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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## Fitness for the Force

The Indianapolis Police Academy successfully tested CrossFit methods on recruits, and now a CrossFit training program has been implemented for all 1,600 police officers. Nathan Barlow and Vincent Cascella explain how they beat bureaucracy to produce fitter cops.

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By Nathan Barlow and Vincent Cascella

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Courtesy of IndyShield CrossFit

In January 2009, the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Academy conducted an experiment: how would full CrossFit implementation affect the quality of recruit physical fitness test scores when compared to the traditional model?

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Sgt. Nathan Barlow, a Level 1 CrossFit trainer and member of the academy staff, took it upon himself to conduct the experiment despite the fact that he lacked funding, sufficient staffing and even mediocre equipment. What Barlow did have, however, was a powerful belief in the proven efficacy of the CrossFit program, and he was certain CrossFit could improve fitness within the agency at the entry level.

Over the course of six months, the 5<sup>th</sup> Recruit Class gathered in our small gym and at our outdoor track to learn the nine essential movements, the concepts of progression and intensity, and what a properly fed athlete looks like. Just prior to graduation, astonishing results—which are also typical of the CrossFit program—were realized: dramatically improved exit-standard scores with less time invested and zero PT-related injuries.

This is the story of large-scale CrossFit implementation within a major metropolitan government bureaucracy.

### An Idea Gains Support

Timing, they say, is everything.

January 2009 was, coincidentally, about the same time I was asked by our chief of police, Mike Spears, to prepare a plan to improve the state of health for our officers. Our chief had become frustrated by the declining condition of fitness observed across broad segments of our agency, and he rightly recognized a need for a progressive blueprint.

At the time, I was serving as a field lieutenant in one of our service districts. Off duty, I was a Level 1 trainer at a local affiliate. Unbeknownst to the chief, we already had the solution to his problem—it was just a matter of giving him the right pitch.

In April, Sgt. Barlow and I gave a one-hour presentation to the chief and his command staff. During the discussion, we stated the problem, underscored the danger of continuing with the status quo, provided a clearly defined tool for solving it, and spelled out the strategy we felt would get us to our goal. Most importantly, we provided the chief with empirical evidence proving the efficacy of our proposal. This was easy, really. We simply provided the chief with the numbers we collected while training the 5<sup>th</sup> Recruit Class: zero injuries and a 100 percent pass rate on exit standards in half the time. What was not to like?



Courtesy of Indy Shield CrossFit



*After CrossFit produced much fitter recruits at the Indianapolis Police Academy, the program was implemented for the entire department. Now, cops and firefighters train side by side for functional fitness.*

Figures 1-4 show the average performance increases of members of each of five recruit classes when comparing entrance and exit tests. As you can see, the 5<sup>th</sup> Recruit Class used CrossFit training to produce substantial increases in push-ups (not pictured), sit-ups and vertical jump, as well as reductions in 300-meter and 1.5-mile run times. These changes were clearly greater than those seen with previous recruit classes. It should be noted that the entrance scores for the members of the 5<sup>th</sup> class were not abnormally low but rather consistent with those of the previous classes.

The increases in vertical jump show increased power, and the higher push-up and sit-up numbers show increased strength and muscular endurance. The most striking performance gains were seen in the runs, where the class lowered its average time by over two minutes in the 1.5-mile distance and over 20 seconds in the long-sprint distance of 300 meters. These improved times indicate significant improvements in cardiorespiratory endurance, speed and power.

After presenting these results to our superiors, the decision was quick, and I was immediately transferred to the academy to oversee implementation. We had been given the green light to fully implement CrossFit, not only to the next recruit class but also to the entire department of 1,600 officers. Readers who are familiar with the operation of a large city government will understand the rarity of this pace of movement.

### Approval From the Chief—Now What?

Imagine you've been given a 5,000-square-foot box, \$10,000 cash and several hundred (at least) potential clients on Day 1. What would you do? Our answer was to approach it like a typical WOD: one round at a time.

Our first immediate challenge was to decide how to provide access to a large and very interested population. In the past, our officers had free access to a typical free-weights/treadmill room housed within the academy. These rooms still exist, but they are mostly vacant. We have never offered, however, a *program*. We adapted an affiliate on-ramp program designed to bring newcomers into CrossFit slowly and in an organized fashion according to our department's needs.

