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In Part 1 of this series, original firebreather Greg Amundson recalls the very first days of a movement that's now a global phenomenon.

By Greg Amundson CrossFit Firebreather

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Staff/CrossFit Journal

The original CrossFit gym was located on a street called Research Park Drive—and I can't think of a more fitting name for the location of the first box. A real-life research project on the potential of the human athlete needed a location with just such a name.

The Birth of the Movement

Over the years, many people have asked me about the early days of training at the original CrossFit Headquarters in Santa Cruz, Calif.

“What was it like to be coached by Greg and Lauren Glassman?”

“What were the group classes like?”

“What has changed over the years?”

“What were the early CrossFit Certifications like?”

“What was it like to train with Eva, Annie, Nicole and the other star athletes?”

When CrossFit classes were still being run out of the original gym, my answer would simply be, “Come check it out for yourself!” And over the course of the many exciting years I was part of the Headquarters gym, countless numbers of athletes made the pilgrimage to Santa Cruz to experience the magic first-hand.

As the CrossFit culture in Santa Cruz grew, many of the athletes from the original gym expressed a desire to open their own CrossFit boxes. At first I resisted the split of the core CrossFit Headquarters team of trainers and athletes. I feared that with expansion would come separation and a loss of the camaraderie and community that made the gym such a wonderful place. Nevertheless, several trainers did leave Headquarters to open affiliate CrossFit gyms on the outskirts of Santa Cruz County. In retrospect, I am glad they had the vision to start something new. Today, there are five thriving CrossFit gyms in the beach communities of Santa Cruz, each a unique and wonderful expression of the affiliate owners and the athletes training there.

And the original CrossFit gym? The doors were closed over two years ago. However, the energy and momentum created by “the little gym that could” is evident in the nearly 2,000 CrossFit affiliate gyms around the world. In addition, the spirit of the gym is alive and well in the athletes and trainers who were blessed with the opportunity to experience first-hand the grassroots fitness revolution destined to change the world.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Two-time Olympian Eva Twardokens was one of the very first CrossFit stars. Twardokens competed in the legendary Nasty Girls video against fellow firebreathers Nicole Carroll and Annie Sakamoto.



Greg Amundson quickly learned that CrossFit offered a new kind of fitness, and he was instantly hooked.

The Introduction

In December 2001, I heard rumors of athletic monsters being created inside a small gym on the east side of Santa Cruz and was intrigued. My good friend Sam Radetsky had found the number for “CrossFit” listed in the Santa Cruz County Yellow Pages and encouraged me to call. After a few rings a now-familiar voice answered, “Hello!” In the background I heard grunting, cheering and the sound of heavy objects slamming against what I hoped was the ground and not any other immovable object.

I introduced myself and asked if I could visit the gym to check things out. None other than Greg Glassman answered, “Sure, show up tomorrow morning at 6 a.m. and be ready to work out.”

I had recently graduated from the University of California at Santa Cruz, where I competed in NCAA water polo. Following college graduation, I had been hired as a recruit deputy by the Santa Cruz County Sheriff’s Office and was fresh out of the South Bay Regional Police Academy. My fitness training up to that point had mainly been aquatic based with a combination of dry-land gymnastics movements such as pull-ups and dips.

Free weights were available at the university gym, and I occasionally performed the bench press and back squat. The Police Academy, on the other hand, had focused on long, slow distance running and various defensive-tactics drills. I was young and competitive and thought I was physically fit. I was about to discover just how little I knew.

The following morning at about 5:45 a.m., I pulled into the small six-car parking lot in front of CrossFit Santa Cruz. I had been in and out of fitness gyms my entire life, and something didn’t feel right. I was staring at a 12-foot-tall garage door whose small glass window was already fogged over from the inside with moisture and perspiration despite the cold ocean air. I knocked before entering the small garage and then stepped inside the black-matted room. With a huge smile on his face, Greg Glassman walked across the floor and reached out his hand.

“Glad you made it! You can call me Coach,” he said. Seated on what looked like two wooden beams (I would later learn this was a set of gymnastics parallel bars) was the fiercest looking man I had ever seen.

“Greg, meet Mike Weaver, a Jiu-Jitsu wizard and CrossFit stud. I’m going to have you two work out together,” Coach said.

I had never heard of a Jiu-Jitsu wizard, but I was certain I did not want Mike to show me what it was.

Coach introduced me to the concept of the upcoming workout. It consisted of a 1,000-meter row on a Concept2 rower, which Coach claimed was the best piece of “cardio” equipment in the world. Following the row, I would complete 21 kettlebell swings and 12 pull-ups. If I felt up to it, I could repeat the workout after a brief rest. In the back of my mind, I thought, “Well, that doesn’t seem very hard to me. That should only take a few minutes!”



