
THE CrossFit LIFE

Out of the Water and Into the Box

Burned out from years of competitive swimming, former All-American swimmer Emily Ciralo rediscovers the joy of fitness through CrossFit.

By Emily L. Ciralo

October 2012



CrossFit 716

I used to hate holiday workouts.

Swimmers do holiday workouts. My club team did 100 100s on New Year's Eve. Holiday workouts suck. They suck more than the usual workouts suck.

1 of 4

I thought about this as I drove home from the Fittest on the 4th at CrossFit 716 back in July. At 25 years old, five and a half years since my last swim meet, I have completed three holiday workouts with my CrossFit family, and I liked them. Scratch that. I loved them!

I proudly came home from the Fittest on the 4th and strutted around my house in my nerdy Fourth of July outfit covered in black marks from 800-lb. tire flips. My parents thought I'd lost my mind—especially my dad, my coach for most of my swimming career.

My dad is a great coach. The best. He doesn't care about awards or recognition. He cares about his swimmers. Period. He wants them to love the sport and do their best. However, as a snotty teenager, there were times when I felt like I hated him. My dad got in my face and pushed me. I'd cry and play Christina Aguilera's *Fighter* on repeat for hours as I sulked in my room.



CrossFit 716

Ciraolo finishing up the Memorial Day Murph WOD.

I loved a lot about swimming, but I wasn't in love with the sport like many of my friends. I envied them. Here's the thing: I don't regret swimming. Much like Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*, it gave me more than I ever gave it. It taught me PPC: pride, poise and commitment. It gave me one of my greatest accomplishments: the title of All-American in 2003.

It wasn't until I headed off to college that I realized everything my dad did for me. I didn't choose St. Bonaventure University because of swimming. St. Bonaventure chose me. The minute I stepped onto campus, I knew I belonged there. (I experienced that same feeling when I completed my first WOD at CrossFit 716 in North Tonawanda, N.Y.) The journalism and mass communication school sealed the deal. Swimming was just a bonus. I didn't even apply to a second school. I was born to be a Bonnie.

What does this have to do with swimming?

I had thrown teenage temper tantrums and "quit" swimming a few times before college, but it wasn't until college that I realized I was swimming for the wrong reasons. I missed my club team, and—don't tell him—I missed my dad. I realized he really did know what he was doing all those years.

I dreaded the 5-a.m. wake-up call at college. I dreaded spending four hours face-down in a pool day in and day out. I did not embrace the suck. I was terrified of it, and I suffered from anxiety. I struggled to fall asleep at night because I was scared of the morning workout, of underperforming, and of being late and suffering through a punishment practice. Have you ever let someone down and felt awful? Try letting down an entire team of hormonal women. I spent time figuring out how to break a bone or get the flu so I didn't have to swim. It made me miserable and took a toll on my relationships with my teammates. There were several factors to blame, including myself, but mostly I didn't see eye-to-eye with my coach. We did not click.

I retired from swimming sophomore year, cutting my college career short.

I do not regret that decision, but I now often wonder what I could have achieved if I had a little CrossFit in my life six years ago, or if I had a different coach or had swum at a different university.

My retirement led me down an extraordinary path. I graduated college in three years. I received a free ride to grad school. Through the Bonaventure connection, I landed an incredible job, and I feel like I'm one of the few 25-year-olds who can say she loves what she does every day. And it all started with swimming.

So what does this have to do with CrossFit?

After joining the CrossFit 716 family, I quickly realized how the coaches there do it right.

Dennis and Jenn Lesniak (and the others) motivate me to be better. They inspire me in ways that's difficult for me to put into words. I want to hurt. I want the WOD to suck. I'm not afraid of the pain. I want to be sore the next day. I'm confident in my abilities. I know if I push myself, I can do it and probably even surprise myself. All things I never said

when I swam. I never thought I would enjoy fitness again, but they make it fun. They have all the qualities of great coaches, and most importantly, I trust and respect them.

Last fall, I started my journey of getting back into shape. I had no real goals. I had been a blob since 2008, and I didn't want to feel or look like that anymore. I hadn't been in any sort of gym routine since my undergraduate days. As a result, I gained 15 lb., a lot of body fat and one dress size.

I was unhappy with how much I let myself go. I joined a local gym and got into a routine, but it was an internal battle (which I often lost) to go every day. At first, I put on weight because I was overcompensating with food. After that, I swore off fast food. A few of my former Bona teammates introduced me to the Paleo lifestyle. It completely changed my outlook on nutrition. It was the slap in the face I needed.



Courtesy of Emily Ciraolo

Ciraolo (left) with her teammates on deck during the 2006 Atlantic 10 Swimming and Diving Championships. That year, the men's team took first place and the women's team took second.

Those same friends encouraged me to try CrossFit. I couldn't help but notice how awesome they all looked in their Facebook pictures. They looked better than they did when we swam in college. I pined for their toned arms and legs.

In April, I finally took a leap of faith, swallowed my fear and went to my first CrossFit workout alongside a former college teammate. Two hundred fifty squats. I couldn't walk for three days without looking like perhaps I tried out some questionable Red Room of Pain tricks from *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

I went home and quickly told as many people as possible how much fun I had, how friendly and encouraging everyone had been, and how I couldn't wait to go back. It's been almost five months, and I still love it. I've gained new friends and a community of people who understand me and inspire me. They don't judge me when I talk about yokes or Atlas stones or mysterious bruises on my body. In fact, they encourage it.

It is clear that I am doing this for the right reason—for me. Not my family. Or my friends. Or because a scholarship is on the line. I do it to be better. I do it because I want to compete one day and not just finish, but place. I wake up at 5 a.m., make breakfast and lunch, and get to the gym all before heading to work. My parents think an alien has taken over my body after I spent years pretending to be asleep when the alarm went off for swimming.

CrossFit makes me feel like I can do anything. It has given me confidence inside and outside the box. I bought a pair of jean shorts this past summer—something I've never done because I didn't like how my body looked in them. On Sept. 22, I, a self-proclaimed hater of running, competed in my first half marathon.

I am incredibly proud to be a member of the CrossFit 716 family, and I think they are proud of me, too. They named me athlete of the month in September. I couldn't help but tear up a little when I saw my picture posted. I lost that 15 lb. I am back down to my original dress size and I lost 10 percent body fat. I would like to lose another 10 percent, but I haven't let that control, deter or determine my progress.

Some of my friends and family think I've lost it. They forget that I've always been a little nutty, and when I find something I love, I nurture it. This is me. I love being an athlete again. I love taking pride in what I do. I am happy. And that's all that matters.



Courtesy of Emily Ciruolo

The author planking with her dog, Otis.