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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## Don't Quit Your Day Job?

More and more people are finding fulfillment with a career in CrossFit. Dr. Allison Belger talks to several affiliate owners who successfully made the jump and put their skills to use in the CrossFit box.

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By Dr. Allison Belger

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Courtesy of Gregg Aseenuk/Guerrilla Fitness/CrossFit Montclair

In today's economy, plenty of people are working multiple jobs in order to make ends meet. It's not uncommon for people to make use of different talents, different experiences and different personality strengths when working jobs that sometimes have nothing to do with each other. At a certain point, though, many working people would probably be happiest if one career could provide enough financial stability, psychological satisfaction and flexibility for life's interests.

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With the increase in popularity of CrossFit and the growing number of affiliates, many people are becoming part-time affiliate owners, and countless others have completely devoted themselves to the business of CrossFit, leaving behind other careers for good. Members of the CrossFit community know all about the program's incredible fitness benefits, and a growing number of people are also experiencing the rewards of a career in CrossFit.

### **Dr. CrossFit Is in the Box**

It's been just over two years since my husband TJ converted his personal-training gym to a CrossFit affiliate in March 2008. At that time, I was working almost full time as a psychologist, specializing in assessments of adolescents and young adults. The work was at once rewarding, challenging, intriguing and exhausting, especially with two young children at home. My income was quite helpful, and I had worked hard for my degrees and my reputation in the field, but I was also tired and stressed much of the time.

As a newcomer to CrossFit, I was a cherry-picker, taking on the met-con days with fervor but hopelessly puzzled by strength training. I progressed quietly and randomly, never tracking my workouts and mostly adhering to my own way of doing things ... or not. As my engagement with CrossFit intensified over time, I found myself increasingly frustrated by the limitations put on my performance by my work schedule, stress level and lack of sleep. While some of these factors come with raising young children and having a generally busy life, my job had a clear and present impact on my ability to apply myself as a CrossFitter. More importantly, I was feeling more and more constrained with regard to how much I could help develop our family's CrossFit business, and it was clear that the business was about to boom.

My eventual decision to take a break from my work as a psychologist came after many sleepless nights. Ultimately, though, I knew I needed a break from the intensity of my position, and I decided to scale back my duties. Although I still took on cases from time to time, this retreat afforded me more time to become involved in our growing business, so much so that I became the owner and manager of CrossFit Corte Madera shortly thereafter.



Matt Barnes/TJ's Gym

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*Originally a psychologist, affiliate owner Allison Belger competed on the TJ's Gym Affiliate Cup team that finished 11th at the 2009 CrossFit Games.*

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As far as career transitions go, mine has been ideal in many ways. I am fortunate enough to be able to grow our CrossFit business while still keeping my job and identity as a psychologist. While I am sometimes overwhelmed by how much I need to do on any given day, ultimately I feel lucky to be able to combine passions and pursue careers in two different realms.

My thinking about this topic has peaked in recent weeks. In opening CrossFit Novato, the third branch of the original TJ's Gym/CrossFit San Rafael, my husband and I partnered with Andy Boone, a family friend and our local middle-school assistant principal. A people person who would probably excel at any career, Andy rose quickly through the public-school ranks and was honored with his current position four years ago. Andy came to our CrossFit program in September 2008 and soon became a devotee, proving his athletic prowess was as impressive as his ability to connect with other gym members. Over time, Andy helped us create a discounted program for school-district employees, worked with us as we became the strength and conditioning coaches for local high-school sports teams, and told just about everyone who would listen about his passion for CrossFit and our TJ's Gym community.

As Andy's involvement in our community deepened, it was becoming clear to us that he would be an asset to our program on a whole other level if only he didn't have that pesky career. As our relationship evolved, Andy would talk about his passion for CrossFit, his long-standing desire to have his own business, and his frustrations with the many reasons that made him feel unable to combine the two into a career. One of these reasons was that he actually loved his job as middle-school vice principal. In many ways, Andy's was a dream job for an educator who CrossFits, affording him a work schedule that included time for a three-on/one-off routine, the ability to drop off his children at school or day care, and the freedom to be home in time for dinner with his family. He was blessed to work with motivated students who looked up to and respected him. Still, with each WOD Andy was becoming more and more intrigued by the possibility of becoming involved in CrossFit in another way. In the summer of 2009, he competed on the TJ's Gym team at the CrossFit Games Affiliate Cup and later got his Level 1 Certification. This turned out to be the first step of many for Andy.



