1 basketball for the University of Idaho, then returned home and played for the University of British Columbia. After three years of playing basketball, she started rowing, competing at the varsity level at the University of Western Ontario for two years. While trying to make the National Rowing Team in 2009, she discovered CrossFit and became utterly addicted. Soon, CrossFit was meant to be a way to cross-train for rowing but became her greatest passion. She moved back to Vancouver in September 2009 and found CrossFit Vancouver, where she now trains and works as an apprentice coach.*

*In her first season competing in CrossFit, she won the British Columbia Sectional competition in 2010. She ruptured her Achilles tendon in December 2010 and served as the Canada West Regional media director while recovering from surgery. She competed in the 2011 CrossFit Games with CrossFit Vancouver, finishing 19th.*