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School of Fitness: Part 2

Emily Beers explains how CrossFit Vancouver is creating fitness professionals.

By **Emily Beers** CrossFit Vancouver

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I was car shopping earlier this year and expected to be greeted by a car salesman.

"We don't call it 'car salesman' anymore," a woman said. "Judy Smith, vehicle consultant," she said as she shook my hand. I laughed to myself but quickly pulled back my smile when I realized she was serious.

Car salesmen have become "vehicle consultants." Sleep Country employees are "sleep experts." The woman working at Toys R Us is a "toyologist." Gone are the days when we had enough confidence to select an appropriate toy for our six-year-old nephew without the help of a toyologist. Now, experts are available for every menial task, and paint-matching consultants and shampoo technicians wander the streets flaunting their obscure expertise. After 20-plus years of washing my own hair, I would have assumed I could call myself a "shampoo technician."

Our apparent compulsion to use experts for all aspects of our lives also means a growing number of people are hiring personal trainers to look after their fitness needs. But, of course, not all strength coaches and personal trainers have equal expertise. Not even all CrossFit coaches have comparable levels of knowledge.

And because Canada has no true regulatory body in the fitness industry, the hypothetical 18-year-old Joe, the guy who lives down the street, can train 20 clients in his basement for \$75 an hour. He looks super fit and has bulging biceps and a puffed-up chest to prove it. He grunts when he lifts weights, and he follows a fitness program he calls "F the Legs, Let's Bench." We are all familiar with the prototypical Joe, and we know that his fitness knowledge is often quite minimal.

One of the major tenets of CrossFit is that the free market weeds out the incompetent. If we believe this, then we might not have anything to worry about. In the long run, the market will take care of the unqualified trainers. Our bench-pressing Joe might injure a client or two, and pretty soon he'll be out of business. Similarly, the good CrossFit affiliates survive, while the poor ones flounder.

But what if you're a CrossFit affiliate owner and you're growing rapidly? You're an incredibly proficient coach, your business model is sound and your ducks are in a row, but the other CrossFit coaches at your gym are inexperienced. They might be competent CrossFitters and good people, but they're not quite yet experts in their field.



After several moves, CrossFit Vancouver settled on an ideal 7,000-square-foot facility.



Craig Patterson (standing) talking to head and apprentice coaches at CrossFit Vancouver.

This is the situation Craig Patterson of CrossFit Vancouver found himself in a couple of years ago.

In his early CrossFit days, Patterson admits he hired and watched many inexperienced coaches train their clients incorrectly in his own gym. He watched coaches teach movements poorly. He watched coaches let their clients get away with poor technique. He watched coaches lose clients because they didn't develop proper relationships with them. Patterson felt responsible.

So Patterson turned his affiliate into a registered vocational school for fitness coaches. But the fact his affiliate is now a regulated school doesn't mean he rejects the free market. The two concepts are not mutually exclusive, he explains.

Patterson remains a whole-hearted believer in economic openness. He continues to believe Greg Glassman is a genius. He is still a strong advocate of the CrossFit Level 1 seminar, a pre-requisite to becoming an apprentice coach at his school. He doesn't want massive regulation in the fitness industry. He's not trying to create the fitness-trainer equivalent to sleep experts.

What he is trying to do is to create knowledgeable, technically sound and experienced coaches, coaches who can go out into the world and become entrepreneurs. What he is trying to do is professionalize the fitness industry. But don't confuse the term "professionalize" with words like "formal" and "pretentious."

The School of Fitness in Vancouver is anything but formal. One of its missions might be to create professional coaches, but what drives the place is an informal and somewhat uncharacteristic—some may even say slightly inappropriate—community all its own. Some say it doesn't even feel like a business lives there.

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The Apprenticeship Diploma Program

Before you can become an apprentice coach at CrossFit Vancouver, you have to become a proficient CrossFitter. As a student of the sport, you complete 15 personal-training sessions, where you learn the movements of CrossFit and improve your fitness. Then you graduate to group classes. You must attend group classes for a minimum of six months before a head coach will take you on as an apprentice coach. You must also attend a CrossFit Level 1 seminar and pass its test.

