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Garage Gym 101: How to Grow a Successful Garage Gym

Original CrossFitters Greg and Mallee Amundson learned about creating a garage gym at the historic CrossFit Headquarters. Now they've got one of their own in Imperial, Calif.

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From the Ocean to the Desert

My wife Mallee and I were blessed with great opportunities in CrossFit while living in Santa Cruz, Calif. After the original CrossFit Santa Cruz Headquarters gym closed its doors, Mallee continued the legacy by founding the "new" CrossFit Santa Cruz on the west side of the beach community.

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In addition, several other CrossFit affiliates began to take root on the outskirts of Santa Cruz County. In one instance, two CrossFit affiliates found themselves within 800 meters of each other! Needless to say, there was never a shortage of inspiration, instruction, community and competition for CrossFitters in Santa Cruz. Mallee and I were living the good life in one of the most beautiful towns in the United States.

Although life was ideal in Santa Cruz, the nature of working for the federal government requires flexibility and an advance agreement to relocate on short notice to domestic and international posts. In June 2008, I was notified my surfing days in Santa Cruz would be “temporarily” suspended in lieu of hiking sand dunes in the middle of the Southern California desert. “Temporarily” actually meant my wife and I had to prepare ourselves for the long haul—at least five years in a brand new land.

The first thing Mallee and I did when we were informed of our post of duty was check the [CrossFit Affiliate page](#). With the incredible success of CrossFit around the world, we anticipated having a friendly CrossFit gym we could join upon our arrival. However, we were shocked to discover no CrossFit affiliates anywhere in the entire county of Imperial, Calif.—and Imperial is one of the largest counties in the state.

Training on a cul-de-sac means the athletes at CrossFit Amundson don't have to worry about traffic while they work out.



The Hunt for the Perfect Garage

During our house-hunting trip to Imperial, my wife and I knew we would likely be training in our garage. As avid CrossFitters, finding a house with a suitable garage was paramount in choosing where we would live. After viewing several houses, we had to make a choice between a residence with an air-conditioned, one-and-a-half-car garage and one with a larger two-car garage and a 12-foot ceiling but no air conditioning. The houses were next to each other at the end of a cul-de-sac, which was perfect for sprints without having to worry about traffic congestion. Despite the 115-degree heat the day of our house-hunting trip (which is average spring and summer weather in Imperial County), we decided on the larger garage. During our 400-meter sprints we run by the house with the air-conditioned garage, still thankful we have the few extra space.

Mallee and I were eager to share our passion for CrossFit with our new community. The question was where to find people to work out with us?



Greg and Mallee didn't have to work out alone for very long after arriving in Imperial, Calif.

Upon our arrival in Imperial County, we had the bare necessities a garage gym needs to sustain athletic development: two 45-lb. barbells, 185 lb. of bumper plates, a GHD machine, a 20-lb. medicine ball, a 24-inch plyometric box, two 45-lb. dumbbells, one 24-kg kettlebell and one 16-kg kettlebell. Our first workouts were creative and involved a lot of sprinting, Olympic lifting and Tabata squat intervals. However, we longed for a more complete garage gym that would allow us to complete any workout posted on CrossFit.com. Additionally, coming from what Mallee and I considered to be the most beautiful CrossFit box in the world, we wanted to transform our garage into a full-fledged gym. We wanted the look, feel and inspiration of a regular CrossFit box.

Building a Gym—Forging a Community

In addition to building our garage gym, Mallee and I were eager to share our passion for CrossFit with our new

community. The question was where to find people to work out with us?

I knew from experience in Santa Cruz that the key to attracting people to CrossFit is leadership by example. If people saw the benefits of dedicated CrossFit training, they would want to experience the transformation themselves. With this in mind, Mallee and I started taking our CrossFit workouts on the road. We would frequent the Navy base a few miles outside of town and complete workouts on the track and the adjacent pull-up bars.

The momentum started to build just like it always does when people see CrossFit in action.