Allison Belger/TJ's Gym

***Andy Boone, a middle-school vice principal, will soon be leaving the school to devote all his time to CrossFit.***





Staff/CrossFit Journal

**As an educator, Boone had summers off—which is convenient for a man looking to compete at the CrossFit Games.**

Despite the allure of CrossFit as a career, Andy's decision to leave his job was not an easy one. He and his family wrestled with the pros and cons for several months, in large part because of economics: Andy would be giving up a paycheck upon which his family relied. The cost of living in Marin County, Calif., is quite high, and Andy's salary is extremely important to him, his wife Karen and their two young daughters. Easing the risk to some extent is Karen's lucrative position as a CPA at a large consulting firm, but in these economic times, nothing is certain. Despite the financial risks, though, Andy's wife was supportive from Day 1, recognizing that CrossFit could provide him with the vehicle to do what he has dreamed of doing since the couple were college sweethearts at UC Davis over a decade ago: owning his own business.

Further mitigating the stress was the fact that Andy had the opportunity to partner with close friends (TJ and I) who were already running two successful affiliates. He and Karen were deeply rooted in our community, and Andy felt confident that, as a group, the management of TJ's Gym/CrossFit Novato share "an ability to teach and work with people and an unceasing passion for what we do."

He explains: "We are all people people, and we all want to help people change their lives. We are giving people the tools to create maximum capacity for life. I am inspired by, and grateful for, the opportunity to wield something that powerful and to change lives for the better every day."

Andy has now decided to follow his dream and make the jump to a full-time CrossFit career after finishing the current school year.

### Trading Wall Street for Wall-Balls



Courtesy of Gregg Arsenuk/Guerilla Fitness/CrossFit Montclair

**Gregg Arsenuk, former trader and current coach.**

Much like Andy, Gregg Arsenuk, owner of Guerilla Fitness/CrossFit Montclair in New Jersey, became passionate about CrossFit soon after his introduction to it. Having searched the Internet for new, dynamic ways of training, Gregg discovered a CrossFit workout called Fran and decided to give it a go.

"That was the crack hit that got me addicted," Arsenuk says.

While the rush from Gregg's first CrossFit workout was the spark, what really fueled his fire was the honesty and loyalty within the CrossFit world. He sensed it was there in the beginning, and it ultimately led him to CrossFit as a career. Like Andy, Gregg realized that his passion for CrossFit was something he had to pursue.

“What was exciting was that for the very first time in my life I really felt passionate about what I was doing,” he says. “I was completely inspired, and that was a very new feeling for me. It kept me energized, and it still does today. The decision was never a struggle. It was oddly easy and reassuring.”

This inspired approach to work was something Gregg had sorely missed as a trader on Wall Street. While his paychecks were substantial, he was uninspired and unfulfilled in every other way. His job afforded him material pleasures he now realizes were ways of “filling a big empty hole.” His job offered no other meaningful rewards, and eventually the money wasn’t enough to make it worthwhile. Within months of doing Fran, Gregg left his job on Wall Street, moved to Denver, and immersed himself in research and a self-directed CrossFit education. Gregg later returned east, earned his Level 1 Certification in January 2008 and opened his affiliate in March of that same year. Opening the doors of Guerrilla Fitness meant the realization of a long-standing personal dream to open his own gym, but before he found CrossFit, Gregg never knew just what that dream might look like. In the months following Fran, it had all become clear.

### Taking Care of Business

Before he discovered CrossFit, Damon Stewart of Wasatch CrossFit in Utah was a wrestler who stayed in shape by running and doing triathalons. When someone online recommended CrossFit, “It was on.” That was in 2004, back when Utah didn’t have a single affiliate. Damon trained out of his well-equipped garage for two years before getting his Level 1 Certification and opening his affiliate in the summer of 2007. Damon and Chris Spealler affiliated at the same time, providing mutual moral support and developing camaraderie along the way. Damon later earned his Level 2 Certification at the last cert held in the original HQ facility.

Unlike Gregg, whose career track was relatively one-dimensional, Damon had started as a salesman and later bought into a small start-up company that identified and purchased troubled assets from large mortgage debt servicers. He helped grow this company to over \$1 million in annual revenue. When the economy turned, however, Damon’s 10-hour workdays became 20-hour work weeks, and 50 percent of the company’s employees were let go. By that time, Damon had already opened CrossFit Wasatch, which was thriving. He retired from the real-estate company two years into his CF affiliation, retaining

his ownership percentage and remaining active as a board member. The money he continues to make from the venture means he can stop working at any time, but Damon’s CrossFit career isn’t just about financial success.



