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Coaching the Mental Side of CrossFit

Psychologists and doctors have offered perspective on the mental aspects of CrossFit, so original firebreather Greg Amundson delivers a CrossFit coach's guide to goal setting, self-talk and an indomitable spirit.

By Greg Amundson

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Susannah Dy/CrossFit Journal

Several years ago, CrossFit founder Coach Greg Glassman pulled me aside at a Level 1 Certification and said, "Greg, the greatest adaptation to CrossFit takes place between the ears."

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Goals ... (continued)

Greatly influenced by this remark, I set out to become a student of the mental aspects of CrossFit. Through observation, practice and research, I discovered something remarkable: the world's best CrossFit athletes had learned to control and optimize their self-talk. This potent mental skill resulted in their ability to formulate and achieve their goals—both inside the gym and out—with consistency and grace. The natural extensions of their positive self-talk were an optimistic energy, a mental toughness and an indomitable spirit evident in their physical accomplishments in the CrossFit workouts. I concluded that Coach Glassman was indeed correct: the mental adaptation to CrossFit was of critical importance to CrossFit athletes and coaches hoping to forge elite fitness. Now, nearly four years after the seed was first planted, I hope to share the key lessons learned as a result of the spark Coach Glassman set inside me.

For a coach at a CrossFit affiliate, understanding and ultimately shaping the way individual athletes talk to themselves and set personal goals are extremely important in the success of both the coach and athlete. Teaching the significance of positive self-talk and realistic goal setting is just as important as instilling a sense of virtuosity in the foundational movements of CrossFit. Although taught, practiced and learned inside the gym, these lessons have the potential to move outside the affiliate walls and continue doing what CrossFit does best: improving the quality of an athlete's life.

Setting a Goal

The first step in goal setting is to understand and define our terms in the context of athleticism and personal achievement. To better serve the purpose of this article, I have created a new definition of the word "goal."

Goal (noun) 1. A specifically desired end state, expressed in the positive tense, which provides motivation and direction on the path to achievement.

In addition to defining our terms, three points of performance in goal setting will expand upon our definition and ensure the success of the CrossFit coach and athlete.

CFSD 2009 GOALS		
NAME	GOAL	Date Achieved
1. Coryna Holcombe	11. Total - 452 (Acc. Handing for 03 lbs)	1.
2. Lauren Eggen	2. 25 Kipping pull-ups	2.
3. Parker Marshall	3. 800 # Total	
4. MIKE VECCHIA	4. 1000# Total	
5. JP Balthus	5. 200kg Benchlifting Goal (110 lbs)	
6. Matt Leigh	6. 11'30 "Helen" 15 kip pull-ups	11/19 "Helen" 2/1/09 1st kip pull-up: 4/1/09
7. JEREMY PARKS	7. Dunk a basketball	
8. MALLIE TORRES	8. 20 Kipping pull-ups	
9. NATE DOG	9. 50 Double Unders	
10. MOE	10. 20 kipping pull-ups	Feb 2009
11. ADAM	11. FRONT/BACK LEVER	
12. Josh Holcombe	12. 900 lbs CF Total 420 FEET	
13. Matt Leigh	13. 11'30 "Helen"	
14. Anthony Burger	14. 10 Muscle Up & Run	27 Kip Pull-ups 9/17/09
15. TRISH	15. HSPU (maximal)	
16. Sonia	16. CFSD 3x a week	
17. ERIC M.	17. Muscle up	
18. Marlene	18. Muscle up	
19. Van	19. 40 p.u. / 3 HSPU	
20. Jason	20. 40 p.u. / muscle up	Kipping Pull-ups 4-20-09
21. Antonette	21. 1 Kipping PU / 1 Rope Climb	
22. Lauren	22. Get to all the HSPU	
23. DALE	23. PLACE WEIGHT TOP 20 OF CROSSFIT GYM FOR 2009	
24. MOISES	24. 5 BUTTERFLY PULL UPS	
25. Antoinette	25. 1 Dead Hang Pull-Up / 8:00 min/mile Run	
26. MARK R	26. MUSCLE UP!	
27. JON	27. MUSCLE UP!	
29. JON	29. Muscle 4 into HSPU	
30. MARIL R.	30. Body Weight Squat	
31. Lauren	31. Rope Climb x 2	4/15/09
32. Melissa	32. 1 dead hang pull up, Kipping pull up, rope climb, muscle up	Deadhang 4/28/09 Kipping 6/10/09 Rope climb: 6/15/09
33. Nathan	33. Hang on rim 90kg	
34. Brandon	34. Hang on rim	
35. Sage LIS	2 muscle-ups	7/11/09
36. Paul	Max APFT	
37. ERIC MONT.	900 CFT (5x BW) 250 C+	
38. CLAYTON T.	500 DBL UNDERS	
39. GEVRTS	Single set of 20 mu	
40. Josh		

