

Diet Secrets of the Tupperware Man

How the Zone took a top CrossFitter to the next level

Greg Amundson



The first time I heard about the Zone diet was in February, 2002 from Coach Glassman. He explained to the old-school Team 6 morning crew that the first athlete to start the Zone would see drastic improvement in CrossFit performance over his peers. At the time, the competition was fierce between the loyal athletes training under Coach weekdays at 6:00 a.m., and we would do almost anything (legal) to get ahead of the pack. I decided to purchase a copy of "Enter The Zone" by Dr. Barry Sears and put the diet to the test.

Of course, reading a book and understanding it are two different things. I have to admit I was overwhelmed by the science, which explained why eating a special balance of 40% carbs, 30% protein, and 30% fat would yield a balanced hormonal response with leaner muscle mass and increased athletic capacity in the gym (see below for details). The Zone also supposedly has huge benefits for long-term health and disease resistance, but I'd already heard enough; simply getting stronger and faster was my primary concern in the early days of my CrossFit training. Back then, I fully subscribed to the "Black Box" model that CrossFit Level One athletes are familiar with. I basically viewed myself as a human CrossFit experiment and was willing to try whatever Coach recommended. I didn't know why a lot of things worked: I simply knew that I was training in gymnastics, weightlifting, and sport in anaerobic intervals and that I was quickly becoming a "fire breather."

So I went to Coach and said, "Look, I want to try this diet. I need you to tell me what to eat." Coach and his wife Lauren patiently took the time to give me a five-day meal plan that hasn't changed too much to this day! Although Coach told me what to eat, it was incumbent upon me to weigh and measure the food to ensure I ate the right amount.

My standard diet at the time—very high in protein with very little mono-saturated fat, and, coming from an Italian family, lots of pasta—was going to have to radically change under the Zone. Pasta was now verboten; my carb intake was going to fall quite a bit. So was my protein level. On top of that, my meals were now to be very regimented: five meals per day, never more than five hours between meals, and the same amount of food every day.

But instead of being bummed out by all this, I was intrigued. In fact, it was comforting to know that I was subscribing to a specific diet, given that CrossFit workouts themselves are very specific, scientific even. It felt good to know I was supporting all the work I did in the gym with good eating habits.

I have always been very strict about keeping a training journal and maintaining accurate records of my CrossFit workouts. Next to the journal entry on 2-10-2002 I wrote, "Started Zone Diet" next to the Workout of the Day.

Balanced nutritional intake, minimal processed grains, and faster times

The Zone, which Sears debuted in his first book in 1995, is his term for proper hormone balance. He says that a 40-30-30 calorie ratio of low-glycemic carbs (mostly fruits

and vegetables) to low-fat protein has several great effects on the body. It gets a little complicated here, but try to stay awake for the next couple of sentences.

The first great effect is that this ratio of nutrients causes the release of moderate amounts of the hormones insulin and glycagon, which together trigger the release of a flood of feel-good chemicals called eicosanoids, which do a bunch of good things: protect your heart, open the bronchi of the lungs, and the biggie, reduce inflammation. The release of eicosanoids is literally "the Zone" that Sears talks about.

But as good as eicosanoids are for your long-term health, CrossFitters may notice a secondary effect of the 40-30-30 ratio even faster: fat loss. That's because moderating carb intake will moderate the levels of insulin, whose job it is to store fat. On top of that, Sears found that a body in caloric balance is more efficient at burning fat. That's why CrossFitters lean out fast on this diet.

Besides the 40-30-30 ratio, the other main aspect of the Zone is portion control and total calorie control. I was allotted 22 "blocks" of food a day for my size and exercise level—five four-block meals and a two-block snack. A block, under the Zone system, is a balanced unit of food, composed of the following three sub-blocks: Protein (7 grams—i.e. one ounce of chicken, turkey, or sardines, two ounces of shrimp, or two egg whites; high-fat meats like bacon and duck aren't recommended.); carbs (9 grams—i.e. half an apple, four cups of broccoli, a quarter-cup of black beans; not recommended are carbs from processed grains, like bread or pasta.); and fat (1.5 grams—i.e. three olives, six peanuts, or a teaspoon of olive oil.). According to the Zone, "average" men and women need 14 and 11 blocks per day, respectively; a 6-foot, 185-pound man would use 16 or 17 blocks.

The only change I made to the diet, under Coach's guidance, was to double the fat intake in every meal. A CrossFit athlete on the Zone diet will become an expert at burning fat in the body as a fuel source. The problem with the 1x fat intake is that fuel source gets quickly used up by the intensity of the workout, so while athletes become very lean at 1x fat, some may suffer a dramatic decrease in their performance and overall "feel" during the day. I am one example of this, as is Nicole Carroll, a long-time CrossFitter here in Santa Cruz. Therefore, CrossFit advocates increased fat intake levels for athletes who lean out so much that their performance suffers.

For 30 days I weighed and measured my food. Every meal, every single day, was precisely calibrated. I enjoyed the process and took great care to ensure I devoted just as

much intensity and commitment to following the diet as I did during the actual CrossFit workouts. The results immediately spoke for themselves.

