

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

December 2010

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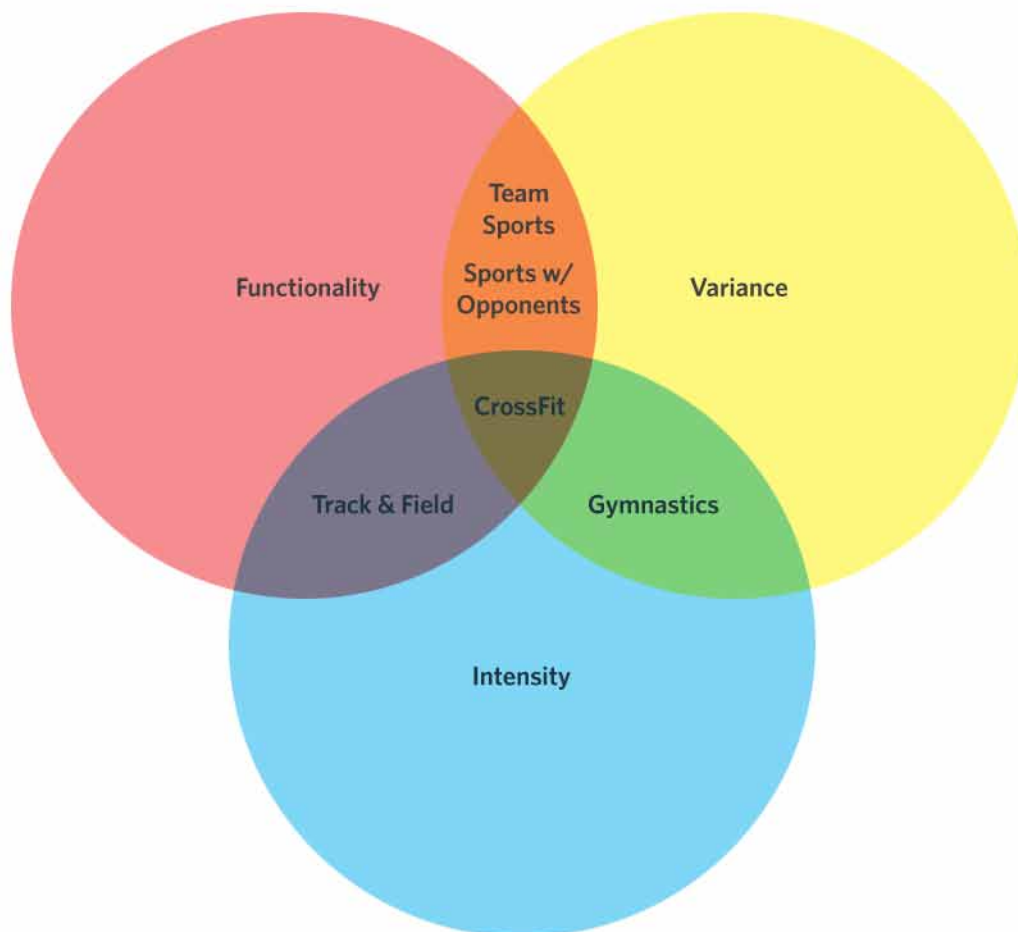
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Diagramming Fitness

Venn diagrams show relationships between sets of ideas, and Tyler Hass thinks they help explain CrossFit's success.

By Tyler Hass

December 2010



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Venn diagrams are a simple and effective visual representation of concepts and their relationships. They work by putting a concept into a circle. Any place where circles intersect shows a relationship between them, resulting in a new idea or concept. The Venn diagram comes out of mathematics and is a powerful tool for exploring ideas and relationships.

To understand CrossFit, the three most important concepts are functionality, variance and intensity. These three principles are the foundation of CrossFit. A lot of training programs and sports have one or two of these qualities, but CrossFit is the first that is built around all three. You can't take one away from a training system and still call it CrossFit. However, being "incomplete" doesn't make a sport bad. And as we'll see, at the intersections of two of the three circles, we will find the component sports and activities that make up CrossFit.

In the intersection between variance and intensity, you have sports that push the body to the limits in pursuit of aesthetic and not entirely functional requirements. For example, in gymnastics you have a sport with both variance and intensity. Gymnasts master a wider variety of movements than any other athlete. And it has intensity, because of the incredible strength, flexibility and coordination required. What it lacks is functionality.

As gymnastics becomes more and more advanced, it has to move toward greater complexity. What they do on a pommel horse is amazing, but it doesn't resemble anything you will ever do in real life. A double-twisting double back flip is the least efficient way I can think of to move 30 feet across the floor. For every flip or twist you remove, you will find a more efficient way to move across a floor. If you keep reducing, you are left with running, which is the most efficient way to move across the floor.

Bodybuilding is another example that fits into this intersection. Even though it has almost nothing in common with gymnastics, they are both judged on aesthetic criteria. Bodybuilders tend to do a huge variety of exercises because they have to hit each muscle individually. However, the goal is to create larger muscles as opposed to power output. They use non-functional movements to meet this end. But bodybuilding has intensity—so much, in fact, that bodybuilders often have to use steroids in order to recover from their workouts.

Gymnasts focus on movement and bodybuilders focus on muscles. Even though they fall under the same intersection in our diagram, the results the sports produce couldn't be more different.

If you look at the intersection of functionality and intensity, we see a group of relatively simple sports (or events), where the objective is to do something as fast, as heavy or as many times as possible. Track and field is a great example. A 100-meter sprinter has only one thing in the world he needs to do well. And sprinting is functional and intense. Regardless of its short duration, it is pushing the human body to its limit, and the power output is astonishing. Sprinting is also the most functional way to travel 100 meters in a straight line. There are no flips or twists. You can't remove anything to make it simpler or more efficient. What is lacking is variance.

Even a decathlete has a relatively limited variety of skills to learn, and on game day he knows that he will do those same movements and in the same order every time. Eight of the 10 decathlon events last fewer than 15 seconds. One lasts less than a minute, and the other lasts five minutes or less. Even the most varied event within track and field is still somewhat confined in terms of movements and energy systems used.

At the intersection of functionality and variance, we have team sports, ball sports and other competitive games. Almost all modern-day sports have their roots in preparing men for war. Most sports comprise functional movements, such as running, jumping, throwing, pushing, etc. And we have variance, because of the variety of movements presented within each sport and how the conditions change from one game to the next.

High jumpers know exactly where the bar is going to be. They carefully measure steps and approach each jump the same way. They know exactly what they have to do on game day. But sports don't follow a script. An athlete must adapt at all times based on what his opponents and teammates are doing. So, we have variance.

What we don't have is absolute 100 percent intensity. When you have to adapt to externalities, you cannot push your body to its limit. You can never be pushed as hard on the field as you can in drills or workouts. Playing a sport doesn't mean you are a slacker, of course. It just means that in absolute measures of intensity, such as power output, you will never reach your limit during play. This is the difference between effort and intensity.

At the intersection of all three circles, we have CrossFit. It is a fitness program consisting of functional movements. These movements are picked from the activities mentioned above.

We have intensity, because functional movements drive power output more effectively than anything else. And we have variance, because CrossFit requires an athlete to be competent in so many different domains—including endless combinations of movements, durations and loads. Plus, you don't even know what the next workout will be! If one of these three components is missing, then you don't have a complete fitness program. This is why all athletes do extra training off the field to supplement what is missing in their sports. It's also why people who have to deal with functionality, variance and intensity in real life or in their sport, such as soldiers and MMA fighters, have embraced CrossFit.

It is because of the combined power of functionality, variance and intensity that CrossFit is the most complete fitness program anywhere.



Courtesy of Tyler Hass

About the Author

Tyler Hass is the founder of Ringtraining.com and designer and producer of the Elite Rings. His company is dedicated to spreading gymnastics into the broader fitness world. He can be reached at info@ringtraining.com.

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

The Crucible

A workout is a great time for learning about yourself and your movements. Justin Keane outlines one way to make the most of your time under the microscope.

By Justin Keane

December 2010



S.Dy/CrossFit

"Watch me jumpstart as the old skin is peeled. See an opening and bust into the field. Hidden longings no longer concealed."

—*Watch Me Jumpstart, Guided by Voices*

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Knee—er—hip deep in my struggle with the air squat, I went to Jon Gilson for advice one night at a barbecue joint.

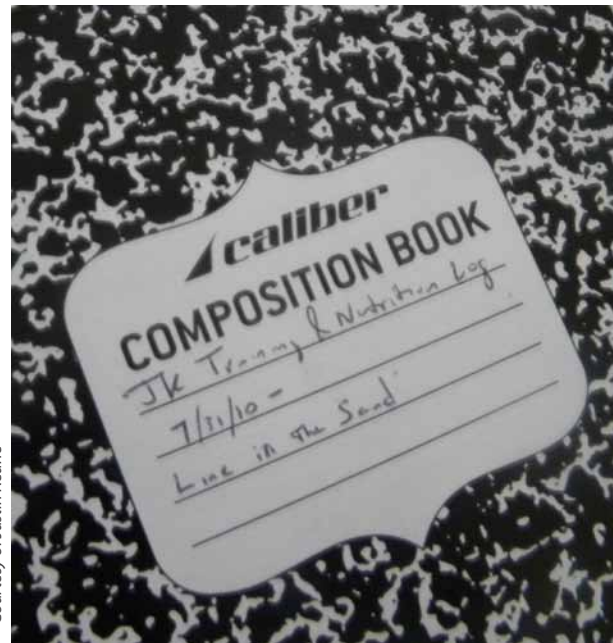
"I can't get out of my own head when I squat," I complained. "It's taking me, like, two minutes to do 20."

If I remember correctly, I was also hitting some skill work on stating the obvious that month. So I did: "I guess I'm thinking too much."

Jon thought for a second or two, then nodded.

"It's like with wide receivers, right? In practice they run their pass patterns and at game time ... they just fly."

And there it was, the perfect metaphor. And then we ate some ribs.



Courtesy of Justin Keane

A training journal can be a powerful tool for any athlete.

Write It Down!

As CrossFitters, we make daily distinction between our pass patterns and our game routes. The former is "skill work"; the latter is "the WOD." Or perhaps we call one "strength work" and the other "conditioning." Whatever our nomenclature, there is most often a palpable sense that our entry to the real proving ground—such as it is—sounds a hell of a lot

like our coach yelling, "3, 2, 1... Go!" And to a degree, this is a very useful dichotomy. How we respond under the klieg light of a WOD will reveal much: our wind, our guts and, yes, our heart. We go so hard at our practices in order that we might fail at the *margins* of our experience rather than in the thick of the thing. Running on muscle memory four minutes into Fran, we realize it is a beautiful thing indeed to be confronted with the essential question, "Who am I and how bad do I want it?" instead of its mundane second cousin twice removed, "Wait—do I drive out of the bottom of a thruster with my elbows or my shoulders?"

