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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## I Am a CrossFitter

Elite weightlifter Erin Okonek explains how she's fitter and happier now that she's doing CrossFit.

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By Erin Okonek

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Courtesy of Erin Okonek

What is CrossFit and why is it better than other workout programs?

By definition, CrossFit workouts are constantly varied functional movements performed at a high intensity. More simply stated, "They are hard as fuck!"

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***When you feel like giving up, don't.***

Yet these attributes do not sufficiently capture the true meaning of CrossFit and inadequately define CrossFit vs. the copious other workout programs people are bombarded with on a daily basis.

Overall, CrossFit is not a workout program; it is a lifestyle. I would personally go even further to state that it is my religion and therapy. Granted, for some of us CrossFit addicts, it's about "chasing the rabbit," competing and becoming a Firebreather. But most importantly, CrossFit, unlike other workout programs, makes us better overall people by creating strong, confident and dedicated individuals.

By suffering through the physical and mental pain of a CrossFit workout of the day and overcoming the deep-seated desire to quit and avoid the pain, each CrossFitter discovers within an individual ready to embrace life's biggest challenges. Every CrossFitter experiences the moment when quitting a workout seems like the best option, when lying down sounds more appealing than fighting the fatigue in the legs, the tightening of the chest and the torn calluses on the hands.

However, it is at that moment that the support of the CrossFit community captivates your heart and helps you find that hidden inner strength to keep moving forward. Other individuals are suffering through the same unbearable workout you are enduring, and they're drenched in even more sweat than you. They're fighting the same desire to quit. By drawing on that community, relief feels reachable as the clock ticks past the halfway point, and each athlete begins to feel the gratification of success.

And just when you feel like lying in a pool of your own bodily fluids is more appealing than getting up and driving your tired ass home, you stand up to high-five and congratulate the room of moms and dads, business professionals, retirees, and fellow athletes who all experienced and overcame the same physical and mental challenges you did. Sometimes those are challenges people did not realize they were capable of overcoming.

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I truly believe that all CrossFitters who have drank the CrossFit Kool-Aid have had an ah-ha moment when they realized they were better than they thought they could be. Each individual has left the CrossFit box experiencing the awakening of an inner strength applicable to everyday life, a strength that is not achieved through biceps curls and workout DVDs. Furthermore, sharing this experience with the CrossFit community enhances the experience and is one of the greatest benefits of CrossFit.

**Untapped Resources**

Personally, CrossFit has "saved" me in every mental sense of the word. Through that ah-ha moment, I have discovered

strength within myself to keep moving forward when life has had me at its lowest depths.

I remember the exact moment in a CrossFit WOD when I was sure I would not physically be able to finish a workout. I remember looking around the room and seeing others struggling just as hard, if not harder, than I was. I heard a coach holler at me to get my ass back up on that pull-up bar and felt my heart begin to surge as I took a deep breath and told myself, "Erin, you are not a quitter." That day, I found a determination within I was unaware of. I left the box with a renewed sense of vigor and my head held higher.

While enduring some of life's challenges, I have learned that I want to live every day with a "3, 2, 1 ... Go!" mentality. Each morning, I awake to a new day anxious to live it to its absolute fullest potential. True, I tend to cram 25 hours into a 24-hour period, but I figure if I approach every activity with a CrossFit mentality and put all my effort into life, I can collapse into bed at night knowing I lived the day to its fullest potential.



*Once a top-10 international Oly lifter, Okonek now considers herself a CrossFitter.*



*When it gets hard, you might as well smile and keep going.*

Yet this inner strength doesn't even begin to address the physical benefits achieved through CrossFit. For 10 years, I trained for the Olympic Games in the sport of Olympic weightlifting. I was top 10 in the world, had 10 percent body fat, and was not just "strong for a girl"; I was really strong. However, I am more fit now. I might have been capable of throwing 300 lb. overhead, but I ran out of breath walking up a flight of stairs. My diet was high in carbohydrates and low in fat. I was constantly fighting lower-back injuries and was ultimately forced to retire from Olympic weightlifting due to neck surgery.

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Today, I might only lift about 85 percent of the impressive weights I once hoisted overhead, but simultaneously I am regularly running 400s, swinging from a pull-up bar and jumping on top of boxes for time. I am flipping tires, dragging sleds and swinging a kettlebell as fast as I can, all the while having a ton of fun. My diet is far from perfect (I may not eat many grains, but I continue to consume them in liquid form), but about 90 percent of the time I eat meats, veggies, fruit and nuts. Overall, I am more fit now than when I was considered an elite athlete, and the variety of the workouts has prevented the injuries that once plagued me as a weightlifter.

Furthermore, this level of fitness is not something accomplished by 20 minutes on the elliptical machine and 3 sets of 10 lifting various weights. Working out in front of a TV does not encourage people to push themselves beyond their comfort limits. Lifting weights will increase strength, yoga may make an individual bendy, and running long distances may increase cardio capacity. However, none of these "workout programs" creates the strong, flexible and metabolically conditioned athlete encountered regularly in the CrossFit world.

And why do we repeatedly come back for more CrossFit insanity? Because, simply stated, it's so stinking fun.

CrossFitters possess an enthusiasm for getting their own asses kicked and want to make sure they are a better person today than they were yesterday. In life, we encounter amazingly passionate, determined and supportive individuals; however, in the CrossFit world, you discover these people in mobs. In surrounding yourself with motivated individuals, you inherently want to be better yourself. This attitude is contagious and is what distinguishes CrossFit from every other workout program out there. CrossFit and CrossFitters are unique in every sense of the word.

So when somebody says to me, "Wow, Erin, you are in great shape. What workout program do you follow?" I respectfully and proudly state, "I don't follow a workout program. I am a CrossFitter."



### About the Author

*Erin Okonek grew up in Washington state and has always been athletic. She began weightlifting in 1997 with Coach Mike Burgener. Erin graduated from UCLA but put her "big-girl job" on hold to move to the Olympic Training Center to train. She stayed there for six years and competed nationally and internationally in events including the World Championships. She earned a master's in elementary education during this time, and her best lifts were a 209-lb. snatch and 262 lb. clean and jerk. Following an injury to her neck, Erin was forced to retire. She started coaching CrossFit Olympic Lifting Seminars in 2006 and officially drank the Kool-Aid in July 2010. She is one of Coach Burgener's Tier 1 trainers and has Level 1 and CrossFit Gymnastics certificates. She currently works as a scheduler for Matrix, and she loves horseback riding, skiing and snowboarding, and salmon fishing.*