The small CrossFit gym in Santa Cruz quickly needed more space as the movement grew into the global phenomenon it is today.

Before the workout started, Coach led me from one station to the next, explaining and demonstrating the points of performance and the expected range of motion for each exercise. While receiving Coach's instruction and practicing the skills, I watched out of the corner of my eye as Mike warmed up with some pull-ups. After carefully observing a few of Mike's repetitions my first thought was, "Man, he is cheating!"

Mike was using his legs and hips in a manner that seemed to accelerate his body and almost float his chin over the bar. I was basing my critique of Mike's technique on the strict California Police Academy rules I had been under as a recruit and a historic belief that the pull-up was a biceps exercise.

After a few repetitions at each station under the watchful eye of Coach, we were ready for the start of the workout. Coach explained to me what Mike already knew: CrossFit workouts were by their design competitive. Mike and I would be racing against each other and against the clock. Coach led Mike and me to the second-story landing of the small but immaculately kept gym, where two Concept2 rowers sat side by side.

Coach said, "You guys will row up here, then carefully walk down the stairs to the remaining two stations."

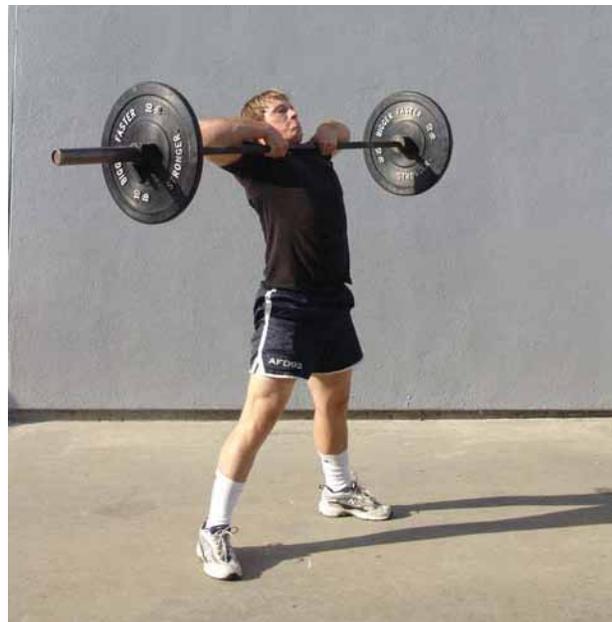
"Walk carefully? I wonder why he said that," I thought to myself.

Coach then said four words that would soon become as distinctive as legendary boxing announcer Michael Buffer's "Let's get ready to rumble!" catchphrase: "3-2-1... Go!" Coach thundered, and I started to pull as hard as I could on the handle of the Concept2 rower.

Three hundred meters into the workout, I knew I had greatly underestimated the impact such a seemingly harmless piece of "cardio" equipment could have on my entire body. After finishing the row, I also understood why Coach had warned us to walk carefully down the stairs. My legs felt like spaghetti and I was forced to support myself on the railing as I walked to my next station.

Coach enthusiastically motivated and supported Mike and me through the swings and onto the pull-up bar. Mike used a skill I would later learn was the "kipping pull-up" to quickly perform 12 consecutive pull-up repetitions. I, on the other hand, still considered this cheating and instead performed three sets of four strict pull-ups.

After the workout—I only completed one round—I stumbled over to the corner of the gym near the stairs and collapsed. Physically I was finished, but internally I was vibrant with the realization I had discovered something sacred. I had found a Coach who would share with me the Holy Grail of fitness: CrossFit.



David Leys demonstrating the sumo deadlift high pull at CrossFit HQ.

The Coach

My father was the first person I considered my coach. He was a Navy diver, an L.A. County beach lifeguard, a doctor of chiropractic and a dedicated athlete. My earliest childhood memories involved being coached by my dad in the basics of gymnastics, swimming and weightlifting. Tragically, less than two years before I walked into the door of CrossFit, my dad passed away from cancer. I felt an incredible loss and despair after he died. I also felt a void left by the man who had been my coach, mentor and biggest supporter.

This all changed the moment Coach Glassman extended his hand and welcomed me into the CrossFit family. In an instant, I felt a connection I had missed for so long. After my first workout with Coach, I spent as much time in the gym with him and his wife Lauren as my civilian job as a deputy sheriff would allow.

Coach instilled in me and the other athletes under his guidance a concept known as “virtuosity.” According to Coach’s definition, this meant “doing the common uncommonly well.” Movements I once considered as simple as a squat or push-up suddenly came alive with nuances and beauty. Coach believed there was magic in movements he described as “functional.” He taught his athletes these movements had the potential to create human power output that could not be matched by traditional bodybuilding isolation exercises.