It's ultimately that caliber of unbending and clinical focus on our smaller triumphs and failings that will make us better CrossFitters.

It's one of life's most resonant tropes, the athletic realm as crucible. And if the receipts from the *Rocky* franchise are an accurate barometer, millions of moviegoers and several of Sly Stallone's ex-wives stand in agreement. It is a pretty seductive notion, after all: we go in one end and, under fire, emerge through the other somehow bigger and deeper. Better. It's such a seductive notion, in fact, that I'd argue we almost always shortchange the time spent within the crucible in favor of its sexier end result. Sure, it's approximately 50 times more fun to say "I shaved 10 seconds off my Fran time" than it is to limn out the dirty dirties like "I didn't give up on the set of 15 like I did last time," but it's ultimately that caliber of unbending and clinical focus on our smaller triumphs and failings that will make us better CrossFitters. Or: Show me a better journal; I'll show you a better CrossFitter.

I realize this isn't exactly revolutionary stuff, the assertion that journaling your workouts will get you where you want to go as a CrossFitter (and yes, shave 10 seconds off your Fran time), but it doesn't have to be. It just has to be true. And while there are a million ways to skin a cat, journal-wise (and here are two great examples: one from the aforementioned Jon Gilson over at [Again Faster](#), the other from Scott Hagnas at [CrossFit Portland](#)), I'd like to focus on one that I and several of my athletes have put to good use: The Sticking Point Journal.

Courtesy of Justin Keane



Journaling just might help you fight through sticking points in any movements you find particularly challenging.

If we stipulate that what happens within the crucible of our workouts is as important as what comes out in the proverbial wash, then it's incumbent upon us to document where, when and how we failed so that we might succeed the next time, or the time thereafter. In this regard, un-sticking our sticking points becomes its own music: the numbers sing with possibility, clang amidst stasis and thrive on surgical focus.

Reflection for Perfection

For example: Athlete A is in the middle of a three-month strength focus using the linear progression model straight out of Mark Rippetoe's *Starting Strength*.

She squats, presses, power cleans, bench presses, and deadlifts, and she adds weight as her ability to hold serve on form dictates. We'll use her Monday and Wednesday squats, at working weights of 185 and 190 lb. respectively, to illustrate the usage and efficacy of a Sticking Point Journal within her progression.

On Monday, she begins her workout as she always does: five minutes on the C2 rower. Nothing special. She feels loose, pulled well, rowed at her customary warm-up pace and kicked it in a little bit when she hit Minute 5. Had she deviated from the norm—pulled harder, faster, slower—she'd note it in her journal. But a standard is a standard, and that's all she'll write next to "warm-up": "status quo."

From there, she'll squat with the empty bar for 2 sets of 5. She will use these 2 warm-up sets to establish a full range of motion within the squat. If she feels any restriction on movement or has difficulty hitting depth, she'll make a note of it and will take another 1 or 2 sets with the empty bar until she's squatting through a full range of motion. As of now, her journal entry will look like this:

Warm-up: 5 min C2, status quo

Squats: Empty bar x 5 x 2—Difficulty with depth, sitting on top of legs, not between them—Sit back and down.

Empty bar x 5 x 1: Hit full ROM, back on heels nicely (position: feet slightly outside hips).

Moving toward her working weight on the squat, she'll begin to annotate her sets more acutely, assessing her work with a coach's eye on one particular teaching point per set. Was there a form fault throughout? Was one rep a lot better—or worse—than the rest? And, globally, she will ask herself, "What is the one thing I could do to make the next set better than the last?"

(We should hasten to note that safety concerns trump any and all smaller form faults. If a lifter feels herself initiating two or three reps with her knees but positively dive-bombs into her last rep mid-breath, the more egregious concern is noted or highlighted: "Don't rush the last rep—stay tight and safe!")

And so Athlete A's warm-up and work sets might look like this:

2-3 min rest between warm-up sets

75 x 5: Bar got forward of mid-foot on last two reps (elbows back, chest up!).

115 x 3: Light weight! No more than 5 seconds from un-racking to first squat.

155 x 1: Little high—sit butt back (feel stretch).

5 min rest

(Work)

185 x 5: Bar rode up toward traps on Rep 3—break across back.

185 x 5: Last rep best, thought with my hips—back and down, back and down.

185 x 5: Rested extra minute before set; keep low back tight on reps 4-5.

And she'll press, and she'll power clean, and she'll call it a day. Now, it's Wednesday, and the rubber is about to hit the road for our Sticking Point Journal. Athlete A begins again with her warm-up on the C2 and 2 sets of 5 squats with the empty bar. This time around, she feels free and easy, burying her empty-bar warm-ups. In fact, she feels a little less restriction in her left hip than she has in several workouts and can widen her stance accordingly.

Warm-up: 5 min rower, felt great. Humid day, nice and loose.

Squats: Empty bar x 5 x 2: Full ROM, hips loose, feet under shoulders.

We most often find that all it takes for our athletes to correct their last session's corresponding form fault is the simple mental goose of seeing it in their own handwriting.

Not needing any extra work with the empty bar, she'll begin to push the weight up. However, for her coaching cues she'll be looking at Monday's record and that of her current workout in equal measure. For instance, as she readies for her first warm-up set at 75 lb., she'll look to Monday's set at 75 for her marching orders while also minding any form faults from the set she's just completed. So, she'll want to keep her elbows back and chest up (Monday's cue) while keeping her feet right under her shoulders and working that width and full range of motion (a cue from her last set completed).

In theory, it seems as though we're asking the lifter to keep her eye on two moving targets; in practice, we most often find that all it takes for our athletes to correct their last session's corresponding form fault is the simple mental goose of seeing it in their own handwriting. This correction, as it were, happens before Rep 1 and frees the athlete up to address the present day's most expedient form fault for the duration of that set.

Moreover, we seek to correct corresponding sets from workout to workout, in this case because it very directly underscores the beauty of a linear progression. Whether an athlete is essaying that progression in classic *Starting Strength* mode or not, we build by adding, and adding, and adding, then stepping back, then adding, and adding. In that regard, a Sticking Point Journal might come to resemble a general contractor's job book from day to day, workout to workout.

Making Sense of Variety

So too might a CrossFitter following the more consistently varied programming endemic to CrossFit.com or most affiliates benefit from a Sticking Point Journal. Although here, I'd argue we're better served by getting at the gestalt of the thing rather than the thing itself. (Am I quoting Maude Lebowski? Sounds like something she'd say, and yes—I'm taking a shot at myself.) Let's backpedal a bit.

It's not only possible but highly probable that you may have to wait four or 12 months to repeat a CrossFit WOD. Further, it's just as likely you'll encounter two or three derivations on an original theme before returning to the

theme itself: a WOD with 30 push presses and 45 wall-balls, first in 10-10-10/15-15-15, the next as part of a chipper, the next during Fight Gone Bad. Now, of course, we'll take the same care to log our WOD in the journal as we did with our strength work, but we'll do so with two concessions in mind. First, as we'll be logging the WOD after it's done rather than piecemeal through each work set, we'll understand that our accounting may be slightly Cheech and Chong. Hypoxia is a powerful thing, after all. We may not remember where the fifth rep of the second round of push presses broke down; we'll almost surely remember how it felt when we had to drop the bar and what we said to ourselves to make it start happening again. Like, you know, "Pick that bar up, maaan." Hold that thought.

**When we note, for instance,
that we broke down a little bit
after the first 5 or 6 minutes
but hauled ass over the last,
we're providing ourselves with
some important data and a
little mental jumpstart for the
next WOD in that ballpark.**

We'll also note that we're going to have a pretty tough time taking pen to paper in anticipation of what form faults we might have occasion to correct during our next workout. Not only don't we know when we'll do what we just did again, but we've also got a far more incipient concern: we've got no idea what we're doing tomorrow. It's all well and good to know that we struggled with lockout during the second round of push presses. How's that going to help us during tomorrow's 5K? Hold that thought, too.

Now put those two thoughts you've been holding together and shake 'em up real good, like they're in a two-thought hopper. We want our Sticking Point Journal to function like Athlete A's neat little strength biography—fell down here, got up there, do this next time—but we need it to be something more of a living document, one that truly breathes the unknowable wind of our sport. To that end, we've found the optimal Sticking Point Journal



Courtesy of Justin Keane

When studied before and after a workout, a journal can help you identify where you can improve your performance.

entry for an athlete following classic CrossFit programming takes on a somewhat informal, largely narrative tack (there's that pesky gestalt of the thing) that answers several questions:

1. What type of WOD did I just hit and where did I break down?
2. What did I learn today that will help me tomorrow?

To the first point, the unknowable isn't necessarily esoteric. We've got our weightlifting WODs, our gymnastic WODs, our metabolic conditioning WODs, and our mixes and matches thereof. Here the classic distinction between strength and conditioning is useful, not antiquated. If we see "Thrusters 1-1-1-1-1" or "Power snatch 10x3" on the whiteboard, we know we're working strength and, to a degree, we're able to log our WOD as our Athlete A did above—form faults by sets or reps, one coaching point per.



Courtesy of Justin Keane

You'll notice differences between logging strength work and met-cons, but you should be able to learn something from all your workouts.

If we've got something like, "AMRAP 15 minutes: 10 burpees, 10 dumbbell snatches left arm, 10 burpees, 10 dumbbell snatches right arm," we know we're driving through met-con city. And grouping these WODs by durations and type—e.g. "medium-duration time priority"—then jotting down a few free-form post-WOD thoughts on performance is a great way to maximize our Sticking Point Journal. When we note, for instance, that we broke down a little bit after the first 5 or 6 minutes but hauled ass over the last, we're providing ourselves with some important data and a little mental jumpstart for the next WOD in that ballpark. Eight months may pass between shots at Fran. Eight days probably won't pass between short-duration task-priority WODs, and when we hit that next burner, we'll reread our notes prior to warm-up, get ourselves amped, and make that sumbitch sing.

Learn From Every Experience

But what about tomorrow? What about the 5K? What good are our notes on today's holy-hell-this-was-heavy burner going to do us around Mile 2 tomorrow? Quite a bit, actually. Where did we fail during our push presses, and what did we think? And what did we learn about ourselves? Reading a narrative like the one below ought to give us a heck of a lot to work with, and it shouldn't be too hard to understand why:

Heavy, short-duration task-priority WOD: 12-9-6 push presses (135 lb.), box jumps (27 inches)—First sets unbroken, second set of pushes 3-3-3, weight felt like it was going to crush me at times. Got back to basics: slight dip, descended from lockout with the weight rather than letting it crash. Keep your head across full ROM; 4:35. Could have pushed harder on third round. Really humid, let that get in my head.