With the on-ramp program as our curriculum, we sent out a department-wide bulletin inviting officers to sign up for 80 initial slots that would be divided up into classes of 20 held four times a day. The on-ramp is a 12-class, four-week program, and after successfully completing all 12 classes, officers would be free to participate in regular open-gym WODs. Within 48 hours, all available slots were taken.

To date, 160 police officers and firefighters have been through the on-ramp and now enjoy the privilege of daily CrossFit training Monday through Saturday. This is strictly an off-duty program; however, we have a great retention rate after completion of the introductory program. In our initial report to Chief Spears, we included 13 pages of testimonials from officers who had completed the first on-ramp. Many who offered praise had never heard of CrossFit before and were surprised at the level and speed of adaptation. This feedback made it quite easy for the chief to justify additional spending and resources. The goal, of course, is to hold as many on-ramps as are necessary to accommodate any officer wanting to participate.

Concurrent with the first on-ramp class for officers, our newest recruit class began. At about the mid-way point, our results reflect a continuation of the success seen

Figure 1: Recruit Class Sit-Up Improvement

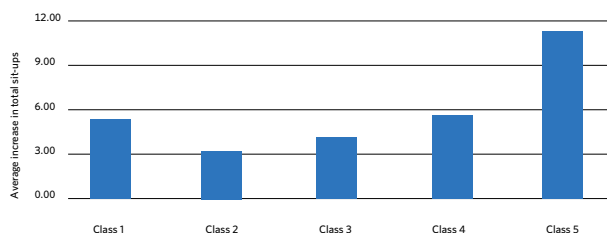
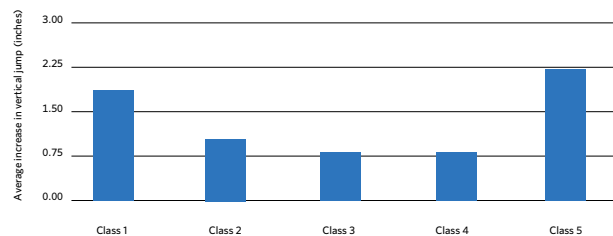


Figure 2: Recruit Class Vertical Jump Improvement



with the 5th Recruit Class. This new class is about twice as large as its predecessor, and to date we've experienced no PT-related injuries. As expected, performance improvements continue to be seen.

As of this writing, we are preparing to begin our third on-ramp class. Within 20 hours of the notice being posted, all slots were spoken for. We strongly believe that our careful preparation and slow initiation into the program has resulted in extremely positive feedback and word-of-mouth promotion—not unlike what a typical private-sector affiliate would experience.

### Being Civil: Forming a Partnership

A key ingredient of our success is the partnership we share with the Indianapolis Fire Department. Due to the fact that we share the building housing both training academy programs, it was fairly easy to develop a mutual belief in the efficacy of CrossFit. A few firefighters who were ardent CrossFitters started volunteering their time and assisting with the police recruit training. And when equipment was needed, they brought in their plyo boxes, kettlebells and bumper plates to help us out.

This friendship between the two departments grew, and eventually we were able to present the same CrossFit proposal to the command staff of the fire department. Fortunately, they listened and agreed that the program was a great investment. We argued that by pooling our resources, our shared program could become greater than its individual parts. The fire department is now actively considering the idea of creating a new position in their

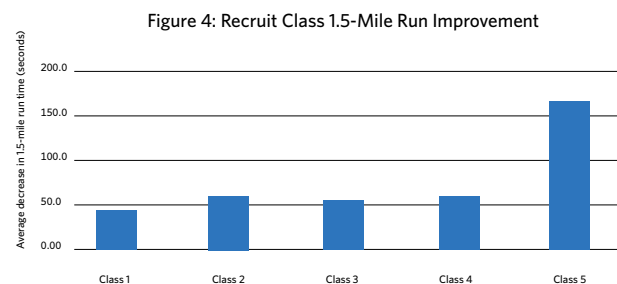
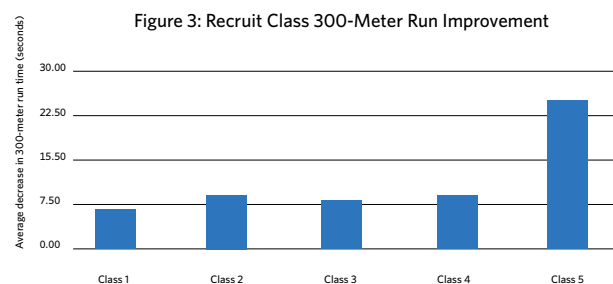
manning table to mirror the one I currently hold so they can properly oversee their portion of the program.