Coach was creating a blueprint for the development of world-class athletes that we would see repeated in affiliate CrossFit gyms around the country in a few years. Coach followed a fairly consistent model in the way he approached teaching his group classes. Athletes were expected to warm up on their own by performing repetitions of the foundational CrossFit movements. This usually consisted of various squats, GHD sit-ups and back extensions, pull-ups and push-ups. Coach would then introduce, refine and instruct a compound weightlifting movement to the group. We would spend about half an hour working up to a fairly heavy load, at which point a repetition scheme would be implemented.

In addition to the weightlifting movements, Coach loved to teach gymnastics. Some days, advanced gymnastics skills would be taught and practiced in lieu of the heavy lifts. Then the excitement would really start.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Sally Stade used CrossFit to achieve new levels of fitness and eventually lost over 60 lb. In 2005 she completed a 15-foot rope climb after three years of hard work and perseverance.

Coach and Lauren were both fans of prescribing “tight” couplet and triplet workouts that beautifully blended the modalities of weightlifting, gymnastics and sport. The whiteboard was his pre-engagement operations center, and the gym the battlefield. Under Coach’s direction, the athletes engaged in epic contests that quickly morphed into today’s famous WODs such as Fran and Helen.

Although Coach and Lauren taught many classes during the day, I gravitated toward the 6 a.m. crew. The athletes training in the early morning hours were competitive by nature and students at heart. In addition to physical training, Coach frequently included short lectures, utilizing the whiteboard to depict and explain concepts such as power, fitness and work capacity. It quickly became evident to me that I was learning much more than functional movement. I was being introduced to a new way of life grounded in belief in the unlimited potential for the human athlete.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Loyd Lewis: one of the few people capable of performing a strict one-arm pull-up.

The Right Place, On Time

When I think back on the early days of CrossFit Santa Cruz, I’m amazed by the amount of talented athletes who were at the right place at the right time. I seriously do not consider it a mere coincidence. It’s almost as if a magnet in the universe attracted all of us to Coach and the incredible momentum he was starting inside the east-side garage.

One of the questions most frequently asked of me is, “What was it like to train with star athletes like Annie, Nicole and Eva?”

I could sum it up in one word: Awesome.

Eva Twardokens, affectionately known as “Eva-T,” was the first female athlete I met at CrossFit Santa Cruz. She had been training with Coach for several years prior to my arrival. Her capacity inside the gym was like nothing I had ever seen before. She regularly beat the other athletes—both men and women alike—in the CrossFit workouts. Her technique in the Olympic lifts was impeccable. She could bang out sets of 20 pull-ups while holding a conversation with you and climbed the 15-foot rope with no legs. She was, and still is, awesome.

During the spring of 2004, Annie Sakamoto and Nicole Carroll burst onto the scene at CrossFit Santa Cruz and never looked back. Annie’s capacity was immediately so fierce she was frequently paired against me and other male athletes to keep us in our places. The common good-hearted joke in the gym when visitors doubted the legitimacy of the program was, “Just keep up with Annie. It’s easy.” Needless to say, I never saw any challengers come even remotely close to beating her in anything.

Nicole Carroll has the heart of a champion and is pound-for-pound the strongest athlete I have every trained with. My favorite song is *Eye of the Tiger*, and I swear it could have been written about her. The most inspiring moment in my life was watching Nicole, Annie and Eva perform the workout Nasty Girls at CrossFit Santa Cruz. In the CrossFit.com [video](#) made that day—which has to be seen to be believed—Nicole braves one of CrossFit’s most demanding workouts with an indomitable spirit. Her efforts in that workout have been credited with inspiring more CrossFit athletes around the world than any other recorded CrossFit event.



The class photo from a cert held Oct. 6, 2003.

Although Eva, Annie, Nicole and I were on several of the early CrossFit workout videos, I consider every athlete who was part of the original gym to be a star. The box was blessed with such talent as David Leys and Matt Mast, two athletes who were part of the first published CrossFit DVD for their efforts on the now-famous CrossFit workouts Fran and Diane. In the DVD, David captured the world's first sub-three-minute Fran, while Matt set a world-record sub-four-minute Diane.

Loyd Lewis was the first—and to this day only—person I have seen do a strict one-arm pull-up. Professional rock climber Rob Miller trained at CrossFit Santa Cruz—and then went out and in a few hours climbed peaks unassisted that took other climbers several days. Garth Taylor, CrossFit Santa Cruz's beloved "heavyweight," took his CrossFit training to win several Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu championships, including black belt runner-up in the 2001 World Championship.

And remember Mike Weaver? His CrossFit training earned him a World Cup and U.S. Open Black Belt Brazilian Jiu Jitsu Championship.