(If you arrive at the school from out of town and you already have both your Level 1 designation and CrossFit experience, then instead of going through personal training and group classes, you can apply for the program much sooner. You'll be assessed by a head coach and must pass a test before you can become an apprentice.)

Once a coach agrees to take you on, you can begin your apprenticeship. You become a junior apprentice. This means shadowing your mentor coach with new students, as well as helping coach group classes. During this time, you'll also attend 10 in-house seminars.

The seminars include:

- Exercise science
- Business of CrossFit
- Nutrition
- Endurance/running
- Stretching/flexibility
- Olympic weightlifting Part 1: clean and jerk
- Olympic weightlifting Part 2: snatch
- Gymnastics
- Rowing
- Speed and agility

The next step is to become a senior apprentice, where you begin training your own clients. You lead both one-on-one personal-training sessions and group classes. You start by earning 20 percent of the revenue you generate. From there, you move up to 30, 40, 50 and eventually 60 percent. The more people you're able to bring in, the more referrals you're able to generate and the faster you'll move up the ladder in building your self-made business.



CrossFit Vancouver hosts a stretching/flexibility seminar by Giselle Nagy (center, in red).

Once your clients graduate from personal training to group classes, you will continue to make that percentage of their monthly fees. So the better you are at retaining and keeping your clients happy, the more money you'll collect each month.

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As Patterson explains, the free market—and ultimately the ability to sell CrossFit—determines a coach's monetary worth. And the open market ensures there's no ceiling on financial success.

"The apprenticeship program is like a year-long job interview," said Patterson. "And ultimately the best way of evaluating a coach is what the free market thinks of the coach."

Corey Lapell is an apprentice coach at the school. Prior to joining CrossFit Vancouver, Lapell ran his own CrossFit affiliate, CrossFit Empower. He trained clients and had some success but soon realized there was much more to learn.

"There's a whole other level of integrity that senior coaches at our school bring to coaching. It's very uncompromising. I had no idea what I didn't know before working through an apprenticeship," admitted Lapell.

When he became an apprentice coach, Lapell did have to take a temporary pay cut. He started at the bottom, like everyone else. But he says it's been worth it.

"I was stuck at making 30 percent and 40 percent for a long time," said Lapell, who now earns 50 percent of the revenue he generates.

In 2010, Lapell brought in more than 60 people to the school. He currently has 40 active clients, either in personal training or who have graduated to group classes. His biggest month so far was in June 2010, when he took home \$9,000.



Corey Lapell, one of the trainers at CFV.

Under this system, Patterson says the school is creating self-employed, self-sufficient and technically sound CrossFit coaches.

The Intangibles: What You Won't Learn in Class

"Becoming a great coach is about more than just teaching the movements," said Patterson. "The Level 1 and Level 2 CrossFit (seminars) are great for teaching people the movements. But how business actually works on the ground level is much different than that," he continued.

As Patterson learned from Glassman, becoming a great coach isn't about learning how to coach a kipping pull-up. It's about understanding people, about figuring out where they need to grow, both physically and emotionally.

"Back in the day, I used to sit around on Glassman's couch until all hours of the night, and we would talk about the way life works, discussing issues and ideas. I learned more from Glassman those nights than I ever could at a Level 1 ...," said Patterson. "He's a genius."

But CrossFit has grown too big for Glassman to spend one-on-one time with everyone who wants to coach CrossFit. So what Patterson is trying to do at his school is to act as an apostle of sorts, relaying Glassman's knowledge to a new generation of eager coaches and aspiring business owners.

Patterson is not alone. Trevor Lindwall, Chris Saini, Charlie Palmer and Andrew Swartz are the other head coaches at the school. Each has a handful of apprentices he both coaches and mentors.

On top of learning how to physically and technically coach CrossFit, apprentice coaches learn about the business of CrossFit. They learn how to become entrepreneurs, they learn about themselves by attending personal-development courses, and they learn by debating social policies over a glass of wine on Friday nights. Through the ongoing trial and error of this community, they make mistakes together, they challenge each other, and they learn about the way people and life work—"just like the way I learned from Glassman in the old days," said Patterson.