At first we got a lot of questioning looks from the Marines and airmen assigned to the base. "Who are those two crazy people sprinting and swinging kettlebells in 115-degree weather?" they must have thought. The track was only feet away from the air-conditioned Globo Gym on the base, and this meant everyone walking into the cool building had to pass by our track workouts. Despite the blazing sun, Mallee and I both wore CrossFit T-shirts. In addition, I hung a large canvas banner from two wooden beams next to the pull-up bars: "CrossFit—Forging Elite Fitness." We invited people who expressed interest in CrossFit to work out with us on the track.

Within just four visits to the Navy base, we had a small gathering of brave Imperial County residents and dedicated servicemen from the Marine Corps meeting us on the track every Friday afternoon for their first CrossFit WODs. For "constant variance," we completed some of our Friday workouts at the large swimming pool on the Navy base, bringing along our medicine ball and dumbbells. We had no trouble inspiring curiosity in the lifeguards and pool patrons by tearing through a workout comprising a 50-meter swim, 50 burpees, a 50-meter swim and 50 thrusters, then lying in a puddle of water gasping for air.



New CrossFitters in Imperial had the spectacular opportunity to learn about CrossFit from the original firebreather himself, Greg Amundson.

I also joined a boxing gym and Brazilian jiu-jitsu school a few weeks after relocating to Imperial. However, instead of driving to class every day, sometimes I would run. I kept my jiu-jitsu gi and MMA gloves in a weighted rucksack I would run across town with. Again, this drew raised eyebrows from the martial artists I was training with. They sensed I was onto something and wanted to know what it was.

The momentum started to build just like it always does when people see CrossFit in action, and soon the track workouts were starting to feel like a regular CrossFit class. But Mallee and I knew the outside track and pool were no longer enough. We needed a classroom where the study of CrossFit could really begin. It was time to start building our box.

Our first major investment was rubber flooring. There's something about a cement floor covered wall-to-wall in black horse-stall mats that just fires me up. Our garage was exactly 400 square feet, and Mallee found a local ranch supply store in Lakeside, Calif., that sold us 4x6-foot stall mats. On a budget, the stall mat is the perfect alternative to the more expensive roll-out rubber matting.

We also needed a pull-up bar system and a rack. Due to the cost of transporting construction material into the Imperial Valley, most houses are framed with metal instead of wood. Therefore, Mallee and I were unable to secure a pull-up bar, such as the Stud Bar, into our garage. Instead, we chose the king of free-standing pull-up bar systems: the BaseFit system from Sorinex. Along the way, Mallee and I decided on our gym's theme colors: black and red. We custom-ordered our BaseFit system in fire-engine red, and the finished product was a work of art that became the centerpiece of our gym.

We had nine athletes training with us at the Navy base on a regular basis. Therefore, we decided to gather equipment that would support a CrossFit workout and class of at least four people at a time. Due to the limited size of our box, we knew we would likely be running workouts in heats of four to five athletes. Mallee found a Concept2 rower for sale on Craigslist, and we invested in two sets of 45-, 35-, 25- and 10-lb. bumper plates from Rogue Fitness, as well as two new 45-lb. barbells and one 33-lb. barbell. From the Garage Gym Store, Mallee and I purchased three new medicine balls in increments of 10, 15 and 20 lb., two 24-kg kettlebells, and two sets of rings. I found a local tire-recycling business and negotiated the pick-up and transportation of a 400-lb. tractor tire.

For inspiration and motivation, I framed some of my favorite CrossFit affiliate shirts I had gathered over the years, along with some historic photographs from CrossFit Headquarters, and hung them on the perimeter of the garage. Mallee and I also hung 3x6 sheets of whiteboard on the walls of the gym and made our own "CrossFit Board" complete with all the famous workouts and room for our new athletes and friends to record their scores. Finally, a huge 6x10-foot American Flag completed the gym. It was time to invite our friends over to play.

From the Track to the Garage

The athletes we were training with on the track were eager to continue their CrossFit education in a "classroom environment" and jumped at the opportunity to visit our garage gym. Because most of the athletes who joined us in the gym were brand new to CrossFit, it was very important to Mallee and me to ensure they received a solid foundation in the proper mechanics of functional movement. In addition to the physical movements of CrossFit, Mallee and I wanted to inspire these athletes with a new way of living: the CrossFit way.