However, perhaps it's the less-known stories of the original gym that need to be told. At nearly 70 years old, Mary Conover was the "grandmother" of CrossFit Santa Cruz. Mary first came to Coach Glassman with very little athletic ability. In fact, she was in tears about her lack of functional independence. Mary realized she did not have the strength to pick her grandchildren off the ground. Under Coach's guidance, Mary soon turned herself into the most capable grandmother in the Western Hemisphere. Today, Mary deadlifts close to 100 lb. and competes in workouts right alongside athletes half her age.

Sally Stade is another shining example of the amazing star athletes at the original gym. When she walked into the headquarters gym at 6 a.m. in 2002, I thought she might have been lost. But she knew exactly where she was. At nearly 60 years old, Sally would capture the hearts of all the athletes in the gym with her determination and never-quit attitude. She insisted on remaining in the 6 a.m. class despite the difficulty of the programming and the great age difference with the other athletes.

Over the course of five years, I watched Sally transform from a woman with very little athletic background into a firebreather in her own right. Sally lost over 60 lb. while gaining incredible strength and capacity: Sally split jerked 88 lb. and overhead squatted 78 lb. for several repetitions. In addition, on a glorious morning in 2005, Sally completed her first 15-foot rope climb after three years of constant struggle. When her palm slapped the wooden beam that hung the rope, the entire gym burst into cheers and tears of joy.

Another incredible athlete I had the opportunity to meet and train with was Kris Machnick. A tenacious competitor, Kris instilled courage and perseverance in all the athletes at the gym. For Kris, CrossFit became a fountain of youth. She learned the fundamentals of gymnastics and weightlifting and then took her new-found capacity into the great outdoors, where she skied, climbed and hiked peaks never intended for someone her age. At almost 60 years old, Kris was able to easily perform muscle-ups, rope climbs, multiple pull-ups and ring dips.



Another class photo, this one from Feb. 19, 2004.



A CrossFit classic: Eva-T and Nicole Carroll.

Learning to Coach, Learning to Lead

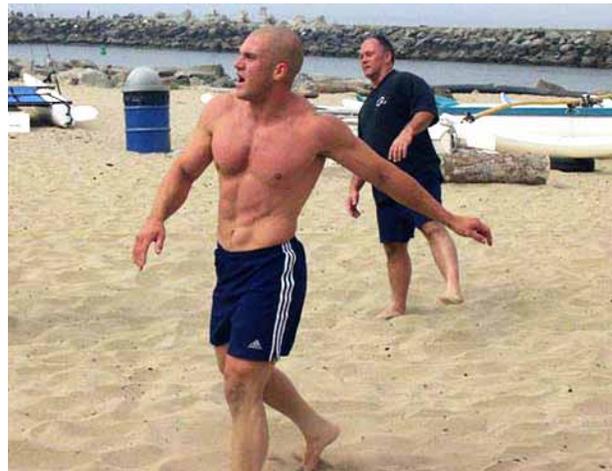
In addition to creating the athletes whose exploits were featured on CrossFit.com, Coach was also creating world-class trainers. He would have it no other way.

Coach instilled in his athletes a trait that I have not seen repeated in any other professional culture: Coach believed that the moment you learned something, you had the responsibility to teach it to others.

Coach insisted the best way to learn anything was to teach it to someone else. In this respect, Coach required his athletes to participate in teaching group and private classes at CrossFit Santa Cruz. Under the guidance of Coach and the more senior athletes, everyone at CrossFit Santa Cruz learned the intricacies of the foundational movements, with the expectation they would teach the skills to others. Coach had a mantra when athletes left the gym, and it has now evolved into a piece of famous post-certification advice: "When you get home, grab a broomstick, knock on your neighbor's door and teach them how to deadlift." At the original CrossFit gym, everyone had something to teach, and we were all hungry to learn.

Garth Taylor taught me how to do kipping pull-ups and was my first Jiu-Jitsu instructor. Eva-T taught me how to perform the snatch. Annie taught me the "frog" method of climbing the rope, and Nicole helped develop my overhead squat. Jim Baker taught me a progression for the muscle-up that I, in turn, teach at CrossFit Certifications. Brandon Gilliam and Jason (J-Dog) Highbarger taught me advanced concepts of programming. Tony Budding worked tirelessly on my split jerk, while Matt Mast taught sprinting progressions and David Leys schooled me on mental toughness.

And the master of it all, Greg Glassman, taught everyone the most important lesson: We were much more than athletes and trainers. We were being forged into the young ambassadors of CrossFit.



About the Author

Greg Amundson is described by his peers as the original CrossFit firebreather. He is the owner of numerous early WOD records and the object of deep respect from CrossFitters worldwide.