Here's a useful exercise: read something like, "I felt like the barbell was going to crush my chest, but I finished my sets" before a running WOD the very next day. Then try telling yourself "I can't do it" around Mile 2 when the "it" in question is the simple act of putting your feet in front of each other a little faster. "I can't" sounds a little silly now, doesn't it?

And that's the Sticking Point Journal. In a nutshell, it's your crucible, a record of where you fell down or skirted failure and what you learned about yourself, and it's the purposive writing of the next page—every workout, every WOD. Give it and try and let us know how it goes!



Courtesy of Justin Keane

About the Author

Justin Keane is the owner and head trainer at [Crossfit Woodshed](#), based in and around Littleton, Mass. He has been CrossFitting since 2007, credits the great majority of his development as an athlete and coach to Neal Thompson of CrossFit Boston and Jon Gilson of Again Faster, and will always believe CrossFit Boston is the best gym in the country. He'd love to squat 450 lb. and run a six-minute mile by his 40th birthday but considers it far more important that the athletes at CrossFit Woodshed learn the most important lesson of all: your classmate's PR is just as important as yours.

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The Lumberjacks Remember

The Fort Hood shooting victims are honored with the Lumberjack 20 workout in Afghanistan.

By Staff Sgt. Lasonya Morales 16 Mobile Public Affairs Detachment

December 2010



All photos: Spc. Janelle Sennert/16th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment

Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan—By 9:30 a.m. on Nov. 5, more than 50 service members gathered at the Kandahar Airfield boardwalk to participate in the Lumberjack 20 CrossFit competition to honor the soldiers who lost their lives in the Fort Hood shootings on Nov. 5, 2009.

"The CrossFit workout is a way to collectively pull everyone together for a common goal. It will allow soldiers to get out their aggressiveness and sharpen their skills," said 1st Lt. Brian Mackey, 20th Engineer Battalion tactical officer. "We do this in memory of the four soldiers we lost to carry on their name in honor."

The Fort Hood-based battalion was two months from deploying and had several soldiers going through the final phases of pre-deployment screenings at the shooting site. Eleven Lumberjack soldiers were wounded in the shooting, and four were killed: Spc. Frederick Greene, Pfc. Aaron Nemelka, Pfc. Michael Pearson and Pfc. Kham Xiong.

The Lumberjacks held a ceremony before the competition started to unveil a memorial to honor the fallen soldiers and their families.

"There isn't a day that goes by that we don't think about them," said Mackey, from Pittsfield, Mass.

The 20th Engineer Battalion's main mission in Afghanistan is route clearance. They search for and destroy improvised explosive devices on Kandahar province's many routes. It's a dangerous job, as IEDs are the No. 1 weapon used by the Taliban to attack coalition forces. Of the soldiers wounded in the 2009 shooting, a few were able to join the unit in Afghanistan.

"The guys were all courageous," Mackey said. "We had a number of guys who doctors told them they would not be able to deploy, but they pulled through on time and it was really inspiring."

The Lumberjack 20 CrossFit competition consisted of 20 deadlifts, 20 kettlebell swings, 20 pull-ups, 20 box jumps and 20 squat cleans, with a 400-meter run after each event.

"It looks fun, but it's not," said 1st Sgt. Shannon Carver, 510th Engineer Company, a native of Tyler, Texas.

He said the rugged and challenging competition was a perfect fit to honor the "hardcore" soldiers who were killed.

"There is no better reason than remembering the soldiers who lost their lives that day," Carver said.

Carver added that losing soldiers while still at home station was a tough way to start the deployment.

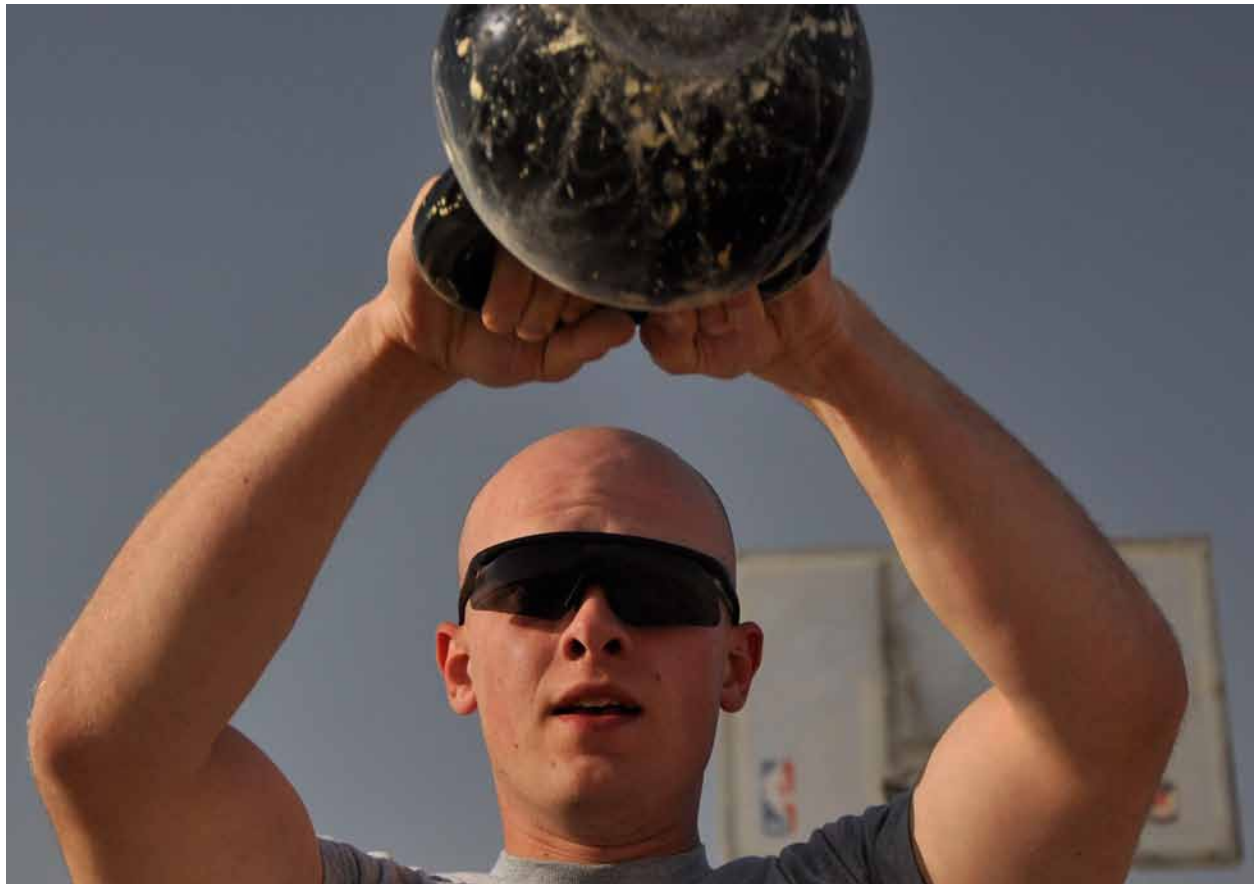


A Hero workout is even more moving when you served with the fallen soldiers.

"Nothing is done in vain. There's a reason we're here. There's a mission we're accomplishing," he said.

Cpl. Jonathan Rivera, Headquarters and Headquarters Company (HHC), 20th Engineer Battalion, from Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, was one of the first to tackle Lumberjack 20.

"I'm not a fan of CrossFit-ness, but the main reason I am here is to support my battle buddies that were lost Nov. 5 (2009)," he said.



Even on active duty in Afghanistan, the Lumberjacks remember the comrades they lost in the United States.

Rivera's voice cracked. He was filled with emotions as he recalled the events that took place at the readiness site at Fort Hood. He was at the site just before the shooting started. He said he left to get lunch. As he was coming back into the building, he heard the shooting.

"It was a pretty rough day. A lot of people were hurt. A lot of people lost their lives," Rivera said.

Rivera said it's tragic what happened, but he hopes everyone will move forward in honor of the fallen and wounded, and in their memory.

The winner of the Lumberjack CrossFit Competition was Capt. Ross Browning, HHC, 20th Engineer Battalion.



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Burg's Eye View No. 2

Coach Mike Burgener explains how Kristan Clever uses athleticism and raw aggression to overcome minor form breaks.

By Mike Burgener

December 2010



All images Staff/CrossFit Journal except where noted

Reigning CrossFit Games champion Kristan Clever began the CrossFit-USAW Open with a miss that sent the barbell rolling off the platform toward the center judge. The SoCal athlete smiled, shrugged it off and went on to nail the 62-kg snatch on her next attempt before hitting 64 kg on her final attempt.

Starting with a miss can rattle an athlete, but Clever was mentally strong enough to come back and make the weight. According to Coach Mike Burgener, she's also strong and tenacious enough to overcome a few form errors he found in her successful 64-kg lift. Once she irons out the kinks, the sky is the limit for a powerful athlete with a good streak of junkyard-dog aggression.

Snatch—62 kg

Great starting position.



Kristan begins her pull a tad too soon. However, her weight is well distributed from the feet.



Unloading of the legs will begin a premature pull.



Burg's ... (continued)

Kristan is not finishing this lift. Again, she is trying to pull the bar up rather than her body down. Note that there is very little shrugging of the body under the bar. Compare this frame and the last one on Page 2 with the picture of Sage Burgener finishing her lift (below).



Note the feet in this picture. They are way too wide in the receiving position for this young lady. The width of the feet here causes her to be unstable in the receiving position.



Again, note how wide the feet are. Also note the torso is forward, which is really caused by the lack of finish seen two frames previous.



Courtesy of Mike Burgener



Burg's ... (continued)

The weight on her feet here is well forward, causing her to move forward while she is trying to recover.



Because the weight is forward, Kristan has to step forward to try and save the lift.



Note the torso and feet again.



Kristan is such a great athlete that she almost saves this lift.



She would have made the lift with another 12 inches of platform and a bit more experience.



Summary: Close! Kristan is a tough, tough competitor. We are going to adopt her at Mike's Gym!

Snatch—64 kg

Kristan's starting position is acceptable, but I would suggest a slightly higher position than the one in this picture. However, her shoulders are in front of the bar, which is what we want. Normally, the position is hips above knees and shoulders over or ahead of the bar.



