
THE CrossFit LIFE

Connecting Through CrossFit

A mother and son strengthen their bond through a shared love of CrossFit. Hilary Achauer reports.

By Hilary Achauer

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Barbara Pappas had always been healthy. Growing up in Germany, she ate a diet relatively free of processed food, and she kept in shape by jogging and taking leisurely bike rides, which she calls “biking with a basket.”

A Montessori teacher, Barbara filled her life with work and raising her sons. Then, in 2010, her 19-year-old son Nick discovered CrossFit. A wrestler and football player in high school, Nick was instantly addicted to CrossFit. Nick spent the summer reading through the *CrossFit Journal* and watching videos on CrossFit.com, eager to learn as much as possible. Nick got his Level 1 certificate in December 2010 and began coaching while pursuing his degree in kinesiology at Sonoma State University.

Nick told his mom about his newfound passion, but it wasn't until early 2011 that Nick convinced his 51-year-old mother to try a class at CrossFit Valley of the Moon in Sonoma, Calif.



Barbara added meat to her diet and felt an instant change in her recovery and energy level.

"I knew nothing," Barbara said. "I didn't know what a barbell was, what a deadlift was—it was all Russian to me."

After she ran through the warm-up that she said almost killed her, Nick put a 12-inch box in front of Barbara and said, "Hop up."

She couldn't do it. The barrier was not physical but mental.

"I was terrified about my inability," Barbara said.

She looked at the box and could not make her feet leave the ground. Despite her fears, Barbara continued with the workout, and like her son, she was hooked. Soon the other Pappas son, Dustin, was doing CrossFit.

Barbara loved the challenge of the workouts and felt herself getting stronger, but after a few months she felt something was wrong.

"I felt more than sore," Barbara said. "I felt brittle, and I had trouble sleeping."

Nick knew what was wrong.

"Mom, you have to watch your nutrition," he told her.

Although she was a healthy eater, Barbara was a vegetarian. She hadn't eaten meat for 20 years.

"We ate pasta every day," Nick said. "Our favorite dinner was pasta, ketchup and Parmesan cheese."

Frustrated by feeling weak and out of sorts, Barbara decided to take her son's advice and started eating meat.

"Within two days, I felt better," Barbara said. "I had a burst of energy. It was like my body was saying 'thank you.' It was an internal coming home, and it was really exciting."

Eight months later, Barbara was deadlifting 210 lb. and back-squatting 135 lb. When she started, she couldn't do one push-up—now she rocks kipping handstand push-ups with just one AbMat under her head, and she recently did 100 unbroken 35-lb. kettlebell swings.

"I am accustomed to seeing human capacity," Nick said, "and I knew she had high capacity. I always believed in her."

Barbara and her sons were always close, but CrossFit strengthened their bond. Due to her long hours at work, Barbara often has trouble making it to the classes at her box, so Nick programs for her.



Courtesy of Barbara Pappas

Barbara bonds with her sons, CrossFit-style.

"Nick coaches me every day," Barbara said.

"It was a learning process for us both," Nick said of programming for his mom. "I learned how to train for someone in her 50s. I taught her to manage her rest days. She was doing CrossFit six days a week, and I had her switch to three days on, one day off."

Barbara smiled guiltily and said, "Sometimes I cheat."

Their biggest triumph together was earlier this year, when Barbara was able to do every workout in the 2012 CrossFit Games Open.

"I need to credit Nick for getting me through workout four," Barbara said of Event 12.4, which included 150 wall-balls, 90 double-unders and muscle-ups. Barbara did all the wall-balls and 11 double-unders.

Spend any time around Barbara and Nick, and their deep respect and affection for each other is apparent. They truly enjoy each other's company and often seem to relate more as friends than mother and son. They've always been close, but CrossFit has strengthened their bond and changed the typical parent/child dynamic. After 21 years of learning from his mom, Nick has the chance to teach her. And after years of cheering on her son, Barbara gets to hear her son's praise for her own accomplishments.

"My boys are the best things in my life" Barbara said, "I wouldn't be much without them."