Within just two weeks of starting the diet, I had shaved ten seconds off my Fran time. I also took over two minutes off my Diane time while at the same time increasing my squat, deadlift and press by ten pounds. I recovered quickly after workouts and frequently trained twice a day. (That didn't last long as it quickly led to overtraining, but that's another article!) I also noticed the diet affected my mental clarity during the day and created an emotional balance that I had not experienced before.

My Tools: A Cooler, Tupperware, and 5 Perfect Meals

At the time I started in CrossFit, I was a Deputy Sheriff working patrol for the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office. I knew that in order to remain at the top of my game, I would need to support the effort expended at CrossFit with good Zone nutrition during my patrol day. How could I implement a plan to ensure that I would stay "in the Zone" while spending nearly 50 hours a week in a patrol vehicle responding to calls for service?

A little effort and some creativity did the trick. My first priority was to invest in a good quality cooler and some Tupperware. Next, I decided to perfect five meals that would be easy to make and that would stay fresh all day in a cooler. Although the meals were by no means glamorous, they provided me with the Zone nutrition I needed and took minimal preparation time in the kitchen during the morning before leaving to work. Here is a look at the five meals I ate during the day:

Pre-Workout Snack: A Zone Bar early in the morning along with a cup of coffee before training at CrossFit gave me a 2-block snack that was just enough to carry me through a workout.

Then I headed home for my first full meal, breakfast.

Meal # 1: (4 blocks).

- 4 scrambled eggs (4 blocks of protein)
- 1-L cup of oatmeal (4 blocks of carbohydrate)
- 24 almonds
(8 blocks of fat—twice the normal intake)

The next three meals were eaten while on patrol.

Meal #2: (4 blocks)

- 1 cup cottage cheese (4 blocks protein)
- 2 Fuji apples sliced into the cottage cheese
(4 blocks carbohydrate)
- 24 almonds (2x the fat intake)

Meal #3: (4 blocks)

- 4 ounces of lean red meat, usually a flank steak sliced very thin (4 blocks protein)
- 1 cup of spaghetti with the meat stirred into the pasta
(4 blocks carbohydrate)
- 2-M tablespoons of olive oil (2x the fat intake)

Meal #4: (4 blocks)

- 4 ounces of sliced cheese (4 blocks protein)
- 1 Fuji apple sliced thin and 1 cup of blueberries (total of 4 blocks of carbohydrate)
- 24 almonds (2x the fat intake)

At the end of my patrol shift, I had consumed a total of 18 blocks of food. This left me with 4 blocks to eat when I got home for dinner. I always tried to make a meal that was heavy in vegetables as the source of carbohydrate. Any shortage in carbohydrate blocks were made up for in Fuji apples.

Meal #5: (4 blocks)

- 4 ounces lean meat or fish (4 blocks protein)
- Large salad with broccoli, tomatoes, spinach and cucumber. (4 blocks of carbohydrate)
- 24 almonds (2x the fat intake)

On some occasions, due to a priority call at work or a major event, I would have to work overtime but would be out of food. In those circumstances, I made a quick trip to a supermarket and purchased string cheese and apples. I always kept extra fat with me in my cooler in the form of a zip-lock bag full of almonds.

In addition to ensuring I ate in the Zone, I also drank exactly one gallon of water a day. To ensure this, I purchased a one gallon refillable water container. This allowed me to monitor my water intake during the day. Water also helped quell any hunger pains I had between meals.

After about three weeks in the Zone, I had a paradigm shift about my relationship to food. Suddenly, food existed in my life to serve a purpose. I did not care what the meals tasted like or what my peers thought of my Tupperware and lunch pail. I was on a mission to be the best CrossFit athlete I could be, and I knew that by eating in the Zone I would be able to optimize my results in the gym.

Over the years I have changed the amount of fat I eat from time to time. I am most comfortable with 2x the fat intake. However, during intense training periods (sometimes I will train for 14 days straight, or do double days, or increase martial arts training) I will increase the amount of fat per meal to 4x the fat.

A recent change is I am only eating fruits and veggies for the carbohydrate. I have been on this for about four months now and love it. I lost about 5 pounds (very lean 200 lb now) but my energy is through the roof and so is performance. I wanted to try this as an experiment and it worked

After almost eight years of training in CrossFit and seven years of eating in the Zone, I have come to the realization that CrossFit is more than an elite fitness and conditioning program. CrossFit is a way of life. The lessons learned in the CrossFit gym, such as accountability, perseverance, dedication, and discipline, are directly applicable to life outside the gym, including the kitchen. Therefore, I find it

perfectly logical that the word “diet” comes from the Greek root meaning “way of life” — and that eating in the “Zone” is a way of life that supports a healthy body.



About The Author

Greg Amundson served seven years with the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office as a SWAT operator and Sniper. He currently works in Federal Law Enforcement and is a 1LT in the US Army National Guard. Greg started his CrossFit training under Coach Glassman at CrossFit Santa Cruz in 2001 and has been coaching Crossfit since 2002.