Here, I feel like Kristan needs to work on her ability to use her legs in bringing this bar to mid-thigh. I felt this way at this position in the 62-kg miss as well. Note the back angle of the starting position vs. the back angle of this position.



Burg's ... (continued)

Due to the unloading of the legs, she begins her pull a bit too soon.



The feet are flat and ready to drive off the ground to create speed through the middle.



Kristan is well on her way to finishing the lift. Note the angle of the legs at this position in the 62-kg miss vs. the angle of the legs in this picture. Note also the extension of the hips and the elevation of the torso on her way to finishing.



We are actually missing a frame here that I would assume shows an awesome finish. Note how high this bar is. When Kristan learns how to lift, I am sure she will be snatching 10-15 kg more than this 64 kg. She is a great athlete and very gifted physically.



Burg's ... (continued)

As before, I feel her feet are too wide in the receiving position, which creates instability.



See above—but Kristan is one tough competitor.



She tightens ups nicely here to save a forward lift.



Due to the wide stance of the lift, she has to recover by raising her butt first. I like to tell my athletes that one must drive through the heels while raising the chest up when recovering. Doing so gets the hips under the bar during recovery.



What an athlete! She barely misses 62, comes back to make the weight and then adds 2 kg and makes that lift, too. Aggressive athletes with junkyard-dog attitudes make big lifts!



About the Author:

Coach Mike Burgener is the head coach of CrossFit's Olympic Weightlifting Certifications. *Mike's Gym* in Bonsall, Calif., is a USAW Regional Training Center, and Coach Burgener regularly works with top athletes and beginners there in the company of his unflappable dogs. Coach Burgener's son Casey is a top American lifter and national record holder, and his daughter-in-law Natalie, also a national record holder, competed in the 2008 Beijing Olympics, finishing 12th. Anyone who's worked with Coach Burgener will tell you that his enthusiasm and expertise are always worth a few more kilos on any lift.

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

The Value of Mental Rehearsal in Strength Training

Bill Starr explains how you can use your mind to get the most out of your body in the gym or in any athletic endeavor.

By Bill Starr

December 2010



All images Staff/CrossFit Journal

"So much of a successful life is preparation." —Nancy Pickard, *The Blue Corn Murders*

Strength training is an individual activity. While an athlete might have the benefit of a coach to advise him on the various aspects of the discipline, he is strictly on his own when doing an exercise. Or he should be. If someone, out of good intentions, helps him move a weight thought a sticking point, which often happens on the flat bench and incline, that person is doing the athlete a disservice.

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In the final analysis, an athlete has to be his own coach and advisor. He must learn not to depend on others in his quest for greater strength. If he does, odds are he will never succeed, simply because no one can understand how he feels better than he can. He has to do whatever he can to develop confidence in his own abilities to improve himself. This generally comes through experience, but not always.



Confidence is learned over time, and mental skills are often just as important as physical skills.

It's not automatic. I've watched competitors at power and Olympic meets crumble under pressure, and they all had been participating in their chosen sports for a very long time. Conversely, I've seen athletes lifting at their very first meets who were as poised and confident as some of the best in the country. Building confidence is a learned skill, and it does not happen overnight.

**Building confidence is
a learned skill, and it does not
happen overnight.**

Anyone just starting out on a strength program will make progress if he's consistent, learns good technique, eats right and gets his needed rest. But once he's been training for some time and knocking on the door of the high-intermediate or advanced levels, progress comes much more slowly. This is true for the competitive weightlifter as well as those who are strength training to become more proficient in their respective sports. Those who continue to break through barriers are the ones who pay close attention to all aspects of training.

They know what exercises work best for them and what set and rep formula brings the most results. They understand the importance of rest and diet. They take supplements and build their meals around protein. They keep accurate records of all workouts and figure out their daily, weekly and monthly workloads. Then they use these numbers to identify weaker areas and make sure they spend time making those weaker groups stronger. They continue to hone their form while slowly but steadily increasing their overall workload and top-end numbers.

And they become more self-assured. Many believe that the quality of self-assurance is innate. You either have it or you don't. I don't agree. While I do believe some people are more self-confident by nature, I have also seen countless young, under-confident men transform into extremely self-assured athletes. It's a trait that can be improved over time. It's very much a skill, and like any other skill, the more it's practiced correctly, the better you will become at utilizing it in your daily workouts and in the competitive arena.

The Mind of the Individual

I began this piece pointing out that training with weights is an individual activity, in contrast to team sports. In any team sports, the athlete has a coach, and in some cases several of them. One of the main jobs of coaches is to instill more confidence in their players because they know this attribute is critical for success. So they supply the motivation and hand out the rewards. If the sports team happens to win championships of some type, every member of the team feels elated, even if he never actually played in a game all season. If the team failed, no one in particular was blamed, other than perhaps the head coach of a D1 football team.



Confidence is especially important in individual sports such as weightlifting, where you compete alone.

This is not the case in an individual sport or in strength training. An individual-sport athlete—wrestling, boxing, swimming, fencing, track and field events, etc.—has to rely solely on his skills in order to taste the sweet nectar of success. And if he fails, there is no one else to share the disappointment with. Some athletes don't care for this at all. However, I found it extremely desirable. The end results were due to what I had done, not what a teammate had done. I played and enjoyed just about every team sport there is, but I still get more satisfaction from winning a game of racquetball than a volleyball match.

By the way, what I'm about to present on mental rehearsal can be useful to someone participating in a team sport as well as those in individual sports. At Johns Hopkins, all the members of the Olympic weightlifting team played team sports. What I taught them in terms of mental preparation, they easily used prior to an Olympic meet and before a game of baseball, football or lacrosse.

There's nothing complicated about learning self-confidence, but it does require a large dose of patience. It isn't going to happen overnight, and it has to be practiced diligently and with a great deal of total concentration. This is something that doesn't come easy to everyone, so for some, it may take a fairly long time before everything falls nicely in place. This, too, explains why many are never able to master the skill. Becoming proficient in a mental skill is much more difficult than learning a physical one because a mental exercise has to be done precisely every single time you do it. With a physical skill such as squatting, you might get stronger even though you use faulty form on some occasions.

**Mental rehearsal also
has benefits far beyond
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It's a valuable asset
in daily activities.**

And it goes without saying that some athletes will learn this skill faster than others. I've found that those who have participated in an individual sport at some time in their lives have an easier time dealing with mental preparation than those who have not. This is due to the fact that they had already done some type of mental rehearsal in conjunction to their participation in strength training. And if they had taken part in competition in an individual sport, they understand the concept that they're on their own. This is not always the case with someone who has only been a part of a team sport.

Mental rehearsal also has benefits far beyond the realm of sports. It's a valuable asset in daily activities. Currently, I use it more for my everyday chores than for my weight training. The day before I do my grocery shopping, I make a list and then mentally rehearse where I should go first, what comes next, and so on until I have gone through the entire supermarket and am at the check-out line. I try to run all my errands on one day, and some days they add up to four or five stops. The night before, I put them all in order, so that the next day I don't have to think about whether I should go to the library or the post office first. I already have my route mapped out in my head. This, I fully understand, isn't such a big deal, but at the same time, it makes my life slightly less complicated and leaves my mind free to think about other things.

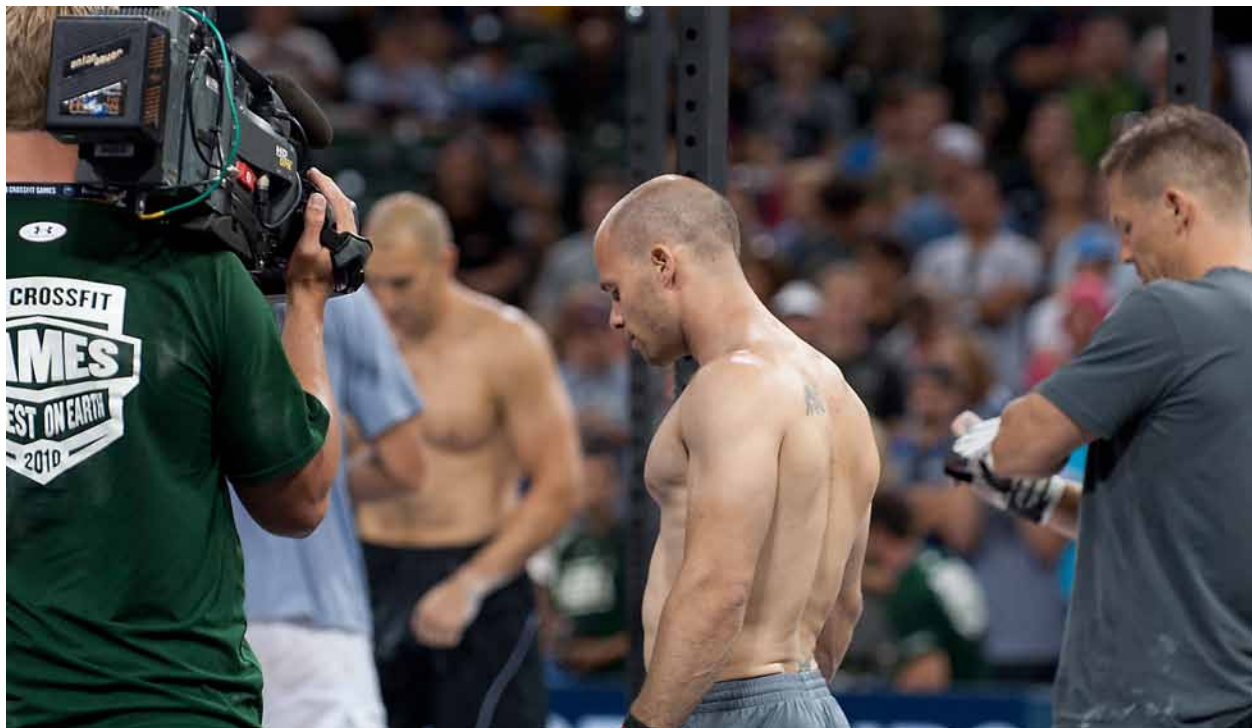
While I don't employ mental rehearsal now as I did when I was competing, I still use it for my upcoming sessions. When I was driving to Baltimore while working at Hopkins, I would use the time to mentally review what I planned to do that day. I do the same thing now when I walk because the walk serves as one of my warm-up activities for my lifting. I go over what's on my routine for the day and then think back to my last session using those exercises.

Which ones went easy? Time to push them harder. Should I add another set to the seated presses or continue to add more reps? Would today be a good day to try out a different exercise for my deltoids? Stuff like that. Nothing earth-shaking, yet I'm much better prepared for the workout than I would be if I hadn't taken a few moments to think through the upcoming session. Keep in mind that it's usually the little things that make a difference in our training, and in life in general.

