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# THE CrossFit LIFE

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## In Pursuit of Excellence

Dave Newman never intended to start a business; he just wanted a better jump rope. Hilary Achauer catches up with the founder of RX Jump Ropes and finds out how it all began.

By Hilary Achauer

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All images: Dave Newman

The workout was simple: 50-40-30-20-10 burpees and double-unders, followed each time by a 400-meter run.

I had been struggling with double-unders. I was able to do them when warming up, but any sort of grip fatigue or WOD-induced nervousness led to me repeatedly stepping on the rope. This time, it was a disaster. I got about 10 double-unders in a row during the first set of 50, but after that the wheels came off.

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Each time I started jumping, the rope caught under my feet. After a few of these frustrating attempts, I threw down the rope and looked at my coach, Bryan Boorstein. He had watched my double-unders worsen over the past few weeks and always offered tips on how to improve. This time he just looked at me sadly and said, "Hilary, I don't even know what to tell you anymore. You need to go see Dave."

"Dave" is Dave Newman, double-under guru and founder of RX Jump Ropes, a company that makes custom jump ropes and runs double-under clinics. Being told to go see Newman felt a little like getting sent to the principal's office. It was discouraging to say the least, but I had reached the end of my rope (pardon the pun).



***Newman deadlifting at the 2011 Regionals, his third Regional competition.***

## Finding CrossFit

Newman never planned to make a living selling jump ropes. After graduating from college, he joined the family business: real estate.

"I had a passion for it," Newman said. "I never considered myself a salesperson; I just really liked helping people."

Newman had always been active. He played football and did gymnastics in high school, and then he was a gymnastics coach throughout college. He ran marathons for a few years but got wrapped up in work and family and completely stopped working out.

Before Newman knew it, his sedentary lifestyle and poor eating habits caught up with him. He found himself 35 lb. overweight, which was unusual for the normally trim former gymnast. In 2008, Newman's buddy dragged him to CrossFit East County to try a workout.

"I had to modify everything," Newman said. "The workout was a mix of box jumps, burpees, pull-ups, kettlebell swings and push-ups. It took me 30 minutes to finish, and I threw up afterward," he said.

However, Newman kept coming back. Helped out by his gymnastics background and desire to work, Newman saw rapid improvement. A year after he started, the owner of CrossFit East County, Paul Flores, had Newman repeat his first CrossFit workout. He finished it in 13 minutes with no modifications.

## Hundreds of Ropes

Despite his success at CrossFit, there was one movement Newman couldn't do: double-unders. When faced with a difficult movement, most people turn inward and blame themselves. Many avoid the movement or give up in frustration. Newman took a different approach.

"At this time, in early 2009, there were three primary ropes available: Buddy Lee's rope, the thin wire speed ropes and the black PVC corded rope," Newman said. "I didn't have success with any of them. I wondered, 'Why do I suck at this?' Part is me, and part is the equipment."

Newman started taking ropes apart to make new jump ropes.

"Everyone would laugh at me," Newman said, "I've always been a tinkerer. I took the handles I liked from one rope, the cables from another and started making my own ropes."

The speed cables were too thin for Newman's tastes because he felt they forced him to move the rope too quickly. He also didn't like the skinny handles, because they made him close his hands too tightly. He knew he wanted to use his wrists as a swivel, but many of the ropes available had the cables attached directly to the handle, which meant he had to turn the rope with his shoulders, not his wrists.

The other thing Newman noticed was that the jump ropes made with rubber, PVC or braided rope stretched as he jumped.

"I measured them," Newman said, "and I found some of the ropes stretched at least a foot and a half as I jumped."

Double-unders depend on consistent timing and rhythm, and Newman knew that the changes were causing him to adjust his posture mid-jump.

Newman found that cable didn't stretch as he jumped, so he went to Home Depot and bought a variety of different cable sizes. He bought out all the jump ropes he could find at the local sporting-goods store and started making his own jump ropes. He combined the handles from the jump ropes with the cables from the hardware store, playing around with different swivel mechanisms to attach the rope to the handle.

"I made hundreds of ropes," Newman said, "and I gave them all away. I tested every thickness and length of cable, and I finally found a length that worked. I realized a heavier cable was easier for me."

At this point, Newman was spending almost all his time in his garage.

"My wife never saw me," Newman said.

All his extra money was going to jump-rope materials, and then he'd give the ropes away to his friends. One day his wife checked the bank account and told him he had to at least start charging for materials.

Word was spreading around San Diego about Newman's ropes, and people came out of the woodwork asking if they could try them. He started charging a minimal price, not even enough to cover the cost of his jump ropes, which were still made from parts of other jump ropes and cables from the hardware store.

Mainly to keep up with demand, Newman decided to place a bulk order of jump ropes, which he planned to use just for the handles. He took them all apart in his garage and donated the ropes to local elementary schools.

"I had to dismantle the entire jump rope and then rebuild it," Newman said. "I hated it."

Still making the ropes out of his garage, Newman finally decided to buy the handles overseas. They came to him as raw plastic handles, which he felt were too slippery. Trying to figure out a way to improve the grip, Newman thought about other sports where grip was important. He realized that tennis players swing their rackets hundreds of times, so he bought tennis grips and wrapped the jump-rope handles. As an added bonus, he discovered he could customize the handles with different colors and patterns.