We also contacted police and fire departments around the country that have already established reputable programs of their own. When initiating a large-scale project, it's best to learn from those who have already met the challenge. We were, of course, enthusiastically supported by everyone we contacted. Specifically, the Colorado State Police, the San Jose Police Department and the Parker Fire Department were instrumental in our education process.

### The Blueprint for Success

Our CrossFit program is exceeding all expectations. Just recently, we've become an affiliate ([Indy Shield CrossFit](#)), hosted our second Level 1 Cert (with great reviews), and completed a \$40,000 retrofit of our box. Most of this money went toward equipment purchased from Again Faster. Some went toward custom-built equipment fabricated by an academy staff trainer who is also a certified welder.

The only limitation we have is a higher demand than we can currently accommodate due to a lack of Level 1 trainers. Unlike some programs, we are insisting that a Level 1 trainer be present whenever the facility is open. We are working to overcome that obstacle, and we look forward to the possibility of unlimited gym access for anyone, no matter the shift or assignment. For those who would like to see similar progress implementing CrossFit with their agency, I offer some bullet points as a guide in summary:





- Numbers matter, especially to agency heads. Theory and passion are great, of course, but chiefs want to know how your idea will benefit the agency in tangible ways. We conducted our own experiment and used the results as our validation. If you don't have access to your own training academy, conduct your own experiment at the shift level. Build support from your smallest unit outward. Create a buzz. The bottom line is this: a fit workforce saves the agency money, and saving money is a concept that is very important to your decision-makers.
- Partnerships are great force multipliers. In our world, the police-fire team is a natural. The camaraderie and competitive relationship help maintain a high-energy atmosphere, and we expect to reap huge rewards by pooling respective budgets. In our case, the fire department was quickly able to justify re-allocating about \$10,000 into our program. Prior to our partnership, that money went to a Globo Gym for the purpose of training recruits. It turned out to be a substantial waste.
- Keep the boss informed. You must be your biggest promoter. Agency heads have lots of irons in the fire. In order to maintain interest in the program and keep the support coming from the higher-ups, you must engage in guerrilla marketing. Word-of-mouth is great and will engage potential athletes at the troop level, but in order to really maintain momentum, the boss must be informed regarding both the tangible and intangible (morale) benefits that can be had by properly investing in a fitness program that works. By actively soliciting testimonials from our folks who participated, we were able to provide our chief with validation that he might not have received otherwise.
- Another way to actively engage decision-makers is to challenge them to participate. During our presentation, we emphasized the importance of leading from the front. We stressed the need to be seen suffering among the troops. With CrossFit, understanding comes from doing. Our commanders believe in our program because they do it.

These are just a few points that helped us achieve lightning-fast progress in agency fitness. Given the nature of bureaucracies, timing of implementation plays a substantial role, of course, and certain people must be in certain positions in order for progress to be made. Be that as it may, we believe we are on course to become one of the largest public-safety CrossFit programs in the country.

Hopefully this information will help those of you endeavoring to accomplish the same progress within your agency.



### About the Authors



*Lt. Vincent Cascella is the physical training section supervisor for the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Academy. He holds the following CrossFit certifications: Level 1, kettlebell, Olympic weightlifting, basic barbell and nutrition. He is also a graduate of the FBI National Academy, 205th session. For more information, visit [Indy Shield CrossFit](#) or e-mail [c9087@indy.gov](mailto:c9087@indy.gov).*



*Sgt. Nathan Barlow is a member of the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Academy training staff and is mostly responsible for recruit physical fitness. Nathan holds the following CrossFit certifications: Level 1 and kettlebell. He is also certified within the Cooper Institute.*