This process goes by many names: "mental rehearsal," "mental preparation" and "visualization" are the most common, but some disciplines have others. They're basically all the same. What you're attempting to do is form a mental image of something you wish to occur in the future. While mental rehearsal most certainly can be utilized for a wide range of activities, I will restrict this piece to strength training and competitive lifting.

Mind Over Matter

Even before I learned the proper method of doing mental rehearsal, I always did a form of mental preparation before I began competing in Olympic meets. Prior to becoming enchanted with that sport, I boxed and wrestled, two



Some of the most impressive athletes aren't the strongest physically but dominate the competition with intense focus and drive.



The pre-competition period is an important time. Use it wisely to set yourself up for success.

individual sports that require the athlete to be mentally ready or suffer dire consequences. In the ring, a dumb mistake can put your lights out. Before a bout or a match, I would mentally go over all the important aspects of what I was about to try and do. At the same time, I would give myself a pep talk to elevate my self-confidence.

When I turned my full attention to Olympic lifting, I discovered that mentally preparing for a contest was a great deal easier than it had been for the combative sports. Now I didn't have to be concerned what my opponent did, because it didn't directly affect me, other than making me select a different attempt. I would write out all my warm-ups and my intended attempts on platform and go over them again and again, mentally paying attention to all the key form points.

Then, at the contest, I would review what I needed to do for each of the three lifts—press, snatch, and clean and jerk—right after weigh-in and then prior to each individual event. Most of the other lifters used a similar method, and I know that in my case it helped a great deal. This system worked out well enough for me to win some regional-level meets, but when I moved to York and began competing

with the York Barbell Club team, it wasn't providing what I needed. In Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Ohio, Kentucky, Illinois, Wisconsin and Indiana, there were usually two and sometimes three competitors in my class who could beat me or, on a good day, I could handle them, but on the East

The reason deep breathing works so well is that the mind can only concentrate on one thing at a time.

Coast, I would enter meets where there were 10 or more lifters capable of knocking me out of a medal. Usually two or three held some national title. It was as if I had gone from the minor league to the majors in one fell swoop, and I wasn't prepared.



You can use a variety of techniques to calm yourself before a lift. Bill Starr recommends deep breathing as a way to clear your mind for the upcoming effort.

Plus, lifting in regional and local contests was a far cry from being onstage at the North Americans, juniors, seniors and Olympic trials. I would get so nervous when I tried to do my mental rehearsal before a major show that I couldn't focus my thoughts, so I'd stop and start over. Same deal. My pulse rate would go up and I could tell that just thinking about the numbers I planned on doing was making me very nervous. I needed someone to tell me what I was doing wrong, but there wasn't anyone around who knew the answer to my problem. Most of them were experiencing the emotions that I was.

Then, while going through a book on Aikido, I came across what I was searching for. I had already gone through several other books on martial arts and one on yoga, but none had what this book had: a section on breath control. According to the author, it was in this martial art that the discipline of breath control was originally founded. So I began practicing the procedure outlined in the book and knew I was on the right track. The first time I used the breathing control while I was mentally preparing for the contest, I had a very good showing, doing much better than my training had projected.

The reason deep breathing works so well is that the mind can only concentrate on one thing at a time. Whenever I felt myself start to get anxious while I was going through

my intended lifts, I would stop and go back to deep breathing again, and I would calm down. Back to the lifts, then another pause to settle down. On and on this would go, but the more I practiced the skill, the longer I was able to focus on my technique for the various lifts. I seldom thought about the numbers. Rather, I thought in terms of warm-ups and my first, second and third attempts on platform. I knew my strength was up to the challenge on these lifts. It was the form that was going to spell success or failure.

At the contests, I began using deep breathing during my warm-ups and before each attempt on platform. This benefited me in two ways. It kept me relatively calm so I could focus on the task before me, and it helped me to conserve my nervous energy for the upcoming attempt.

Mind Over Matter

Now I will present a short course on mental rehearsal that will bring results if you're patient enough to stick with it for as long as it takes to master the various aspects of the discipline. First and foremost, you need to find a quiet place. For those who live with friends or family, this can often pose a problem—but figure it out. I had two football players at Hopkins who lived in a frat house famous for its ongoing parties, so they did their mental rehearsals in their cars.

Personally, I like a dark or dimly lit room and want it to be as quiet as possible. Some prefer soft music. Fine—whatever fits your mood. Turn off the TV and unplug the phone and fax. Turn off any electronic devices—no distractions whatsoever. The next prerequisite is to get very comfortable. You're not going to be able to give your full attention to breathing if some part of your body is in pain. Sit on a couch, lounge on a recliner or lie in bed. Sitting upright is really the best, but if you feel more relaxed in either of the other two positions, use them. After you learn the technique while lying down or reclining, you can easily use it while sitting.

Lift your head slightly. That will enable you to take deeper breaths and make sure your back is very flat. Take a few moments to allow your mind to go blank. For some, this is instantaneous. Now, slowly and steadily, inhale. While you're doing this, try and picture the air flowing into your lungs. When you're reached your limit, suck in a tiny bit more and hold it there for 8-10 seconds.

While learning the technique, you might not be able to hold the air in your lungs for that long, but after a bit of practice you will, and eventually you will be able to hold the air for two or even three times that long. Slowly release the air, making a soft whooshing sound as it leaves your lips. Don't let the air gush out. There is a soft rhythm to the inhaling and exhaling that is an important part of the whole deal. When you have let out all the air in your lungs, squeeze your diaphragm and push out just a tad more. This is the hardest part. Once all the air is released, don't take another breath right away. Wait for five or six seconds before you inhale again. The urge is to suck in mass quantities of air. Resist that urge and draw in the air slowly and steadily, just like you did on the first inhalation.

Learn to involve your diaphragm in both the inhalation and exhalation. Extend it while drawing in air and contract it when releasing the air, just as you would while running. Allow your abdomen to relax and extend when inhaling, and pull the diaphragm up into your chest cavity to create an abdominal vacuum when exhaling.

The area of your body that is the focus of your systematic breathing is where martial arts and yoga consider the source of energy, the "kin" or "chi," so as you go through the breathing drill, you're in fact pulling good energy into your body and releasing bad energy. That's another reason this breathing technique is so useful when you are about to perform a lift, either in training or at a contest.

Keep in mind that the various times I mentioned are only guidelines. Learning how to do the exercise in a controlled, rhythmic fashion is more important than how long you can hold the air in or how long you can deprive yourself of the next lungful.



The mind will race before a competition. Finding a way to calm it will allow you to focus on the task at hand.



Every athlete is different. Experiment with various techniques and find the one that helps you perform your best.

Go through as many cycles as are necessary to allow you to feel more relaxed. After you've been practicing for a while, three is usually enough. Now you're ready to mentally rehearse your next workout. It's a good idea to write down what you intend to do at that session beforehand—all your warm-ups and every set on the primary and auxiliary exercises. Otherwise, the mental preparation doesn't work nearly as well.

I had a football player at Hopkins who took the mental preparation a step further than everyone else. He erected a shrine to the back squat.

Our imaginary Olympic lifter is planning on going after a PR in the front squat at his next workout. He does a few cycles of the breathing exercise and then goes through his entire routine for that day. But the lift he's really interested in is the front squat, so he reviews that at least two more times. The first time he walks his mind through the front

squats, he thinks in terms of the weight on the bar for each set. His intended goal is 350, 10 lb. more than he's ever handled, but he knows he's capable of making that number because he has been moving his 5 triples up in recent weeks, having done 335 x 5 last week.

The second time he goes through the front squats, he concentrates only on technique: where to set his feet, the position of his torso and head, the importance of keeping his back tight and straight, pulling himself down to the deep bottom under control, staying tight in the hole and, most of all, leading with his elbows out of the bottom with a quick follow-through with his hips. He goes through the form points one more time for good measure, and when he walks into the weight room the following day, he is brimming over with confidence. When you're going after a new personal best, that's half the battle already won.

I had a football player at Hopkins who took the mental preparation a step further than everyone else. He erected a shrine to the back squat. He had photos from magazines of lifters moving huge amounts of weights tacked to a bulletin board in his room. The night before and sometimes the morning of a heavy squat workout, he would light candles (honestly), sit in front of the shrine and meditate about what he would do that afternoon in the weight room. I never saw this tribute to the squat, but a number

of his teammates told me about it. Extreme? Maybe, but he ended up making more progress in the lift during the off-season program than any other member of the team.

Focusing on a Competition

Preparing for an upcoming competition requires a great deal more in terms of mental rehearsal than it does for a single workout. That's because there are so many more variables to consider, such as pace. In a workout, you can pretty much control when you take an attempt and how much rest you can get in between sets. Not so at a contest. And at a meet, you're going to be on the platform all by your lonesome, the center of attention. Thinking about this brings on a nervous response, and that's where the breathing exercise comes in handy.

The night after your final session before the meet, start rehearsing for it. Write out all your warm-ups and intended lifts on platform. Do several cycles of breathing, then work your way through all the lifts, following the same procedure I mentioned earlier: visualize the numbers first, then go through and picture yourself using absolutely perfect form on the competitive lifts. Whenever you feel yourself start to get anxious, stop, do a cycle or two of breathing, then return your full concentration to the specifics of each lift.

The more often you do this, the better prepared you'll be. I've used lifting, either power or Olympic, as my example, but the same rules apply to every athletic endeavor, even team sports. A quarterback on a football team will be able to improve the odds of having a great performance if he takes the time to mentally go over all the small form points that are critical for that position.

During the contest, when things get hectic and you sense you're losing control of the situation, put a towel over your head and do some breathing cycles. It will ease the tension and help you relax so that you can once again focus clearly on the task at hand.

Finally, learning how to do the breathing exercise is most useful in everyday life to reduce stress. That's what the meditation in yoga is all about. It works for both mental and physical stress.

When running was still part of my training regime, I would often end up totally spent after covering five miles in hot, humid weather. I had difficulty getting my pulse and respiratory rates back to normal, even after moving into a much cooler house. One very hot day, I was having a devil of a time recovering, and then I recalled the breathing exercise.

Within five minutes I was fine. I've also using the exercise when I'm faced with a situation that has me fuming. While I'm breathing deeply, I'm telling myself to calm down, that getting angry is only making things worse, and that in another year I won't even remember the event ever happened. I've saved myself a lot of grief by doing this.

Learn how to do the breathing exercise and practice it regularly. It's very useful to hard-charging competitive athletes, but it's also most beneficial to those who are just trying to stay physically fit so they can live a lifestyle they enjoy. With the systematic breathing, you will be able to harness more of your mental and physical energy, and that will enable you to more readily achieve your goal—whatever that may be.



