
THE CrossFit LIFE

Athlete Again

Dylan Rivera struggled with a painful nervous-system disorder for most of his childhood, missing out on the physical challenge of sports. Then he found CrossFit and rediscovered the joy of athletics.

By Hilary Achauer

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Millie Rivera

Dylan Rivera was always an active child. He played soccer and baseball and spent much of his childhood outside kicking around a soccer ball.

One day that all changed.

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"When I hit fifth grade, my health turned for the worse. All of a sudden, I dropped one day. I couldn't walk without excruciating pain. My entire body was in pain," Rivera said.

He went back and forth between hospitals and doctors for over three years. While he waited for doctors to come up with a diagnosis, Rivera was in a wheelchair, on heavy medication that made him into a zombie.

"I needed help eating and even brushing my teeth," Rivera said. "Worst of all, the slightest touch killed me."

After a month-long stay at a children's hospital, Rivera was finally diagnosed with complex regional pain syndrome (CRPS), also known as reflex sympathetic dystrophy, a nervous-system disorder that relays pain signals to the brain. As Rivera puts it, "The slightest touch hurt like hell. I often described it as a hammer hitting me repeatedly wherever I was being touched. That pain covered me from head to toe."

Rivera endured many nerve blocks, operations where doctors put a long needle in his back. After that treatment, his pain receded and became dormant—but never for very long.

"It would stay dormant for a little while but always returned with a vengeance. Several nerve blocks later, I couldn't bear them any more. Then began a very long process of physical therapy," Rivera said.

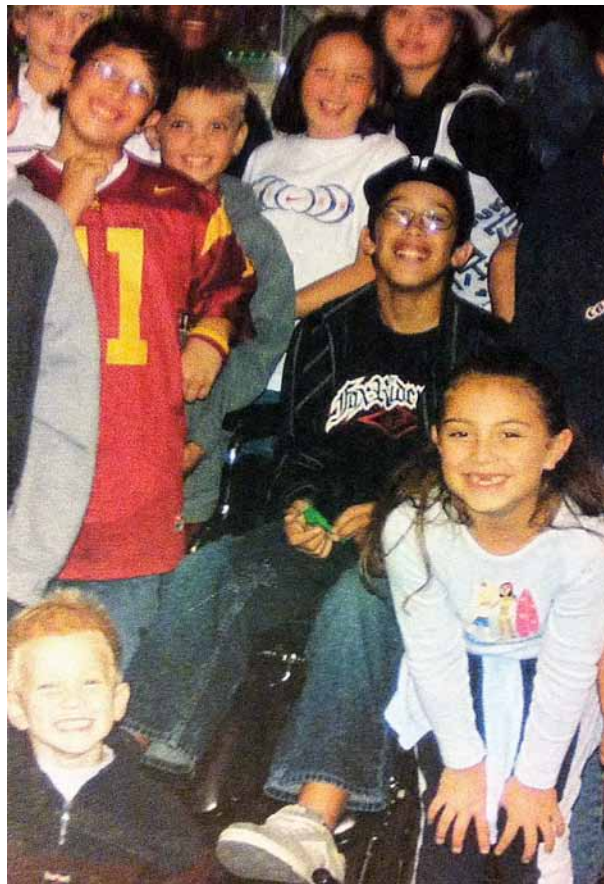
Physical therapy was painful, and worse yet, Rivera only experienced small improvements. In the meantime, the formerly active kid had ceased all physical activity, except for physical therapy.

"I was a tiny, tiny kid," Rivera said. "I had zero body fat and zero muscle. I was depressed and was on so many different medications that it was as if each pill cancelled each other out."

Eventually, Rivera began to adapt to life in pain. When he was in eighth grade, his parents moved the family to Chattanooga, Tenn., from Bakersfield, Calif.

"I hated it!" Rivera said. "The huge culture shock was the main reason I didn't enjoy it. That, and I couldn't compete in any sports and meet people through sports. I continued physical therapy in Tennessee, still gaining nothing. Needless to say, the move was rough, the parents split and I had to deal with more random bullshit."

When Rivera was a senior year in high school, his dad started CrossFit.



Courtesy of Dylan Rivera

Rivera spent much of his childhood in a wheelchair, unable to play sports with his friends.

"He kept trying to convince me to go, but my lazy ass wasn't about going at all. I actually even asked him why the hell he did it. I thought CrossFitters were crazy and I would never do that!"

Finally, in February 2012, halfway through his senior year, Rivera gave in and tried his first WOD, Fight Gone Bad.

"It was awesome," Rivera reports. "From that moment I was hooked on it! I signed up for the unlimited package and went twice a day pretty often. That was eight months ago."

Eighteen-year-old Rivera is now a college student at Middle Tennessee State University. He is a member of two boxes, CrossFit Brigade and CrossFit Rampage. In those eight months, Rivera has gained 15 lb. and done things he never thought he could, and, most importantly, his health is better than it's ever been. Rivera used to have CRPS flare-ups about once or twice a month. Since starting CrossFit, he has not had one flare-up.



Emily Griffith

After years of living in pain, Rivera has newfound strength, energy and hope for the future.

CrossFit didn't magically cure Rivera. Physical therapy and exercise—both resistance exercise and aerobic exercise—are often used to treat CRPS. However, an important part of physical therapy is consistency and patient compliance. Through CrossFit, Rivera found an exercise he loved, and an added benefit is that, so far, it helps manage his condition.

"CrossFit has given me my life back and a reason to get out of bed. Now the only pills I take are fish oil, and instead of physical therapy, when I feel in pain I do a WOD," Rivera said.

When Rivera started CrossFit in February 2012, he could only deadlift 180 lb. Now, just eight months later, he can deadlift 275 lb. He also just got his first muscle-up.

Rivera is a busy college freshman, but he always finds time to fit in CrossFit. His dedication to CrossFit has given him serious long-term goals not found in many college freshmen.

"I am so grateful for CrossFit that I've even made it my long-term goal to make it to the Games as well as becoming at least a Level 1 trainer," Rivera said. "That would be the ultimate accomplishment."