### The Business Takes Off

While Newman was spending time making the perfect jump rope, he was also becoming a formidable CrossFit athlete. At the 2010 Southern California Sectional—which preceded the Regionals before the Open began in 2011—Newman placed seventh. He didn't make it to the Games—he placed 50th at Regionals—but at Regionals something more important happened. A representative from Rogue Fitness had heard about Newman's ropes and asked to try one out.

"He loved it," Newman said, "and he wanted Rogue to start selling them." The owner of Rogue, Bill Henniger, asked Newman to come to the 2010 CrossFit Games and sell his ropes.



*The RX Smart Gear team in front of their new office space.*



*RX Jump Ropes offers five different cable choices, and the ropes are assembled by hand by very fit individuals.*

Not knowing what to expect, Newman brought material to make 125 custom jump ropes, and he pre-made 20 demo ropes with different lengths and cable sizes for people to try. In all his experimenting, Newman had discovered there is an ideal cable length and weight for each athlete, depending on the athlete's height and double-under style. Newman customized each of the ropes he sold, meaning that he and his assistants were up all night making the ropes people ordered during the day at the Games.

By the end of the weekend, not only had Newman sold out of his ropes, but people were also paying full price for the beat-up demo ropes. After that weekend, Newman realized his hobby was no longer a hobby—it was a full-fledged business. Rogue Fitness started carrying Newman's ropes, and by the end of the year, Newman had turned over most of his real-estate business to a partner. RX Jump Ropes was off and running.

### **The Tinkering Continues**

Now, two years later, RX Jump Ropes is growing rapidly. The business is still built on customized ropes. Customers choose their own cable weight, length and color and pair it with the handle color of their choice. Just this year,

Newman moved the business from his 2,000-square-foot house into a dedicated office and warehouse space. The business has 10 employees and is expanding into other CrossFit-related products under the name RX Smart Gear.

Newman hasn't stopped tinkering. While I walked with him around the RX Smart Gear offices, he showed me some of his new inventions. Just like his jump ropes, his inventions are all created to solve annoyances he encounters in CrossFit—like protecting the top of his hairless head during handstand push-ups and a solution for sweaty, slippery AbMats that result from shirtless sit-ups. The company is also expanding their double-under clinics throughout the country, and they have plans to take them worldwide.

"We're still pinching ourselves," Newman said. "I'm having so much fun."

### **Back to Basics**

After taking me on a tour of the offices and warehouse, Newman got down to business.

"Let's see those double-unders," he said. I managed to get about 15 in before I stepped on the rope.



***RX Jump Ropes employees assembling the custom handles.***

"The problem is that your form doesn't allow any room for error," Newman said. "If you get tired, then everything falls apart."

That sounded about right.

"Let's see some singles," he said.

I started to do some single jumps, and I couldn't even string together four in a row. It came as a bit of a shock. I used to jump rope all the time in my boxing days, and I couldn't understand what had gone so wrong that I couldn't string together 10 singles.

Newman worked with me for about 20 minutes, taking a quick video to point out what I needed to correct and giving me specific things to work on.

"I want you to work on your singles," he said. "Start with that."

Although I didn't expect to have my double-unders magically fixed in just one visit, I certainly didn't anticipate being told I had to start all over again. To add insult to injury, Newman cut up my old RX Jump Rope and affixed balls on the short ends so I could practice the grip and wrist technique he taught me. He gave me a new rope with a heavier cable and told me to go home and practice.

When Boorstein, my trainer, found out that Newman had told me to go back to singles, he laughed.

"Remedial jump rope!" he teased.

My timing and rhythm were so off it took me a few days of practice to figure out singles. I focused on the tips Newman had given me, and soon I was doing singles with no problem.

Then I started working on double-unders. To my surprise, they felt completely different. I felt more in control, especially once I established my rhythm with a few singles. I practiced all week, avoiding any WODs with double-unders, not wanting to jinx my fledgling skills.

Finally, after a week of practice, I felt like I had the hang of it and another double-under workout appeared on the whiteboard. After a 21-15-9 of kettlebell swings and box jumps, we had a two-minute rest then had to do three rounds of a 400-meter run and 50 double-unders.

I finished the first part, waited the two minutes, and then went on the run, trying not to psych myself out for the double-unders. I got back inside, caught my breath and picked up the rope. After a few singles, I calmly did 40 unbroken double-unders. I did the same in the second round, and then in the third I did all 50 double-unders unbroken.

As embarrassed as I was about having to start all over again and work on my singles, it turns out that was exactly what I needed. Maybe it was the fact that Newman himself struggled with double-unders. Maybe it comes from years of tinkering with and thinking about jump ropes, but Newman was able to pinpoint exactly what I needed to do to pull myself back from the brink of double-under disaster.

Like most successful entrepreneurs, Newman didn't start his business looking to make money. In fact, he didn't plan on turning his tinkering into a business at all. Newman had a passion—CrossFit—and he had a problem: double-unders. The success of RX Jump Ropes is built on those hours in the garage, alone, trying to make the perfect jump rope.

As I walked with Newman around his offices, we chatted about how far he had come since those early days.

"It's so satisfying to have created this out of nothing," Newman said. "It's never a day of work here."