Jody Forster

About the Author

*Bill Starr coached at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, the 1970 World Olympic Weightlifting Championship in Columbus, Ohio, and the 1975 World Powerlifting Championships in Birmingham, England. He was selected as head coach of the 1969 team that competed in the Tournament of Americas in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, where the United States won the team title, making him the first active lifter to be head coach of an international Olympic weightlifting team. Starr is the author of the books **The Strongest Shall Survive: Strength Training for Football** and **Defying Gravity**, which can be found at [The Aasgaard Company Bookstore](http://TheAasgaardCompanyBookstore.com).*

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Old School for New Ideas

Bob Guere offers a look into CrossFit Brand X
and the CrossFit Kids program.

By **Bob Guere** CrossFit Kids California City

December 2010



All images courtesy of Bob Guere

It takes one visit to CrossFit Brand X in Ramona, Calif., to understand that Brand X is different. Brand X is old school.

Upon entering, it's obvious that martial arts are the backbone of what Jeff and Mikki Martin have built at Brand X. The walls near the entrance are adorned with black-belt certificates, promotion photos and other memorabilia generally expected in a martial-arts studio. Banners proclaiming Brand X a Krav Maga and Kenpo karate studio hang high on the walls. It's no-nonsense self-defense, passed on from some serious old-school masters to Jeff and Dan Strametz.

Still, if you walk into Brand X looking for martial arts, you'll probably find yourself curiously observing the kids squatting; the heavy, explosive lifts taking place on the lifting platforms; or maybe the muscle-adorned bodies bopping up and down on the gymnastics rings. If martial arts are your bag, Brand X will start to look a bit different.

If you walk into Brand X looking for CrossFit, however, you will find nothing but one of the most organized, effective and organic programs out there. The Martins have put together a team of trainers who mesh together perfectly, use their individual talents to their advantage, and provide an environment for training, growth and fun. They work hard at what they do. No frills, nothing cutting-edge—just good old-fashioned sweaty-brow work.

**The people at Brand X
are old school.
In fact, they claim to
have built the old school.**

The people at Brand X are old school. In fact, they claim to have built the old school.

In the early days of CrossFit affiliation, Greg Glassman knew Jeff and Mikki were right for the job and encouraged them to start the CrossFit Kids program. Brand X is CrossFit affiliate No. 5, which should tell you how “old school” this old school really is.

After incorporating CrossFit into Brand X Martial Arts, it was a natural progression, even if painful in growth, to become CrossFit Kids headquarters. Along the way, the Martins have meticulously pruned and nurtured their training staff to what it is today. By all definitions, the CrossFit Kids staff

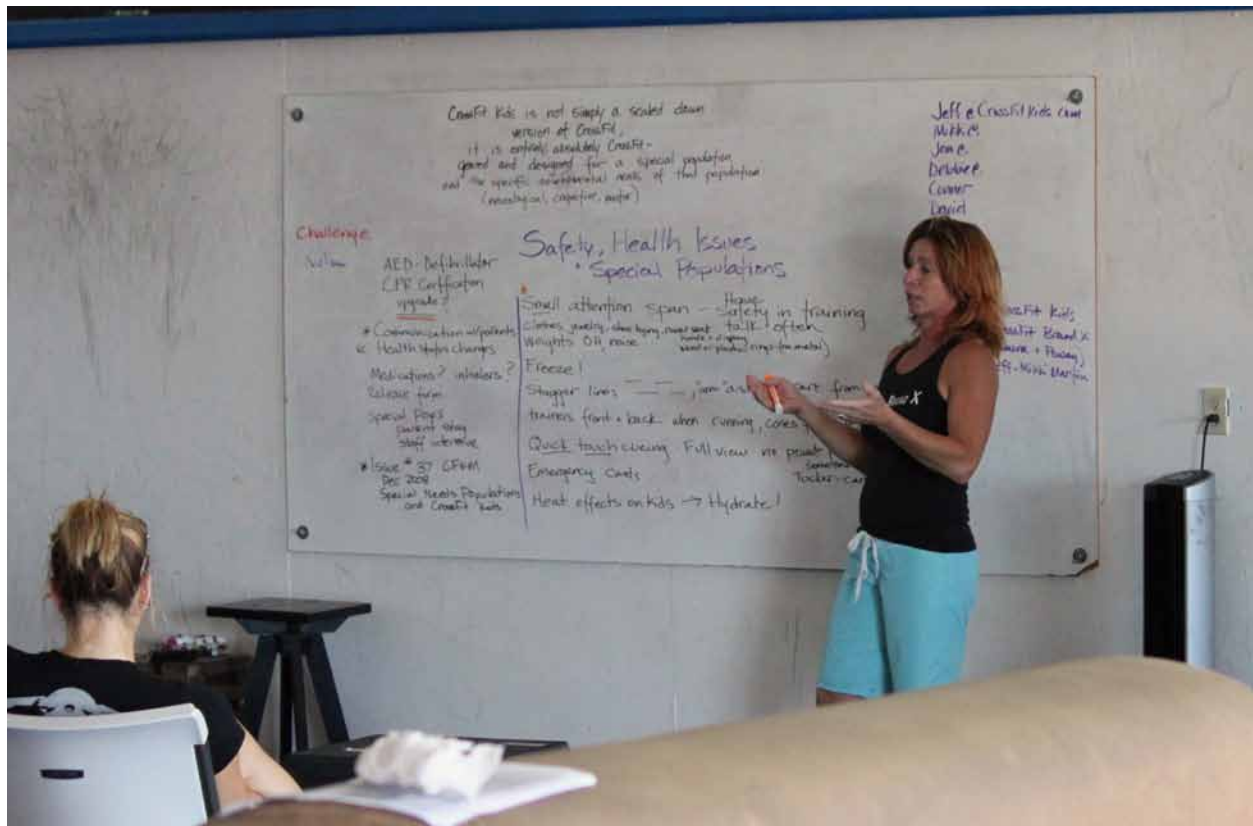
is world class. The Martins and their band of merry trainers truly believe they are the future of CrossFit and the future of youth fitness. This author agrees. Coach Glassman is nothing if not a visionary, and I believe he knew this from the beginning.

Doing It for the Children

Since inception, CrossFit Kids has held 36 certification seminars (and counting), the first in January 2008. The program currently boasts 1,200 CrossFit Kids trainers and 250 CrossFit Kids affiliates, and CrossFit Kids recently held the first of many overseas certification seminars as part of an expansion to make the certification more accessible across the community. The ultimate goal is to ensure quality trainers are providing quality training at CrossFit affiliates when they start a program for kids. Just like with the Level 1 certs, the team of trainers at CrossFit Kids is handpicked by the Martins and endures a strict mentoring and training program to keep the quality consistently high.



Brand X is actually the fifth CrossFit affiliate on a list that's over 2,000 names long now.



The CrossFit Kids program upholds the highest standards of training through a rigorous mentoring program designed to produce top coaches.

What makes this team, and Brand X, different can't be readily defined in a small, concise package. It's a collection of traits and talents that make up a skill set. Possessing a skill set is old school. It brings to mind images of industrial-age tradesmen, iron workers, welders and carpenters: workers who knew their trade and knew it well. At Brand X and CrossFit Kids HQ, that skill set is wielded properly, and proper judgment is exercised cautiously in order to provide the type of training required when translating a program like CrossFit to kids.

The CrossFit Kids staff has expanded the training to cover all ages. From preschoolers all the way through teens, they wrangle them all. The preschool program was developed when it was noticed that the little ones playing nicely in the waiting area were mimicking the kids class. Imagine a two- or three-year-old squatting repeatedly because big brother or sister was squatting repeatedly 20 feet away. If they are squatting anyway, why not take it a step further? So was born the preschool class.

The People Behind the Program

Debbie Rakos heads up the preschool program (among her many other duties) and is a wonderful class leader. Her friendly demeanor and natural ability to work with small children make it the perfect role for her at Brand X. If there is an original "Brand X-er," it's Debbie. Debbie and Jeff met early on when Jeff was offering kickboxing and boxing classes. Debbie started training with Jeff, and when CrossFit was on the offering, she jumped on that as well. An accomplished martial artist, Debbie also handles the day-to-day operations at Brand X. She holds the catch-all title of "manager," but really she's the gears that keep the place running. From initial contact with new clients to follow-up sales and assisting with scheduling, Debbie really does it all.

Dan Strametz has been called "Jeff's right hand." From this author's perspective, Dan is a hairier version of Debbie. All kidding aside, they both work extremely hard to keep

Brand X running smoothly. In my many visits, I don't think I've seen either of them sit for more than a few minutes. Dan bounces around the gym, smile firmly carved on his face, from one task to the next. He's the toolbox. If you need something done, ask Dan and it will get done. I think every large gym has a guy like Dan, but few have someone with the skills and trustworthiness Dan has. Dan is old school, by the way.

At Brand X, it's obvious the people love what they do.

Dan and Debbie have more than one thing in common, but the prominent characteristic they share is the obvious love for what they do. To be totally satisfied with an occupation is rare, though CrossFit trainers certainly love their jobs more than most. At Brand X, it's obvious the people love what they do. I believe this comes from the enduring friendship Jeff and Mikki develop with their trainers. The CrossFit community is real and tangible at Brand X. Jeff and Mikki have surrounded themselves with quality people who love working for them and experience that elusive "job satisfaction" as well.



"Regularly learn and play new sports."

Ever-present and always welcoming are the Martin kids: Connor, Keegan and Duncan. If old school is new again, these three are the proof. The boys are genuine, polite and fun-loving. They are boys for sure, and antics abound. In no small part, they add to the feeling of home when you visit Brand X. You literally step into the Martins' home when you walk through those doors. It's the place their children have grown up, matured (somewhat) and flourished athletically.

A great organization, led by great people, produces a great product.

All three are active participants in the CrossFit Kids Certifications and have become the poster children for CrossFit Kids. Connor has evolved into a monster of an athlete. Youthful gusto and resulting injury are the only things that kept him from the CrossFit Games this year in my opinion, and you can bet he'll be there next year. Keegan will best his older brother by default as he grows older. I am looking forward to seeing Duncan in his teen years and beyond, because he will truly be the product of CrossFit Kids.

Sometimes I think Jeff is Tolkien's Sarumon, breeding Orcs to create Uruk-hai, the strongest possible offspring he can create. Or perhaps that's far-fetched and a tad bit ridiculous.