Sharing your goals makes you accountable and is a great way to invite the community to support your efforts and motivate you.

Goals ... (continued)

The goal must be concise and specific. *"I want to complete 50 gymnastic kipping pull-ups in a single set."*

The goal must be expressed in the positive tense. *"I want to safely perform a backwards roll to support on the rings."* vs. *"I don't want to fall off the rings while upside down."*

The goal must include a time frame that is challenging yet realistic and achievable.

This CrossFit definition of a goal is unique to our community for several reasons. By looking closer at the definition and associated points of performance, we can explore several ways a coach can maximize his or her athlete's adaptation to CrossFit both physically and mentally.

First, a goal must be specific. Before a coach can lead an athlete on the path to achievement, the coach and athlete must understand and agree upon the desired end state. The more focused the definition, the more opportunity there is for precise planning, preparation and training. In

addition, by specifically defining a goal, the CrossFit coach and athlete can evaluate with precision when the goal has been met.

Second, a goal must be expressed by the coach and athlete in the positive tense. In order to maximize human athletic potential and harmonize the mind-body connection, coaches must teach their athletes the significance and power of positive expression. The conscious and subconscious brain will either promote or inhibit athletic performance. If I tell myself consciously, "I don't want to fall off the climbing rope," my subconscious brain in fact hears, "I want to fall off the climbing rope." This is because the subconscious does not hear the negative tense. By telling yourself what you don't want to manifest, you actually create a blueprint for exactly what you intend to avoid. The key lesson for coaches, therefore, is to keep their athletes in a constant state of positive affirmation of the goal's desired end state.



Susannah Dy/CrossFit Journal

A good coach always uses positive language so athletes never let negative thoughts enter their minds during a workout.



Setting reasonable goals and then striving to accomplish them is a rewarding pursuit that keeps training intense and fun.

The final point is perhaps the most important but least understood: a goal must contain a time frame that is realistic and achievable while at the same time providing the athlete with a certain amount of challenge and motivation. A goal set too far in the future will lack the urgency and fail to create the internal fire needed for accomplishment. On the other hand, too short a time frame may lead to discouragement and despair.

A CrossFit affiliate coach has the responsibility of helping athletes set and achieve their goals.

When deciding upon the time frame for a goal, a certain degree of self-assessment on the part of the athlete must take place. For example, if an athlete tells me his goal is to perform a single set of 50 pull-ups in three months, I

will likely ask him how many consecutive pull-ups he can currently complete. How specifically the athlete can answer that question will help me in determining the best approach to supporting the achievement of the goal. If the athlete responds, "I'm not sure how many pull-ups I can do right now," we need to find out immediately! The approach we take to setting a time frame for completing 50 consecutive pull-ups will vary greatly if the athlete has five pull-ups as compared to 45 pull-ups.

In setting the time frame for a goal, a CrossFit coach must weigh the delicate balance between motivating and challenging an athlete while at the same time ensuring a high likelihood of success. A CrossFit coach has the responsibility of helping athletes set and *achieve* their goals. Notice the key word here is *achieve*. By helping an athlete define, move towards and ultimately arrive at a desired end state, the CrossFit coach sets in motion a pattern of behavior for the athlete that can be applied to anything. The frequency with which an athlete can set a goal for him- or herself and reach the desired end state will in large part define the individual's sense of ability and capacity. For the coach, this means happy, healthy and physically fit athletes who remain lifelong clients and provide a steady referral base to the gym.