30-year-old Bill McClain is an apprentice coach at the School of Fitness. A former Ph.D. math student from Missouri, McClain first came to Vancouver in 2009. "From Day 1, I asked Patty (Patterson) if I could do the apprentice program. He told me I'm going to have to wait a couple months and get fit first," remembered McClain.

A few months later, McClain brought it up again.

"I'm still interested in doing the program And finally, one day, we had the old sit-down. Patty brought in (other head coaches) Charlie (Palmer) and T-Bear (Lindwall) and Sheppy (Saini), and he asked them, 'What do you guys think? Should we let him in?'"

In July, 2010, McClain applied for and was granted an international student Visa from Immigration Canada and began the Apprentice Diploma Program at CrossFit Vancouver.

"I made Bill earn his stripes before I took him on," said Patterson. And because McClain had to earn his place, he is more appreciative today.

McClain agrees. "If he just tossed us in, we wouldn't respect it," he said.

What the Apprentice Program Is Really Like

I'm sitting in the school's lounge with Bill. I'm stressing about how I'm going to accurately describe in writing what being an apprentice coach at CrossFit Vancouver is really like.



Chris Saini (left) prepares to define the student-teacher relationship to apprentice Mike Dahlman.

"How am I going to explain this in my story? I mean, how honest can I be about the apprentice program?" I ask.

"Just tell it how it is," Bill insists.

"But can I really write about our apprentice nights out on the town? Those nights are a huge part of the program, but we don't even talk about CrossFit. Think about last Saturday night: we talked about cleaning up the Downtown Eastside, debated whether or not kids who have been abused can ever have healthy sex lives, and we razzed Reto about being a socialist," I begin.

I sigh, still somewhat stressed.

"I don't know if it will make sense if I write about how Patty sent me to talk to a rebirther to figure out why I had a meltdown at regionals last year. I can't write about how he gave me a raise for flexing my hamstring muscle for that girl he was into. And on the other side of things, I can't write about how Patty has made me cry on more occasions than any of my ex-boyfriends ever did. Our community is such a weird contradiction between love and uncompromising honesty," I continue.

"Why can't you write that?" he asks.

"I don't know. All I know is I've learned more here in the last year and a half than I did in seven years of university. As corny as it sounds, I can actually feel myself growing. And I don't just mean that I'm better at showing someone how to do a squat clean now. I mean that ... I don't really know how to explain it. I just see the world differently. But I can't write that."



Originally from Missouri, Bill McLain got a Visa to study at the School of Fitness.

Bill smiles.

"Why can't you write that?" he asks again.

"Because in journalism school, I learned that it's important to keep myself out of the story. You'll probably be more objective than I am. How would you explain what being an apprentice here is like, Bill?" I ask.

Bill looks at me for a moment and hesitates.

"Most of us are raised to be almost politically correct and professional, especially in a business setting, but we're definitely unlearning that here."

—Bill McLain

"You're right—this is going to be hard to articulate," he says.

"Something ... something so different is going on at CrossFit Vancouver ... We're learning to embrace people, but at the same time we're learning that you have to make them earn it. You work them really hard until they graduate to classes. It takes some people three or four months to be able to graduate from personal training to group classes, so when they get there they value it a lot more. They invest so much more of themselves," Bill says.

"That's true," I add. "And that's why the coaches are making us earn it too before they hand us the keys," I say.

"Exactly. It makes you realize how effective the approach is, so you start to understand how your brain works when you're pushed in this way, and you start to understand your clients better too," Bill says.

He continues: "There's a bit of a tough-love approach, a sort of honesty that we weren't necessarily comfortable with when we started the program ... Most of us are raised to be almost politically correct and professional, especially in a business setting, but we're definitely unlearning that here."



Chris Saini is a head coach and the general manager of CrossFit Vancouver.