Ramona, Calif., is a small town, mostly rural, with a bustling downtown to support the surrounding families. Ramona is not a high-income community, yet Brand X thrives—proof that CrossFit is worth the money, no matter what the demographic. Nearby Poway is a natural area in which to expand, with dozens of blocks filled with high-tech manufacturing and corporate parks. Jason Dunbar, a trainer at Brand X, has been running Brand X Poway from his garage for years now and will be expanding to a commercial space by the time this article hits the Internet.

Jeff and Mikki trust Jason and his better, more-attractive half Aileen to run Brand X Poway for the same reasons they trust Dan and Debbie. They are trusted friends, and they love what they do.

I had the pleasure to be at Brand X for Jason's Kenpo black-belt testing. The Kenpo test is old school: a relentless onslaught of commands and demands by the many instructors continued for what seemed like hours. I'd only known Jason and the Brand X crew in the context of CrossFit to this point. Though I was aware of the alter ego Brand X possessed, I had not witnessed it. As a former martial artist myself, I could appreciate the dedication it took for Jason to come this far and the honor bestowed on him by Jeff and the rest of the high-ranking members present.

After the long examination, there was no doubt Jason was ready to be promoted. Jeff presented Jason with a ring, and on Jason's belt was embroidered "MacMha'irtin," Gaelic for Martin. It symbolized Jeff inviting Jason into his clan. That's old school. Jason was family now. Actually, if you ask Jeff, Jason is like another son to him. Knowing Jeff and his family like I do, that's saying a lot.

The treatment of Jason and the dedication of the other trainers at Brand X aren't surprising if you've been to Brand X and know the Martins. To expect anything less would be selling them short.

CrossFit: Always Advancing Performance

A great organization, lead by great people, produces a great product. Anything else wouldn't make sense. Old-school gyms like Brand X are known for the results they achieve through their methods, which are innovative despite their retro approach to training.

CrossFit strength bias is a sliver of CrossFit programming started by Jeff Martin to infuse strength into his athletes. It's a trend that caught on throughout CrossFit in the past few years, and it would be wrong to not assume Jeff helped start the fire. I would challenge the average adult male CrossFitter to run his numbers against those of the guys at Brand X and see how their programming stacks up.

Brand X also runs a skunkworks project: a select group of athletes at Brand X get to be guinea pigs and test out new WODs and new combos of movements before they're unleashed on the masses. That group is impressive as well and gives some great performances on a regular basis.

These are a few examples of the world-class programming that occurs at an old school. Then again, everything old is new again in strength training. CrossFit takes us back to the basics of foundational movements, heavy lifts and Olympic weightlifting, one of the oldest sports there is.

For many of us, we can't go back and be a part of CrossFit Santa Cruz in the early days of Coach Glassman's pioneering efforts. We watch the videos, read the articles and get to meet some of the original firebreathers who were there and still provide inspiration. If you want to get close to the philosophical origins of CrossFit, I say take a trip to Brand X. I don't believe it's far removed from the feel and intention that took our little sport to heights nobody could've imagined. It's raw, and yet it's genius. It's warm and welcoming but fierce in its endeavors. It's black-box programming.

And it's old school.



About the Author

Bob Guere is the owner and trainer at [CrossFit Kids California City](#). Specializing in the teen population, Bob runs a nine-week summer course and is a strength and conditioning coach with high-school soccer teams. CrossFit Kids California City is not your average affiliate. It does not operate out of a set location but travels to the athletes wherever practice occurs. Bob is married to his wife of 18 years, Kerry, and has a 14-year old daughter, Whitley.

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

The Power of Conscious Breathing

Breathing is the most basic human activity, but Hayley Parlen says doing it “properly” can help you in the CrossFit box.

By Hayley Parlen

December 2010



All images Dave Re/CrossFit

“In basketball—as in life—true joy comes from being fully present in each and every moment, not just when things are going your way. Of course, it’s no accident that things are more likely to go your way when you stop worrying about whether you’re going to win or lose and focus your full attention on what’s happening right this moment.”

—Phil Jackson, *Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior*

1 of 6

A Personal Account

The other day I set out to break a PR for pull-ups. Shortly after I jumped on the bar, I noticed a tiny battle going on in my mind. When I got to about six, I heard this voice pop up: "You aren't going to make it."

And so began the fight.

Right after I heard that voice, another chimed in, "Come on! You can do it! Keep going!"

The two voices went on for a few seconds until suddenly, without my having to do anything, everything felt really quiet inside of my mind, and all my attention and focus went straight to my breath. It was as if my breath had a voice of its own, yet it did not have any words to speak. It was just there as a very loud, audible sound, kind of like Darth Vader, yet in a strangely peaceful way.

As the breath got louder and louder, my brain felt quieter and quieter, as if I had just dived down to the bottom of a lake. All I could hear was my breath, and then suddenly it was just my own breath, my body, the pull-ups and me. I was completely immersed in the present. I felt no resistance in my mind. My body felt loose, and before I knew it I was on my 20th pull-up. I fought for the next one, bringing my new record to 21.

This experience is one of many in which I have been able to get through a CrossFit workout and do even better than intended because of the conscious breathing practice I have outside my CrossFit workouts.

I believe a conscious breathing practice, which consists of sitting and putting all your concentration on listening to and feeling your breath, can benefit athletic performance and help cultivate the focus one needs in order to resist the commands and the drama of the mind. This is why Phil Jackson felt it so important to teach his athletes Zen meditation. He knew that when athletes think too much about the past and the future—the bulk of all thoughts—they miss the reality of what is happening in the present. Some athletes and coaches refer to this present state as "the zone," while some refer to it as a "runner's high."

Controlled breathing is certainly not a new idea when it comes to sport. Many training texts will talk about breath control, particularly as it relates to athlete arousal and the ideal performance state, and deep diaphragmatic breathing can have important effects on heart rate and

muscle tension. Controlled breathing can also affect oxygen exchange, and most CrossFitters will know that using your breath correctly can often be the difference between a missed lift and a new PR. Breathing ladders are often used as a way to teach athletes to avoid "panic breathing."

Some people certainly associate breathing only with spiritualism, yoga and meditation, but sports scientists have long known that breathing can affect athletic results. One need only use Google to find a wealth of literature linking breathing techniques to sports performance. Still, we don't always need to get so complicated or examine the exact physiological mechanisms of breathing and movement. Sometimes it's enough just to know that the breath can be used as a point of focus when the mind is wandering during a workout.



Hayley Parlen introduces conscious breathing to a group of top CrossFitters in Lake Tahoe, Calif.



Focusing on the breath can calm the mind and help you devote all your energy to the task at hand.

Why Focus on the Breath?

This practice of focusing on the breath, as opposed to getting caught up in your thoughts, is extremely powerful when applied to situations that require intense physical exertion. Of course, the self-talk we all know about can be helpful to get us through tough times and motivate us to do our best, but even getting caught up in positive thoughts while working out can drain us of our energy and perhaps cause us to lose focus on the task at hand. This energy is so precious in these moments. We cannot afford to waste an ounce of it. With every positive thought, there always lies its opposite. So rather than risk getting caught up in the inner battle, or even having to tame the negative thoughts, why not just use your breath as a point of focus?

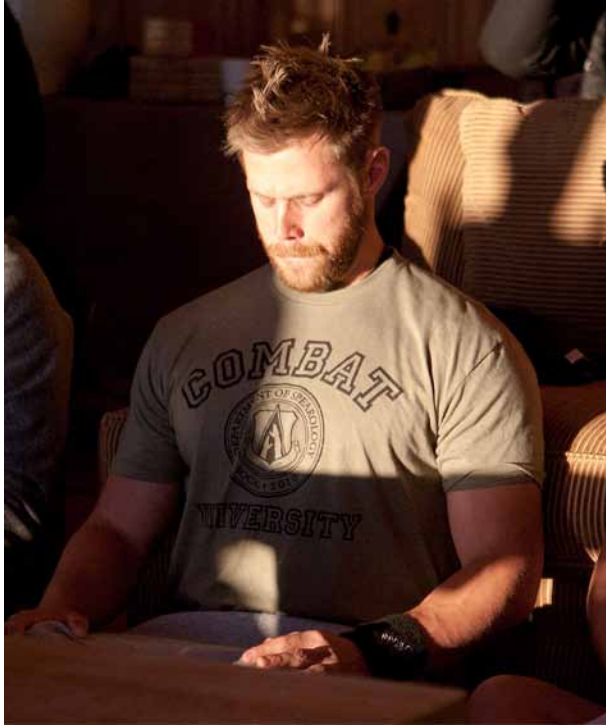
In fact, we really do not have control over the types of thoughts that enter our mind. We do, however, have control over where we want to put our attention. Putting your attention on your breath is far more productive and safe than being swept away by thought. Ask yourself, what is more important: putting your focus on what your breath is doing as you go into a 400-lb. back squat or listening to the mind chatter? In order to get really good at focusing on your breath, you must practice. Just like if you want to get good at squatting, you must squat.

Being able to put your attention on your breath is an amazing tool. Giving your breath all your attention helps

the mind chill out in times when it's freaking out or wants or quit. Having a breathing practice is like a CrossFit WOD for focus, and it can be just as hard. If the core-to-extremity principle is one of the main components of effective movement, then breathing and focus are the ultimate tools of implementation. Think about this the next time you lift something: our power starts with our core, our center, and one way to tighten our core is to breathe into it. If we start to let our breath out before we finish lifting, we weaken our core and thus our chance of injury increases or we miss the lift.

Notice, too, what your mind is doing the next time you attempt a heavy lift and you take a breath into your core. For me, my mind usually goes quiet. If I start engaging in thought, even for one second, I forget about my body and my breath. I might start to exhale too early or I might lose focus, and then I either risk injury or I don't succeed in the lift. The more I practice conscious breathing outside my workouts, the more natural it becomes to incorporate focus breathing when I am engaging in physical activity.

Our breath is an intimate link between our mind and body. The breath takes the mind and grounds it deeper into the body so that we feel more whole, more connected with every part of us. The more grounded we are in our bodies, the more we can increase our own body awareness. The more body awareness we cultivate, the more alive we feel, the less likely we are to injure ourselves, and the better control we have over how we move.



Dave Lipson, full of peace.



Miranda Oldroyd (top) and Kristan Clever experiment with breathing techniques.

What Is a Conscious Breathing Practice?

After attempting my first WOD, I remember thinking that, had I not had a conscious breathing practice all these years, there was no way in hell I would have been able to get through the workout. This practice involves training your awareness to watch what is going on in your mind and your body's sensations without reacting to them, without getting swept away by the mind's stories—to observe without becoming emotional.

In a CrossFit workout, these thoughts might sound like: "I am going to die," "I can't do it," "My coach is an ass," "I can't believe my boyfriend is making me do this shit," "This is crazy and useless," "What is the point?"

