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The Face of Battle

Jeff Barnett explains how facial expressions can give good trainers valuable insight into each athlete.

By **Jeff Barnett** CrossFit Impulse

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Jeff Barnett

When the fog of war permeates the field of battle, nothing is easy.

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I took the name of this article from a book by John Keegan. My commanding officer once assigned the book as required reading for his officers, and I think I know why. The book describes three epic battles: Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme. For me, the centerpiece was the Battle of Agincourt, a 15th-century English victory over the French during the Hundred Years' War. Keegan's message about Agincourt was clear: war is ugly. It's full of mud and rain and broken wagons and body parts and shit and piss and blood and dead animals and dead people—stacks of dead people. Friction assails you at every opportunity, making the easy difficult and the difficult seemingly impossible.

Yep, sounds a lot like CrossFit.

As a trainer at CrossFit Impulse, I get to witness a different face of battle every day as my athletes attack the WOD. I can tell much about an athlete's expectations and mental state during a WOD by his facial expressions, mannerisms and actions. Expectations and mental state are large drivers of performance in competitive and high-intensity activities. If I can perceive what an athlete is thinking or what he is feeling, then perhaps I can coach him in the right direction. Furthermore, it gives me insight into an athlete's psyche: how the athlete views himself, the WOD, the world—everything.

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This is more useful than just interesting conversation. Coaches can use this knowledge to improve their athletes' performance. From our unique position outside the WOD, coaches can identify and correct mental patterns that bleed away performance. And much like developing kinesthetic awareness aids the athlete in maneuvering his body, mental awareness can help him maximize his efficiency during the WOD.

Below, I've taken my observations and rolled the messy business of human emotion into nice, neat packages with a bow. In this arena almost nothing is concrete, but I am confident you'll see some familiar faces.



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What does this athlete need to hear from her trainer right now?

Tired Terry

Tired Terry is born of some messy combination of fear, uncertainty, pain and being overwhelmed. I often see athletes take on his persona as they hold a melancholy stare at the equipment in front of them. Kettlebell, pull-up bar, barbell—they're all equally likely to get a look that says, "I know I'm supposed to pick you up and do something, but I think it might kill me, and that makes me a little conflicted." As with many of my cues, I begin by refocusing the athlete's attention back on the task at hand. Regaining focus will be a common theme, because focus is the embodiment of putting the voices and feelings aside to concentrate on a difficult task.

Desperate Dora

Desperate Dora displays a look of pure desperation and exhaustion. The athlete feels like she hasn't a drop of gas left in the tank, yet she is expected to continue. Hands go to knees, sometimes knees go to floor, and sometimes even backs go to the floor—during the WOD. The look of Desperate Dora says to me, "You don't understand. I really am dying, and I've got to rest before continuing, so please understand that your cry of, 'Pick up the bar!' may go unanswered. Kthxbye." If an athlete has mentally checked out to this degree, then a firmer cue is usually required. "Stand back up! You're stronger than that!" is a useful lead-off. Follow up by re-focusing her attention and getting her in motion once again.

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Couldgiveashit Carla

I rarely see Carla, but she does exist. She usually bears an apathetic half-smile with a subtle lip-clinch that says, "You're so cute trying to motivate me, but today I just don't give a fuck. So you can keep doing what you're doing or you can read to me from *The Iliad*. It doesn't really matter. My heart rate is about 120 beats per minute, and that's where I like it, and that's where it's going to stay." She doesn't show up often, but I'd be disingenuous if I didn't include her in the lineup. She's also pretty difficult to coach. If applicable, I might give some positive feedback on her technique and then use that idea to encourage her to move faster. Most people will push themselves pretty hard under the direct observation of a trainer, so if I stick around long enough I can at least ensure she's hitting the right intensity before I depart.

Reluctant Roger

Reluctant Roger lacks confidence and has one signature move in particular: staring at the pull-up bar, possibly with hands extended and ready to grasp it but unwilling to take hold and begin. Roger's unique position says, "I'm done resting and know I should begin reps again soon, but that idea scares the hell out of me." This isn't unique to pull-ups, but pull-ups showcase it more than anything else because a deliberate jump is required to mount the bar and begin. You can put your hands on a barbell, and then 5 seconds later get into your starting position, and then 5 seconds later start your movement. But the moment you jump onto the pull-up bar, it's go time.

Roger's lack of confidence is straightforward to correct. Reassure him that you know he can keep going—that you know he's capable. But more importantly, tell Roger that he must believe it. Only by changing the way Roger views himself and his capabilities will you inspire him to action. You can also ask the athlete to trust you enough to jump onto the pull-up bar and start pulling before they think they're able. When he starts linking pull-ups and proves to himself that he was indeed able even though he didn't believe it, that's very powerful. It will change his performance forever.



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A look of determination says a lot about an athlete's mindset during a WOD.