Courtesy of Damon Stewart/Wasatch CrossFit

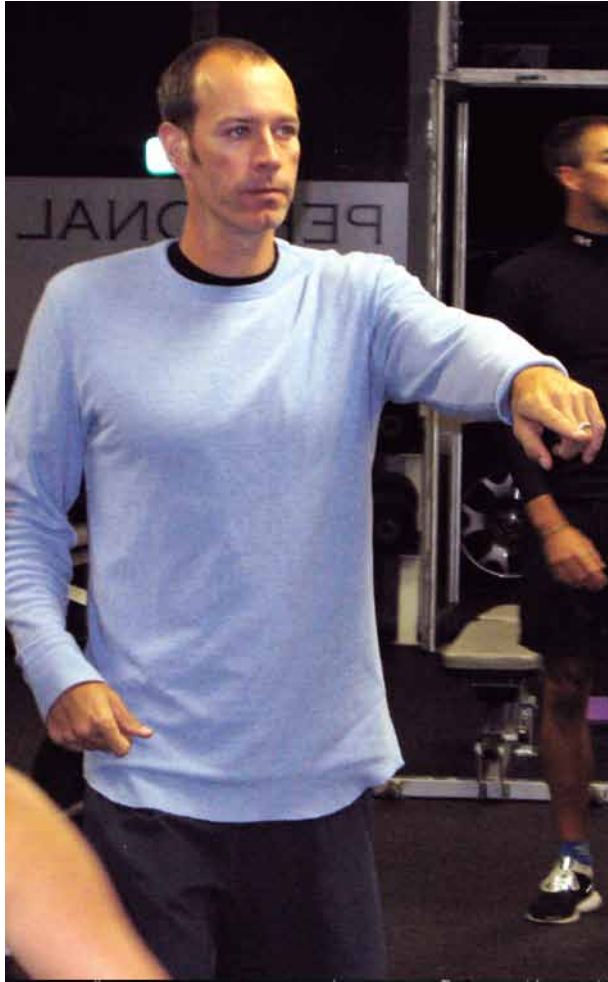
*Damon Stewart’s “office attire” isn’t what it once was.*

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**“I feel fortunate to be able to combine my background in psychology with my passion for fitness and for making change in people’s lives.”**

**—Dr. Allison Belger**

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Stefan Meholic/TJ's Gym



C.J. Rendic/TJ's Gym

*TJ Belger (top) has expanded his collection of affiliates, with boxes in three different California locations.*

CrossFit, apparently, has much to offer a previously successful businessman. For Gregg, there is the appeal of the raw, the real, the honest, the loyal—the absence of the pretense and bling he had endured on Wall Street and the chance to make real connections based on human interactions in a community striving for something other than money. For Damon, there is the appeal of the “grassroots revolutionary vibe of CrossFit”: he was convinced CrossFit would “change the world’s view of fitness.”

While Damon acknowledges his passion for CrossFit and the communities it creates, for him there is an allure of another kind. “I love growing businesses,” he says. “The idea of taking a vision from dream to reality is what gets me out of bed every day, seeing the dream come to fruition.”

Back in New Jersey, Gregg also finds himself able to get out of bed much more readily these days.

“Now I toss and turn at night thinking about what is on deck for tomorrow, knowing I have a ton of stuff to do, but I can’t wait to get to the gym to do it,” he says. “I know some new person is going to come through my doors and ask me a bunch of crazy questions like, ‘But when is the cardio?’ or tell me how they are ‘in shape and don’t need an intro session,’ and I am going to want to lose my shit. But I welcome those challenges.”

### Transferable skills?

So how do people from other fields make it as affiliate owners, and what skills, traits and talents do they make use of in their new role? Judging from the four affiliate owners (myself included) profiled here, different people emphasize different aspects of the job depending on their unique set of skills and their previous experiences. The psychologist (me) makes an extra effort to connect with clients, learn what makes them tick and offer support through the inherent vulnerabilities of CrossFitting. The business developer (Damon) has a knack for the organizational and logistical challenges of growing a business. The former trader (Gregg) feels so liberated to be able to work with people in a meaningful context and calls upon his attention to detail and capacity for work. The public-school administrator (Andy) treats each class, each client encounter, as a teaching moment and a chance to offer something new. What unites all four different trainers is passion for the job.





