
THE CrossFit LIFE

Intensity in Action

Master Sgt. Eric Johnson believes true intensity and focus can make the difference between good and great.

By Master Sgt. Eric N. Johnson

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Master Sgt. Eric Johnson

At the age of 41, I have spent 22 years as a United States Marine, and I've been an avid weightlifter, American Mountain Guides Association rock-climbing instructor, ski instructor and martial-arts instructor. I've always thought of myself as being in pretty good shape. I can run three miles in under 21 minutes and do 20 strict pull-ups no problem, and I don't even break a sweat doing crunches.

But it wasn't until this last summer, while serving my third tour in Afghanistan, that I began to catch a glimpse of what "in shape" really means. And thanks to CrossFit and a few good friends, I also learned a great deal about intensity.

It's Not About Sweat

A lack of intensity can separate even the best of us from our goals. The proper, often violent application of intensity can be the catalyst that brings our long-sought-after dreams into focus. We like to think we are “giving our all” toward our selected endeavors, we may work hard toward accomplishing our goals, and we may even make physical and spiritual sacrifices to achieve our desired ends. No one wants to admit his or her training program is weak or lacks focus, so we slug through Insanity, or we do a CrossFit-ish workout that consists of 5 rounds of something with a 3-minute break between each round, and we then tell our friends about our “epic WOD,” what we had to give up to hit “the box,” and how Paleo our diet is.

“I totally miss ice cream, but I am willing to sacrifice,” we say.

But if we are truly honest with ourselves, we may find that all we are doing is making sacrifices for the sake of sacrifice.

Most of us think we work hard to reach our goals, or we did before we gave up, but until we truly fight through the clammy grip of exhaustion as it attempts to choke us off from our dreams, we really do not understand the difference between just trying hard and fully committing ourselves to an end.

More than in most other areas in our lives, personal fitness is a direct reflection of the level of intensity we are willing to devote to ourselves. We intrinsically understand fitness is right for our physical and emotional well-being. Extrinsically, we admire real health and fitness in others; we long to have it for ourselves, but we try gimmicks and gadgets over hard work. How many of us have copies of P90X or Insanity somewhere in our homes? How many of us actually thought these programs were hard? If sweat equals success, I can just put on a jumpsuit and sit in a sauna.

Rather than pushing through real, hard, intense workouts, though, we prefer to just fret and worry. We worry about celebrities, positions and appearances, but for a lot of us that's where the action stops—with worry. We worry our daughters will be harmed by the unhealthy images of women they see in magazines and on television, so we tell them, “Those women aren't real. You just be who you are. Have a piece of pie. You'll feel better.” We worry that our sons aren't growing up to be strong young men, so we buy them a Wii and tell ourselves that at least now they'll move around a bit.



Sara Gilman

Effort has never been a fitness gimmick.

When it comes to our own appearance, we worry that we're too fat, but we have a million excuses why now isn't a good time to get into shape, so we cover up with baggy clothes and promise that tomorrow, next week, next spring, we will finally have time.

Even when we do push hard to better ourselves, we do little real work to meet that end. We jump in our car, drive down to the Mega Gym, and knock out a few bench presses while reminiscing about our max press back in high school or college. When we do leak out a bit of sweat, we pick up our dingy gray Mega Gym towel and dry off our moist brow.

“Whew, I must've burned 1,000 calories tonight,” we tell ourselves. “Better not work too hard. I don't want to be sore when I'm just getting back into it.” This may knock us back down a belt notch or two, and for a little while we might even feel good about ourselves, but all we are really doing is treading water as we slowly continue downstream. Year after year, the goals and dreams we used to have seem less important and more frivolous.

"Fitness is for young people. I'm over 40 now," we tell ourselves. What we really need is to get off our asses and get out and go after something with some full-blown intensity.

Don't Hold Back

What is the difference between a regional champion and a national champion? What makes greatness stand out from mediocrity? Sometimes it can boil down to hard-fought seconds sent violently snatching victory from an opponent's grasp, while other times it is reflected in the thousands of extra repetitions a champion is willing to power through each and every day, year upon year. In each case, it boils down to intensity—not only the ability but more importantly the willingness to focus great strength, concentration, vehemence and violence of action toward a single purpose.



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***Every workout contains a choice: quit or keep going.
Which one will you choose today?***

When is the last time you did a workout that really scared you? Not a workout that would make you sore, but one that really made you take a hard look at yourself and wonder if you could actually complete it. When is the last time you did a workout that was so hard it made you dry cry, a workout that tore at your soul as you fought with your entire being to finish it, one that actually brought you closer to God? Have you ever had an experience like this? Why not?

Stop taking half measures and wishing you had the time or the freedom to achieve what you want. Get up and take it. If you think you are working hard now, trust me: you aren't. There is nothing worse than finishing a grueling workout when you collapse from exhaustion, and while holding back what little is left in your stomach, you look up and realize deep down that you could have gone a little harder and maybe beaten the clock this time. At least once a week, your workout partners—yes, you need partners for intensity—should see you do one or more of the following: cry, scream, collapse, bleed, throw up, fail, get nervous, admit fear or achieve something you didn't think possible.

Teach your sons what it means to be strong young men, and teach your daughters to be stronger and more real than those sickly waifs in the magazines. Teach their minds to fight far beyond where their bodies think they need to stop. Teach them what real beauty is, and how to achieve it. Teach them to be confident badasses. Most importantly, teach them through your example.

You don't have to be great to start, but you have to start to be great.

