
THE CrossFit LIFE

Breathe Deep

A chance viewing of the Reebok CrossFit Games on ESPN2 inspired Kevin Joyce to drastically change his health and his life. Hilary Achauer reports.

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Steve Gregersen

Kevin Joyce was feeling terrible. He had struggled his entire life to do something most of us take for granted—breathe.

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Doctors could never figure out exactly what was wrong. They told him he had exercise-induced asthma, but he always felt it was something worse. In high school, Joyce played football and basketball and would often push himself until he blacked out. He liked football best of all because he was self-conscious about his labored, heavy breathing, and the helmet covered up the noise.

"I didn't even want to hear my own breathing," Joyce said.

After high school, Joyce began working as a New York City carpenter, and that's when things deteriorated. He got weak just walking up stairs, and the dust at work aggravated his condition. Doctors told him he had fibromyalgia. Joyce wasn't sure what he was going to do. Work was making him even sicker, but what would he do without a job?



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Despite respiratory problems, Joyce has seen overall improvements in his body since he started CrossFit.

In the winter of 2011, Joyce reached a low point with his physical and mental health, and he became depressed. He happened to turn on ESPN2 one day and saw the rebroadcast of the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games. All those fit people climbing ropes and lifting weights sparked something in Joyce. He had heard of CrossFit, but "I never knew they had CrossFit gyms," Joyce said.

Right around this time, Joyce finally found a pulmonologist who agreed to run a battery of tests on him. "Most doctors wouldn't give me a pulmonary-function test," Joyce said. The doctor discovered Joyce had 50 percent less lung function than most people. He was officially diagnosed with chronic asthmatic bronchitis, one of the forms of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, or COPD. Joyce was given Prednisone, bronchial dilators and nebulizers.

This diagnosis, combined with worsening symptoms brought on by the dust and fumes at work, caused Joyce to go on lifetime disability in February 2012. Then, in March, Joyce gathered his courage and visited CrossFit KOA in Cranford, N.J.

Everyone is self-conscious when starting CrossFit, but Joyce felt more insecure than most because of his loud, heavy breathing. To make matters worse, when Joyce exerts himself he experiences immediate lactic-acid buildup in his muscles because of the lack of oxygen in his body. Imagine doing CrossFit workouts with half the lung capacity and your muscles burning from the minute you start.

But Joyce kept at it. After a few weeks, he started to see improvements.

"My wind was a little bit better," Joyce said. "I felt much better. The more you can push yourself, the less scar tissue you have in your lungs, so my doctor supported me doing CrossFit."

Once Joyce started building strength and lung capacity, other things in life improved as well. He didn't want to sabotage his hard work, so Joyce started eating Paleo about 80 percent of the time.

"I saw a big difference in my energy level," Joyce said. "And the cravings for sugar went away."

Nick Benedetto Productions



Joyce is proof that the Reebok CrossFit Games can inspire average people to take charge of their fitness and improve their lives.

Soon after Joyce started CrossFit, the owners of CrossFit KOA approached him about competing in Lift 4 Lungs, a local fundraising event to raise money for the National Lung Cancer Partnership. The second annual fundraiser and competition was in honor of Jeff Trojca, who lost his battle to lung cancer at age 48 in 2010, leaving behind a wife and three kids.

Joyce had only been doing CrossFit for about a month, but how could he pass up an event called Lift 4 Lungs? So on April 14, 2012, Joyce showed up at CrossFit ACT in Saddle Brook, N.J., for the Lift 4 Lungs event. The competition consisted of three workouts, with RX'd and scaled divisions. Joyce did the workouts scaled, but he was worried he wouldn't finish the first workout—a combination of deadlifts, bar-facing burpees and box jumps—under the time cap. Joyce did more than finish; he came in second.

The second WOD was a mix of running, rope climbs, pull-ups and wall-balls. This time, Joyce came in first. There was one workout to go. Joyce went to his car to change. Once he sat down in the car seat, "My body shut down," Joyce said. He was having trouble recovering from the lactic-acid buildup during the workout.

"I knew then it wasn't healthy to continue," Joyce said. He sat out the last workout and cheered on his fellow athletes, soaking in the atmosphere of his first CrossFit competition.

It probably won't be his last. Joyce just signed up for his Level 1 Trainer Course in July.

"I want to get involved," Joyce said. "I want to advocate for people who have struggles."

Beyond the money of the Reebok sponsorship and the flash of the big-name athletes, the CrossFit Games are about this: inspiring all of us to do more and be more—and to pass that gift along to anyone who will listen.