Megan Kelly/TJ's Gym

**Boone (center) instructs students who are slightly older than the middle-school children he's used to, but his teaching skills no doubt serve him well in the box.**

Gregg talks about his passion for the loyalty of CrossFit, the sense of real that comes from laying it all out there with the same groups of people day in and day out. He talks about teaching his soon-to-be-born child a life lesson about doing what is inspiring and not necessarily fitting into some kind of mold of supposed success: "Go after something you want. Create something for yourself." He has no regrets about leaving his job on Wall Street and pursuing a longtime dream. He greets each challenge with gratitude for the opportunity to change lives, the friendships he has made and the community he has created.

Damon talks about his passion for growing businesses and the learning opportunities that come from overcoming mistakes along the way. He talks about his confidence in his business-development skills like someone reflecting on days on the football field as captain of the high-school varsity squad. He's full of childlike exuberance mixed with pure conviction.

"I spent the last five years of my life learning how to grow, how to develop systems, deal with employees, learn bookkeeping and accounting, deal with people, compete on a national scale, communicate, deal with money—you name it—and at the same time pursued every scrap of CrossFit knowledge I could in my spare time. It was the hard-knock version of an Ivy League business education. I

know beyond the shadow of a doubt that this is helping us springboard to massive success, and I hope to share some of that with the affiliate community."

Andy talks about his good fortune for having the opportunity to combine passion and purpose with a career. Still juggling dual roles as affiliate owner and school VP for now, Andy revels in each teaching moment he is given.

"Each class represents an opportunity to impact individuals, and there are a number of ways this happens," he says. "We can correct form of movements and feel good about helping people progress while avoiding injuries. We can offer new content and instruction and create new experiences for people. We can inspire and push and cheer and calm and support others. We can compliment and encourage and correct.

"We consistently run into people in our classes who are physically and mentally and socially vulnerable. There is a tremendous responsibility that comes with the job. A great coach keeps these social components at the front of his or her agenda. It's more than rolling out a WOD and turning up the tunes. It's the ability to create better lives for people each and every encounter we have with them. It is this responsibility and opportunity that has compelled me into the business."

For me, a dual career as a psychologist and affiliate owner/coach seems easy and obvious in so many ways. Despite the logistical challenges of fitting everything into a 24-hour day, much of the work in both realms is strikingly similar. In both roles, I evaluate, question, listen, learn and try to offer something new, something potentially helpful to my clients. Be it a small pointer on waiting for the hips before pressing the arms in a thruster or a five-minute chat after class about an emotional moment a client had, working as a psychologist prepared me for the CrossFit box.

And while I hate to admit it, my mom was right: when TJ and I first got married, she couldn't stop talking about how cool it would be for us to combine our expertise and have some kind of "mind-body" facility. I used to roll my eyes, picturing some cheesy gym tagline about serving the total person. But, as I've said in a previous article, CrossFit changes everything. Organically, and without any sort of plan, my work life evolved to what it is now. I feel fortunate to be able to combine my background in psychology with my passion for fitness and for making change in people's lives. I've learned in the trenches how to operate a business, and though mistakes are made I've gained a whole new set of skills I never thought would interest me.

### A Career in CrossFit

Along with the passion for CrossFit, what seems to be present in the larger population of affiliate owners is a conviction that whatever their background, whatever their work experience, whatever their skill set, running a CrossFit box can give them a place to apply their strengths. Two of the great things about CrossFit are its variety and its inclusiveness. The variety allows people with different specializations to focus their business in a certain way (e.g. the former football coach who emphasizes Oly lifting or the former collegiate gymnast whose clients do more muscle-ups). The inclusiveness allows affiliate owners to work with clients from all walks of life and all demographics. This means specific experiences with different populations can come in handy.

All kinds of skill sets can apply when CrossFitting as a career. The business side, management demands, athletic forums, community-outreach possibilities, interactions with clients and many other domains combine to make owning an affiliate a multifaceted, challenging and exciting prospect—maybe exciting enough to warrant quitting that day job!



Courtesy of Dr. Allison Belger

### About the Author

Allison Belger lives with her husband, TJ, and their two young daughters in Marin County, Calif. They own and operate *TJ's Gym*, with three CrossFit affiliates: CrossFit San Rafael, Corte Madera and CrossFit Novato. Allison is a clinical psychologist specializing in assessments of children, adolescents and young adults. She juggles management of the family business, her private psychology practice and her role as mom.

Although Allison recently began fitness coaching after finding CrossFit in 2008, she has a long history of involvement in athletics, as both a player and a coach. Allison played soccer at the Division I level in college and has since coached a number of youth soccer teams in the Bay Area. Allison has a bachelor's degree from Dartmouth College, a master's in learning disabilities from Northwestern University, and a doctorate in clinical psychology from the Wright Institute in Berkeley, Calif.