The benefit of CrossFit training for our new friends was immediate and immense.

In the same manner CrossFit founder Greg Glassman instructed me on the physical and mental aspects of CrossFit, Mallee and I provided our athletes with lessons on the foundational CrossFit movements, as well as educational whiteboard discussions on key CrossFit concepts such as nutrition, work capacity and the theoretical development of an athlete. Not only did we teach our athletes how to squat and deadlift, but we also taught them *why* these movements are essential to their development as athletes. We took nothing for granted.

Because we were starting with a blank canvas, we taught everything from proper mechanics to goal setting and mental toughness. Our mission was to educate and inspire our new friends about their unlimited athletic potential.

For many, this was a radical notion. Very few of the people who stepped into our box had ever been referred to as "athletes." Mallee and I had left CrossFit Santa Cruz with a strong conviction that words had incredible creative power and influence. Therefore, we constantly used constructive and positive words when coaching and cueing our new athletes:

"You guys are natural athletes!"

"You were born to do this stuff!"

"Believe in yourself! You can achieve anything!"

"You're getting stronger every time I see you!"

Soon, our constant positive affirmations paid off. One member of our gym told us, "Nobody ever called me an athlete before. But I believe today that I am!"

Starting with new athletes who had never seen or experienced CrossFit workouts or movements posed some programming challenges. Mallee and I had to frequently remind each other that for a new athlete, learning and refining the foundational CrossFit movements with a PVC pipe had the potential to create soreness, discomfort and even some frustration. Therefore, Mallee and I made a concentrated effort to start slowly with a special emphasis on mastering the mechanics of the nine foundational movements (squat, front squat, overhead squat; deadlift, sumo deadlift high pull, medicine ball clean; press, push press, push jerk).

We ran our group classes in the same manner that we would instruct at a CrossFit Level 1 Certification. With the athletes in a circular formation, Mallee would demonstrate a series of CrossFit movements that followed a logical progression. For example, she would demonstrate the squat, front squat and overhead squat. While Mallee moved through the ranges of motion, I would point out to the group the significant points of performance for each skill. As a group, we then performed repetitions of the movements together. Mallee would lead from the center, and I would assist from the perimeter with verbal cues and posture adjustments for the new athletes.

This proved to be an excellent learning modality for the group. Mallee and I witnessed steady learning taking place in our gym. The smiles on the faces of the athletes and their words of encouragement and congratulations to each other proved their confidence and ability in the movements were increasing on a daily basis.

Mallee and I were eager to introduce the concept of intensity to our new athletes. However, because we were working with a wide range of athletic capacities and abilities, we introduced the term “relative intensity” and made it clear that the goal of the workout was always completion with a focus on proper mechanics. We instructed our athletes to push themselves as hard as they could individually while remaining vigilant in their execution of the points of performance and ranges of motion they had previously been taught. This proved to be an excellent strategy for keeping the collective intensity of the group high while at the same time insisting upon virtuosity in our athletes’ movement.

The benefit of CrossFit training for our new friends was immediate and immense. It was also readily apparent to the people our athletes associated with during the day. Soon the inevitable happened: our athletes wanted to bring their friends and family to work out with them at the box.

Within just four months of opening our garage door, we had 25 people attending our daily evening class. Within six months that number had doubled, and it continued to grow each week.

The large numbers of athletes attending our evening class proved to be a challenge unto itself. We solved the problem in two ways. First, we turned our one evening class at 6 p.m. into two classes: one at 6 and the other at 7. That helped thin the ranks of our one previously large class. Second, and most rewarding for the athletes, was that Mallee and I introduced a concept of “athlete-coach” for the workouts where we ran two heats of the workout of the day. The athletes were paired up, and while one athlete performed the workout, the other athlete acted as the “coach.” The coach for the workout was instructed to provide motivation, count repetitions and, most importantly, insist upon the proper execution of the mechanics. Within just two workouts of implementing this strategy, it was common to hear our new athletes cueing each other, “Drive through the heels! Keep the chest up! Maintain your lumbar curve!” For Mallee and me, this was music to our ears.