I laugh. "No kidding. The other day, Patty walked up to me when I was training a new client. He says, 'Jesus Dave, we need to get you off the carbs, buddy. It will make your life better.' Then he reached over and pinched Dave's stomach and laughed. 'What did you eat for breakfast this morning, dude? Don't lie to me,' Patty insisted. Only Patty can get away with that. I thought I was going to lose this guy as a client, but after that comment, I had the best session I've had with him yet," I say.

"It's because Patty understands how people work," Bill says. "If you show people some love, they'll give you some trust, so you have more leeway to make mistakes Patty makes mistakes all the time, but even when he's just trying to be a horse's ass, even the times he pushes you until you're in tears, he is usually trying to teach you something," he adds.

"It's not even a conscious learning process a lot of the time. It's intuitive," Bill says. "And you end up learning more outside of the school than at the school because you watch the same things happen in different settings. We're learning how to sell, but you almost don't want to call it sales. It's not just about CrossFit. It's about understanding human interaction—you can abstract what you do at the school and apply that skill anywhere. Whether it's picking up a girl at the bar, creating a good energy at a party or telling a story, if you're keen on paying attention, then you'll see the same trends everywhere," he says.

"You articulate it much better than I do," I say.

"Really, I feel like I'm rambling," Bill says.

"Well, it is kind of hard to explain what it's like to be an apprentice here. I sure have never been part of something like this before," I say.

"Just be honest," he says.

The Executive Diploma Program

Like most aspects of CrossFit Vancouver, the executive business mentorship program was developed unintentionally, through trial and error. In 2007, as CrossFit Vancouver started to grow, other CrossFit affiliate owners began turning to Patterson for business advice. He found himself spending so many hours on the phone that Patterson started neglecting his own community. So he turned his mentorship time into an official program.

26-year-old Devin Glage, owner of Raw CrossFit in Penetanguishene, Ont., completed the business mentorship program before opening his affiliate in August 2009. Just a year and a half later, Glage has 121 members enrolled and has five coaches working for him. Not bad considering Penetanguishene has a population of only 6,300.

Glage says Patterson's business advice has been invaluable to his success.

"When I met Patty, he kind of threw his knuckles up in the air and put his arm around me. He has a bit of the big-brother thing going. I've been trying to do that with my clients. And I've been trying to teach my coaches this, too," said Glage.

"It's hard to teach people how to interact with people, but when you see it, you can learn it from them," he added. "Knowing what buttons to push with certain people, it's something that only comes with experience."

Since opening his affiliate, Glage has continued to turn to Patterson for advice. One way Patterson has helped Glage along the way is by getting him over the hurdles that most CrossFit affiliates seem to hit.

“If I could go back six or seven years and tell myself what I know now—about business, about CrossFit, about people—I could save myself countless headaches and stress.”

—Craig Patterson

“As a new business owner, you can’t predict what’s going to happen to your business. But all the milestones Patty predicted have come true, so he’s been really helpful to get me through them. I wouldn’t have had this much success this quickly without the business mentorship program,” Glage added.

Until now, Patterson has mentored most of his clients over the phone and via e-mail, but he says there’s much more he could do in person. So this spring, Patterson is broadening his mentorship program and hosting a three-day program at the school.

The seminar will cover the following:

- Professionalization of the fitness trainer
- CrossFit Vancouver’s business model
- The evolution of CrossFit affiliates
- Four common phases CrossFit affiliates go through
- Solutions to common mistakes CrossFit affiliates make
- Tools to maximize revenue



Emily Beers, an apprentice coach at the school, also authors the CrossFit Vancouver blog Bathroom Graffiti.

His goal is to help CrossFit affiliate owners and aspiring owners become successful faster.

"It's going to be three days where we look at wherever you are in your development as a CrossFit owner or aspiring owner, and we take you over the humps," Patterson said. "If I could go back six or seven years and tell myself what I know now—about business, about CrossFit, about people—I could save myself countless headaches and stress. Starting from the beginning, we made tons of mistakes, and it seems like everyone makes these same business mistakes," he added.



Head coach Andrew Swartz with student Lars Konge.