When the lesson of goal setting is implemented by the CrossFit coach, an exciting and rewarding journey suddenly awaits the five-pull-up athlete whose goal is to achieve 50 pull-ups: he or she has an opportunity to set and reach several smaller and more immediate goals along the way! These mini-triumphs will reaffirm to the athletes their ability to succeed and provide them with motivation and confidence. Remember, well before athletes can reach 50 pull-ups, they must first reach 10, then 15 and then 20 pull-ups. Each of these seemingly small increments can in fact become a huge milestone and a chance for both the coach and athlete to say, "I can achieve that which I set my mind to."

The Power of Positive Self-Talk

If there is one consistent character trait I have observed in CrossFit athletes from around the world, it is a strong sense of optimism. The difficulty of the CrossFit workout naturally instills not only physical fitness but also mental fitness. Regardless of the time to completion or the amount of weight used, simply facing the daunting workout of the day (WOD) puts the other obstacles of life into proper perspective: they are all a lot easier. CrossFit coaches and athletes who understand that optimism and a positive mental attitude can yield tremendous results in the gym have one thing in common: success. The athletes are performing at the top of their game, and the coaches are surrounded by thriving clients.

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In my experience as both a CrossFit athlete and coach, I have concluded that a positive mental attitude and positive self-talk are paramount in achieving the full potential of human work capacity. Simply stated, a CrossFit coach must learn how to talk to an athlete. To this extent, I have observed that an athlete is impressionable mentally and emotionally at three distinct times while at the CrossFit affiliate gym:

Five Coaching Tips for Goal Setting and Positive Self-Talk

Use a section of the whiteboard to record goals and their expected date of achievement. In addition, encourage athletes to write their goals in a personal journal. A powerful connection takes place between the athlete and his or her goal when it takes the form of the written word.

Encourage the use of public goal setting. When an athlete communicates goals to a coach and fellow athletes, a relationship is formed based upon trust and accountability. The athlete becomes accountable to the CrossFit affiliate gym to give 100 percent on the path to accomplishing the goal. In addition, the athlete puts a high amount of trust in the coach and community to keep him or her accountable to the stated goal.

Ask your athletes what they are working towards. If athletes are uncertain, encourage and teach them how to formulate a goal. Then help them achieve it!

Publicly acknowledge when an athlete achieves a new goal. Use the whiteboard, affiliate website or newsletter. Every goal met deserves congratulations and public recognition.

Listen carefully to the words athletes use when they talk about themselves in the affiliate gym. An athlete's spoken words are a reflection of inner self-talk. Politely correct athletes who speak negatively about themselves by encouraging them to change their words to a more positive dialogue.

— Greg Amundson



Susannah Dy/CrossFit Journal

Athletes are very impressionable during workouts. Good trainers take advantage of that and help bring about outstanding performances.

- From half an hour before the workout up until the announcement of "3-2-1... Go!"
- During the workout (this is perhaps when the athlete is most receptive).
- Depending on their state of alertness and fatigue, following the workout as well.

With this in mind, it becomes extremely important for the CrossFit coach to engage in positive reinforcement before, during and after a workout. The reason for this is a coach's reinforcement, either positive or unintentionally negative, will influence the individual athlete's self-talk at the conscious and subconscious level.

An indomitable spirit will be forged by both the coach and athlete as they realize what the mind can believe the body can achieve.

The significance of this lesson was most apparent to me during my attempt at running 100 miles in 24 hours. At the halfway point, I was joined by a coach and pace-runner who immediately said to me, "Don't think about it, but the next 50 miles will be the hardest yet."

We are all students in the sport of life, and this coach had no way of knowing the emotional state I was in and had the best intentions with the comment. However, on the receiving end of this bit of advice, I was left emotionally and mentally devastated. My first self-talk thought was, "This is about to get a lot harder."

Moments after the incident took place, I was joined by my wife Mallee, who, having overheard the previous comment, loudly exclaimed, "Baby, you're gonna fly through these next few miles!" My mental and emotional state changed in an instant, and I felt a surge of strength that replaced the weakness of only a moment before. My subconscious mind heard "fly" and "few miles." The result was positive self-talk that sounded like, "Just a few more miles. I'm gonna fly!"