Scatterbrained Scarlett

Scatterbrained Scarlett lacks focus and shows up when things get tough. Perhaps something unexpected happens. The athlete's grip slips on the bar, the bar hits her in the nose, one foot misses her box on a box jump, her double-unders keep failing The opportunities for setbacks are endless. Setbacks will always occur, but Scarlett emerges when an athlete allows setbacks to slow her down. If lack of focus is mixed with fatigue and self-pity, she will rest by walking far away from her equipment. She might even visit the chalk bucket. Who among us hasn't meticulously chalked hands like Michelangelo painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel? Much like Dora, Scarlett may need a more assertive cue to bring her back to reality. Calming and re-focusing is the next step, followed by supervising that she has returned from Crazy Town and is moving efficiently once again.

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Agonizing Arthur

Arthur is in pain. You can see it on his face and in the way he digs his fingernails into the steel pull-up cage. This isn't pain from injury or simple metabolic discomfort. He genuinely wants to keep moving, but he's overcome by pain when he tries. I have actually noticed a trend with this behavior and athletes who don't eat enough fat. They seem to hit a wall after 3 or 4 minutes and move slowly for the remainder of the WOD. In contrast to most of my methods, I usually tell Arthur to take it easy and relax a little. I can't make him move any faster. In Arthur's case, if he could, he would. I try to calm him and encourage him that the WOD is completed one rep at a time, and he will eventually get there, albeit slowly.

Afterwards, I usually initiate a conversation to find out the problem, and often it's lack of quality fats in his diet. In this case I start with a simple solution: just eat some fat with every meal. An avocado, some mixed nuts, some olives—something. And I don't care if you weigh and

measure—just eat some fat with every meal. My results with this method have been overwhelmingly positive. One athlete remarked, "Since I changed my diet, I've noticed a huge difference. Usually I would have been out of gas after the first round (of the WOD), but tonight I was on fire!"

Dangerous Danny

Dangerous Danny is an unfortunate byproduct of a supremely motivated athlete. Danny's fatigue, motivation and competitive drive push him into unsafe movement patterns. Some WODs are simple enough that you can slog through them half-conscious. But some maneuvers, like deadlifts, muscle-ups and handstand push-ups, require mental focus simply to keep you out of the ER. You can identify Danny by a grimaced look on his face as he pounds through the WOD with no regard for life, limb or intervertebral discs.

You absolutely must slow him down and get his technique back into an acceptable range. Pause him, explain how he's being unsafe, and insist that he slow down a little and correct the problem. Stick around for a minute to make sure he's consistently moving safely again. Athletes invariably give positive feedback on this after the WOD is over. After all, this is training, and the purpose of training is to better ourselves, not to die during the training itself.



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What the mind believes, the body achieves.



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Your athletes may show you several faces during a battle. How will you deal with each one?

Optimal Performance

It's funny to reflect on these feelings and behaviors because they seem to be universal, transcending every time and place. Another critical step in developing our athletes is accepting that no one can escape these feelings; athletes can only seek to control their actions despite them. As a clichéd example, courage is not the absence of fear but acting despite the presence of fear. All normal men and women feel fear, but some shrug it off so effortlessly that you'd never know. Given that premise, here are three instructions for your athletes that will improve their performance:

1. Prepare

Get your mental game right before you begin the WOD. Use positive self-talk and an accurate assessment of your capabilities to prepare your mind for what's to come. You can take this as far as having a complete plan for work and rest. You might say, "Last time I performed Fran, I rested after 17 thrusters. This time, I'm going to complete the set of 21 unbroken. Then I'll take 5 breaths and begin my pull-ups." Certainly, the plan will change. Unexpected things will happen. But the act of planning and having a baseline from which to improvise is profound.

2. Be Deliberate

In everything you do, be it work or rest, do it deliberately. If you are working, then perform reps. If you are resting, then rest. But whatever you do, don't muddle in the middle with half-hearted reps that won't count but will drain your energy. Be disciplined enough to start working when you know you should, and don't let yourself create distractions that you'll use for "unplanned" rest. Everybody needs chalk, but nobody needs chalk every 3 pull-ups. And don't make out with the water fountain.

3. Filter and Focus

Filter out every sensory input that isn't beneficial to the work you are performing at that very moment. Don't listen to the myriad voices in your head and distractions around you. Focus on exactly what you are doing. When you have your current action well under control, you may want to start thinking one movement ahead, but don't overwhelm yourself. You get through a WOD one movement and one rep at a time, so make that one movement and that next rep your object of focus.

Every WOD is fought despite immense friction, but you and your athletes are always in control. They may feel frustrated, tired and full of any combination of other feelings, but they always have the ability to regain control of their WOD. Coaches are in a unique position to help athletes regain that control through the power of calm, objective, outside observation.

The trainer's job doesn't end with teaching and correcting movement patterns. Fostering proper mental technique can be just as helpful—but doubly difficult.



Leslie-Ann Barr

About the Author

*Jeff Barnett is a mechanical engineer and co-owner of [CrossFit Impulse](#) in Madison, Ala. He served as a United States Marine officer from 2003 to 2007, including combat duty in Fallujah, Iraq. He has been a guest op-ed columnist for the *New York Times* on their [Frontlines](#) and [Homefires](#) columns. When he's not training clients or training himself, you might find him wakeboarding, eating meat off the bone or finishing an MBA at the University of Alabama Huntsville.*