Patterson: The Mistakes Affiliates Make

I ask Patterson to explain a bit about the common mistakes affiliates make, as well as the hurdles they usually face in the first couple years. His face lights up, as though he couldn't wait to answer the question. He jumps right in:

The first place an affiliate gets stuck is when it opens and becomes a one-man show. One guy runs the place, and he's struggling to get clients. He always wants to start these big marketing campaigns, to slop himself up on a billboard.

The other mistake he makes is he lowers the price. He wants to lower the threshold, and then he attracts all the wrong people. He may even give away free months, which is the worst idea. Glassman always taught me that, "If you're not the most expensive guy in town, then you're doing yourself a disservice." You sell a better product if you're charging more money. If people pay for their first 10 sessions up front—when they hand you \$750 off the bat—you invest more in them, and they give more energy to you.

It wasn't until I learned this and started to standardize how a person's first day is administered that we started to make any money. A person's first day has to be done right. At this point in Vancouver, everyone who walks through the doors gets put through our patented first day. All our apprentice coaches are tested on putting a newbie through. If they do it right, it almost always results in a new client.

Business is simple. No matter how good your product is, what wins every time in business is the same. How many people can you get through the door? How long can you keep them? How much can you charge them?

Once affiliates get over the hump of finding clients, other challenges come up. He is usually still a one-man show, so now you have one guy working his ass off. He has lots of clients, but he works way too many hours. He usually has eight classes a day plus personal training, and sometimes there are only three people in each class.

He needs to find partners. The biggest mistake here is he starts splitting revenue instead of costs. Partnership agreements are tough to do. I know—I've had bad partnership agreements before. Resentment always grows. Ill will develops, and it's bad for the community. But the overriding lesson here is that you have to split costs, not revenue.

And once you have good partnership agreements, the business can start to take off. And in order to maintain it, you have to be able to develop your coaches from the ground up. This is where we are today in Vancouver with our in-house apprenticeship program.

The School's Longer-Term Plan

In 2010, the School of Fitness grossed CA\$700,000. Patterson explains that growth has been stunted because of the hoops they've had to jump through to become a registered school.

"We basically had to hide until we received the City of Vancouver's approval. We don't even have a sign on the door. We haven't even gone into the community yet. We've done zero advertising. We've operated in the shadows," Patterson said.

Finally, in 2011, the school will have a chance to flourish. Currently, Patterson is the sole owner of the School of Fitness, but within the next year his top coaches will be able to buy shares of the company.