During a CrossFit workout, which may range from under two minutes to well over 45 minutes, it is impossible for a coach to predict what one small word, statement or comment an athlete will hear, register and be affected by. Therefore, it is vital that a coach be aware and respectful of the amount of influence he or she has over an athlete while at the affiliate gym.

At CrossFit Level 1 Certifications, students are taught to cue athletes with specific and concise statements, such as, "Drive through the heels!" A CrossFit coach must learn to time and articulate positive reinforcement to an athlete with the same skill. When an athlete hears from a coach, "You're doing great! You're going to get a personal record!" the athlete internalizes these specific and tactful words and the meaning of the statement. The effect of the coach's words on the athlete's self-talk is this: "I am doing great! I am going to get a PR!" Those few words can motivate tired athletes and help strong performers work just a little bit harder.

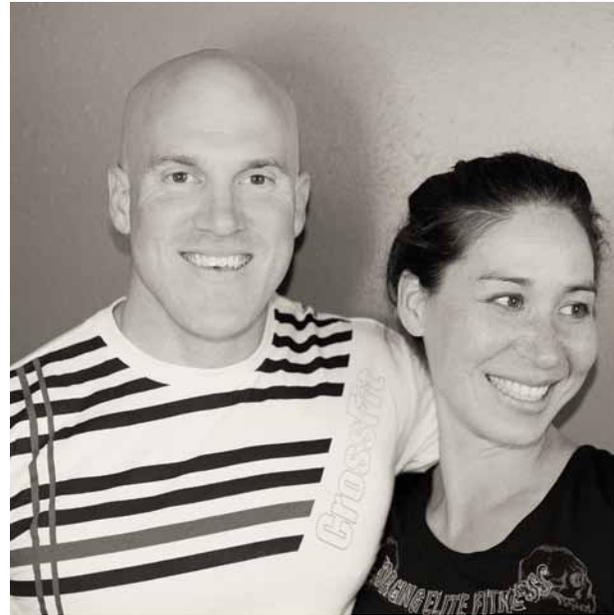
A CrossFit coach can utilize the same lessons of positive reinforcement to cue an athlete's technique and range of motion. For example, rather than telling an athlete, "You're rounding your back," cue an athlete in the positive tense to reach the desired end state by saying, "Maintain your lumbar curve." If an athlete misses the bottom of a squat, rather than saying, "You missed the bottom," encourage

by saying, "Drive two inches deeper into the squat." By choosing positive language, the coach begins to influence the athlete's own degree of positive self-talk.

Legendary fight trainer and CrossFit coach John Hackleman taught me the significance of essentially scripting athletes' self-talk for them. In his extensive coaching experience, John has had the awesome responsibility of providing advice, support and positive reinforcement to top mixed-martial-arts fighters such as former Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) light-heavyweight champion Chuck Liddell during the one-minute break between rounds of UFC bouts. John explained to me that no matter what had unfolded during the fight up until that point, he would tell the fighter such statements as, "You look strong. I am proud of you!" and "Your punching is powerful." The focus and word choice always remained in the positive tense. John said, "I would never say to my fighter, 'You're *not* tired!' or 'You *don't* feel tired' because that would almost guarantee my fighter would walk back into the cage thinking, 'I'm tired' instead of thinking something more productive and positive."

Forging an Indomitable Spirit.

Learning and applying the art of goal setting and positive self-talk will have an incredible influence upon the CrossFit affiliate coach and athlete. The result of practicing and teaching these skills with the same diligence as a CrossFit physical modality will increase the collective work capacity and positive attitude of a CrossFit affiliate. In addition, an indomitable spirit will be forged by both the coach and athlete as they realize what the mind can believe the body can achieve.



Susannah Dy/CrossFit Journal

About the Author

Greg Amundson serves in both the U.S. military and federal law enforcement. Referred to by his peers as the original CrossFit firebreather, Greg has been training and coaching CrossFit for over nine years.