Mallee and I had decided early on we would not charge any money for our instruction. We wanted to share our passion for CrossFit with our new community, and we wanted to do it for free. With full-time jobs that kept us both very busy, we had determined CrossFit would be one of our hobbies and would remain in our garage.

However, with close to 60 people participating in CrossFit workouts, the little equipment we had started to take a severe beating. Our new friends realized this as well, and soon a monthly \$25 “equipment donation fund” was established. We used the fund to purchase new equipment and maintain existing gear.

We also recruited the talent of our athletes in improving our box and building equipment. Athletes who were skilled in trades such as welding, electrical work and construction donated their time to build 12 plyometric boxes of various heights and install a lifting platform and indoor garage lighting. Other athletes donated equipment such as kettlebells, jump ropes and dumbbells. And everyone always stayed late to return the gym to order and clean and mop after the workouts.

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Different location, same result: satisfied athletes.

Over the course of about nine months, Mallee and I witnessed a simply awesome transformation take place at our gym. Although hard to describe in words, we noticed our athletes had “got CrossFit.” This wasn’t just evident in their CrossFit T-shirts and newly forged levels of fitness. Conversations revolved around new Zone-friendly diet recipes and techniques for learning double-unders, kipping pull-ups and handstand push-ups. Everyone walked around with notably more self-confidence yet maintained an air of humbleness.

One evening during a workout, Mallee and I watched the beautiful sight in front of us with smiles: our new friends and CrossFit athletes were running the show on their own. Athletes held stopwatches for each other and helped record scores on the whiteboard. More experienced CrossFitters offered movement cues to the beginners. Athletes sat outside the garage in the grass reading laminated *CrossFit Journal* articles on nutrition and programming. And above the roar of the cheering for the last evolution of Fran that night, we heard a voice scream out, “I love this stuff!”

Enough said.

Top 10 Lessons for Building a Garage Gym That Will Inspire You and Others

1. Conceal or store off-site anything not essential to the gym (i.e., water heater, door to house, Christmas boxes, etc.).
2. Invest in rubber floor covering. Doing so is vital to creating the finished and professional look of a CrossFit box and prolongs the life of your equipment.
3. Add some motivation to the walls. Hang affiliate shirts, photographs, posters—anything that provides inspiration for you and your athletes.
4. Build a library. Laminate key *CrossFit Journal* articles and have them available in your box. Select books that offer education and inspiration and have a check-out system for them.
5. Install whiteboard. It should be part of every box and provides a surface on which to capture workout times, diagram workouts, explain key CrossFit concepts and write fun quotes.
6. Lead by example. Work out in public places. Run down your street. Invite your neighbors over for coffee and teach them how to squat!
7. Be clean and tidy. Because of the limited space of a residential box, everything must have a place. Keep the gym pristine—it is a reflection of you and your attention to detail.
8. Refer to the “garage” as a “CrossFit gym.” Words are important. Your athletes should associate their workout space with a true gym, not just someone’s garage.
9. Choose quality over quantity. Make the investment in safe, durable equipment you can be proud of. Rogue, Sorinex, Concept2, Iron Mind and Garage Gym have become our dear friends.
10. Create a sense of gym ownership for your athletes. Have them take responsibility for welcoming new athletes, leading warm-ups, cleaning and recording times. Remember: it’s *your* home but it’s *their* gym.

The CrossFit Way in 50 Words

Pursue virtuosity in functional movement. Believe unconditionally in yourself and the ability of others. Learn new skills—teach them to a friend. Forge an indomitable body and spirit. Apply character traits learned in the gym to life: perseverance, honesty, integrity, resilience, courage, loyalty, respect and service. Be humble. Encourage others.



About the Authors

Greg and Mallee Amundson met at the historic CrossFit Headquarters in Santa Cruz, Calif. As Greg completed a muscle-up and Mallee finished her post-workout flexibility training, their eyes met and it was love at first sight. They were married in Santa Cruz on July 4, 2008. They run the garage gym [CrossFit Amundson](#).