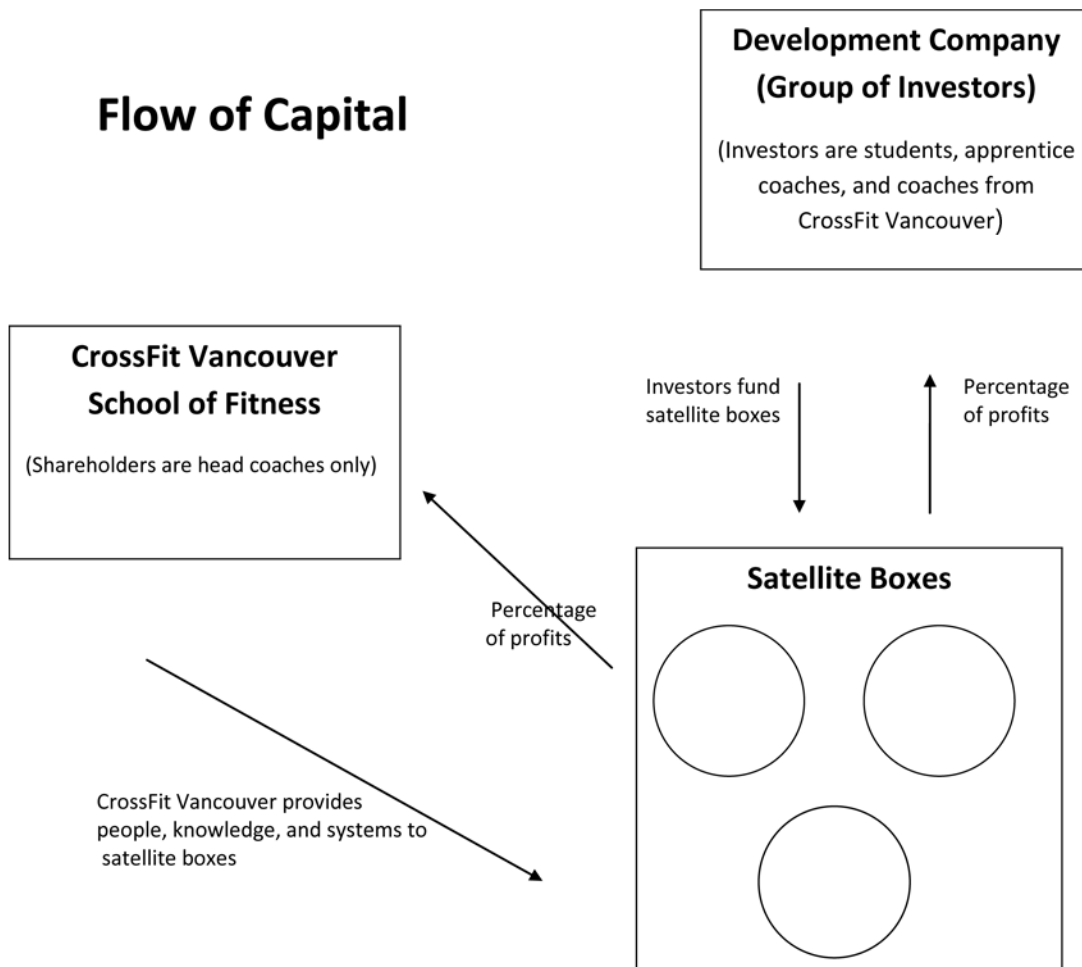
And once enough apprentice coaches graduate from the school, they will start a development company as a way to raise enough capital to open satellite boxes, sister schools. Students of CrossFit Vancouver, as well as apprentice coaches, will be able to invest in the development company.

"Once the development company raises enough capital," Patterson explains, "we'll take the best and the brightest coaches and put them in the new satellite boxes."

And once the satellite boxes are making money, capital will then flow back to both CrossFit Vancouver and to the shareholders of the development company.

"This way, everyone can be a business owner. It's sort of like a co-op," said Patterson.

(See graph for flow of capital.)



Patterson is still working out the details and the timelines, but the hope is that eventually anyone who has been CrossFitting at the school for at least a year will be able to buy a share of the development company.

"We're a couple years away from that at this point," he said.

For now, Patterson's focus is on ensuring his head coaches make a good living, and on bringing up his apprentice coaches.

"We'll get there eventually. This is only just the beginning," he said.



As an athlete and CrossFitter, Beers started out as a gymnast, competing to the national level. After growing too tall for gymnastics, she played NCAA Division 1 basketball for the University of Idaho, then returned home and played for the University of British Columbia. After three years of playing basketball, she started rowing, competing at the varsity level at the University of Western Ontario for two years. While trying to make the National Rowing Team in 2009, she discovered CrossFit and became utterly addicted. Soon, CrossFit was meant to be a way to cross-train for rowing but became her greatest passion. She moved back to Vancouver in September 2009 and found CrossFit Vancouver. In her first season competing in the sport, she won the B.C. Sectional competition in 2010. Regionals were less kind to her, but that's only made her more determined to get to the Games in 2011. On top of being an athlete at CrossFit Vancouver, she's also an apprentice coach and writer for the School of Fitness.

About the Author

Emily Beers finished a master's degree in journalism at the University of Western Ontario in the spring of 2009. Prior to that, she completed a bachelor's degree at the University of British Columbia, where she majored in political science and minored in history. In 2009, she won both the CBC Joan Mead journalism scholarship and the Global21 journalism writing contest. Last year, she worked as a sportswriter at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games, where she covered figure skating and short-track speed skating. Currently, she hosts [Bathroom Graffiti](#), a not-always-PG publication of the CrossFit Vancouver School of Fitness. She also writes for Wolf Worster Associates and for Human Motion Inc., a Vancouver-based strength and conditioning and sports-science company.