A breathing practice will allow you to hurdle these distractions and obstacles to not only achieve a better WOD time but also to experience more enjoyment during your workout. This practice is about cultivating mental toughness, so your will becomes so strong that you are no longer bullied by your own thoughts. It also cultivates the will for one to be in control of his or her actions simply by becoming more aware of what one thinks.

Physically, we need body awareness in order to be good athletes. If you do not know how to loosen your hips or engage your lats, you will likely have problems with the kipping pull-up. Mind you, body awareness happens on a very deep subconscious level. We are often not telling ourselves to do something while in the movement. But we have learned how to move through our training along the way. That's another cool thing about the breath: it pierces through our conscious level, into the subconscious, allowing us to go deeper into our bodies, sometimes without us really even knowing it.

A few days ago, when doing 100 burpees, I remember my mind telling me to quit when it started to get too hard. Again, I was being pushed around by my thoughts. Around 20, I heard the sound again—the sound of my breath—and it grew louder and louder until it was all I focused on. Granted, my breath was all over the place, neither smooth nor rhythmic by any means, but it gave me the will to continue, and I was also able to look around to see the beautiful blue sky, to feel the grass underneath my hands and feet. I went from thinking mode to feeling mode, and the feelings and sensations suddenly did not seem all that bad.



Ignore the perfectly squatting cameraman. Sit tall, relax and bring your attention back to your breath.

Who Can Have a Breathing Practice?

Nothing I could say or teach of a breathing practice is new. This practice has been around forever. It is not man-made. You don't need any equipment (except a pair of lungs and nostrils), you can do it anywhere, and it's free. If you want to see for yourself how the breath is intimately linked with our bodies and movement, try this simple exercise:

Sit up tall, with a straight spine. As you draw in a deep inhalation, pay close attention to the direction your spine moves. Then when you exhale, pay attention to how your spine moves now. On the inhalation, your spine automatically goes into extension. I tell my students to inhale and extend their spines, but really you don't have to do anything. The breath pulls your spine into extension: the lower back arches slightly and the chest lifts towards the ceiling. The same goes for spinal flexion on the exhalation. As soon as you exhale, the spine rounds slightly and the chest draws inward.

As you focus on your breathing during this exercise, notice how little room there is to think. For a brief moment, your mind goes quiet and you get a small reprieve from all the chatter. It is rather pleasant, no? From here, for the next few minutes, allow yourself to sink into your breath. Sit

with a neutral spine and follow each inhalation and each exhalation. As thoughts enter your mind, watch them come in, and watch them drift away. If you notice you start to get carried away by your thoughts, just bring your attention back to the next breath.

Whether for five minutes or an hour, I make it a point to sit and practice observing my breath every day to train my mind to focus its attention on my breath while not getting involved or carried away by my thoughts. When you sit quietly regularly, you will start to see how often you are pushed around by your thoughts. For example, let's say you decide to sit for five minutes, without moving, and focus your attention on your breath. After just a few seconds, thoughts will come in, and before you know it you have completely forgotten about your breath. You might instead find yourself planning your family vacation, what you are going to eat for lunch that day, etc. The biggest bully of them all, is this one: "Wait—I can't sit here. This is a waste of time, I need to get back to" If you are not 100 percent objectively observing that thought, I guarantee you will have forgotten about your breath, and you will get up and go do the thing your mind told you to go take care of.

Sitting still and observing your breath is a very intense experience, but it has to be if we want to see results. Sound familiar? The stuff that comes up, both mentally and physically, when you are sitting still can be overwhelming and emotional. The sensations that accompany emotional pain and pleasure are equally as overwhelming. So to sit through all of these sensations without being able to reach for a comfortable distraction is an extremely powerful accomplishment.

You can always practice breathing at any point in the day, but you can also try to practice just before a WOD. Before you attempt your next workout, try sitting silently for two to five minutes just observing your breath. Sit comfortably with an upright posture, shoulders relaxed, and put all your attention and focus on each in breath and each out breath. There is no need to control your breathing or make it special in any way. Just observe as objectively as possible. In doing this, you are clearing away mental debris and increasing your ability to focus. Hopefully, you will cultivate the will and mental fortitude to bring this state of mindfulness and presence to your workout.

When the workout becomes challenging, as it always does, try to avoid the thoughts that will flood your mind. If you can, return to your breath, clear your mind and keep cranking out the reps.



About the Author

Hayley Parlen was introduced to CrossFit three years ago and knew right away that she had found a fitness program that was about getting physically fit and cultivating "mental fitness." Hayley is a certified Level 1 trainer and has completed numerous other CrossFit certifications. Hayley's dedication to her meditation and yoga practice, coupled with her CrossFit training, has shown her that no challenge in life is too big or too daunting to endure. Hayley also shows unwavering dedication to sharing her knowledge of and love for the art of body awareness and movement to children, adults and at-risk youth, as well as the mentally and physically challenged.

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Skin Infections and the CrossFit Athlete

Ripped hands and bloody shins give bacteria a way into your body. Dr. Mike Ray explains what's going on and offers his tips on how you can avoid nasty infections.

By Dr. Mike Ray CrossFit Flagstaff

December 2010



Rodney Hamby

The pull-up bar was a larger diameter than she was used to, but she wasn't going to slow down for that—especially not visiting a new gym. During the last round of pull-ups, she was vaguely aware that she had injured her hands, but she didn't really look at them until the workout was over. Even then, she didn't think much of it; she'd torn much worse plenty of times before, and now she just had blisters on both palms, though the one on the right did open up and drain a little. She squeezed out some clear fluid and left it at that. Besides, her doctor had just convinced her to update her tetanus immunization—something she had been reluctant to do.

1 of 6



Joe Reney

Rough hands are the result of hard work, but if you tear, you need to take some precautions to prevent infections.

As athletes, many in the CrossFit community like to think of themselves as protected from disease. It's certainly true that being fit provides us with resistance and a remarkable resilience with regard to illness, but we can still get sick. There is good evidence the immune system is enhanced by exercise, though there is also evidence that "extreme" exercise (however that may be defined in medical literature) could actually suppress immunity. The clinical significance of this effect is unclear.

Athletes remain susceptible to infection. Bacterial skin infections, generally termed "cellulitis," most commonly occur when bacteria enter through a break in the skin (which may be so small as to have been unnoticed at the time of injury) and begin to multiply, leading to inflammation and damage. Unchecked, cellulitis can spread to progressively larger regions of skin, potentially entering the bloodstream or involving other structures. Occasionally, an abscess may develop. This is a pocket of pus, comprising bacteria and dead cells, that forms at or under the surface of the skin. An abscess may exist independently of cellulitis or with it. Conversely, cellulitis may exist with or without an abscess.

For the first day she wasn't too worried. The blister on her left hand never did drain, though the one on the right looked worse within a few hours. Then, her right hand started to hurt more. She had, of course, continued to work out, so she figured she had overdone it on an already-vulnerable area. But was the skin near the blister on her right hand becoming a little red? It was getting so she couldn't hold onto a bar.

The bacteria that most commonly cause cellulitis are streptococcus species and staphylococcus aureus. The latter bacteria give rise to the term "staph infection." Some species of staph aureus have developed resistance to the antibiotics once most commonly used to treat cellulitis and are termed "methicillin-resistant staph aureus" or "MRSA."

**If you haven't had a
tetanus shot in 10 years,
get one.**

One concern with any bacterial skin infection is the possible development of tetanus, caused by another bacterium, clostridium tetani. Tetanus is very unlikely in an individual who has an up-to-date tetanus immunization.

Rarely, a person who has cellulitis may have a much more dangerous and rapidly spreading condition ominously and very appropriately termed necrotizing fasciitis. Necrotizing fasciitis is caused by a variety of bacteria and advances rapidly between layers of soft tissue (the fascia). It constitutes a life- and limb-threatening emergency.

That night, her right hand was really hurting. The burning made it hard to sleep, and she woke up every few hours. Checking her palm under the bathroom light, she could see it was definitely redder. Even though the blister had drained, there still seemed to be some fluid, maybe under another layer. It was getting really tender to the touch. Something was not right. In the morning, she would have to get it looked at.

A medical evaluation of a possible skin infection will include—aside from the usual vital signs and review of previous medical issues, medication allergies and other information—a history to determine any injury that may have occurred, including the possibility of a foreign body (such as a splinter) in the wound. The patient will be asked his or her tetanus status and will receive an exam. The medical provider will be looking for evidence of an abscess or foreign body and will try to determine if any other structures are involved and how extensive the infection is. This will involve palpating the wound, checking that nearby tendons and joints are functioning properly, assessing the spread of redness, and checking lymph nodes.

Tetanus immunization (which is universally packaged with a diphtheria vaccine and referred to as “dT”) should generally be updated every 10 years, though with any significant laceration or infection the recommendation is to receive a booster if it has been more than five years. These days, with the resurgence of whooping cough (pertussis), the Centers for Disease Control suggests using a vaccine also containing the pertussis vaccine at least once as an adult. This combination is referred to as “Tdap”. Either one doesn’t really hurt that much to receive but will make you feel like you were punched in the arm the next day or two. There is no evidence to suggest any connection between autism and this or any other vaccine.

If an abscess is identified or suspected, it must be drained because antibiotics alone will not penetrate the abscess. Generally, a local anesthetic is injected into the area around the abscess, a painful procedure in itself. Then a needle may be used to confirm the presence and location of the abscess, and an incision is made to drain the pus. More sizable abscesses will be packed with strips of gauze to keep the incisions from closing and allow them to continue to drain, though this practice has recently been called into question. The packing is generally changed every day or two as the wound heals. A really large abscess, or one in an area where nearby structures are at risk for damage, may require drainage in the operating room under a general anesthetic.



This is the infection at its worst. Note the redness around the wound and the general swelling of the palm (especially evident at the base of the fingers), but the drainage is clear.



The wound is getting much better after about four days on antibiotics. You can see where the blister was unroofed to ensure drainage and assess for any pus.



The infection after about nine days of antibiotics.

Courtesy of Dr. Mike Roy

She saw the doctor first thing in the morning, actually getting him out of bed, so great was her concern. In daylight it was pretty obvious the redness extended about two centimeters from the blister itself, and there might even be a little streaking onto her wrist. The doctor had her flex and extend all her fingers and her wrist and checked the lymph nodes in her armpit. He pushed on the wound—which really hurt—and agreed there seemed to be a little fluid deeper in. They discussed a local anesthetic, but for now he was just hoping to drain any fluid through a needle hole, and they agreed the anesthetic would hurt as much or more than just using one needle stick to drain it. He did probe around in there a lot more than she thought necessary but only got a few more drops of fluid, and it was blood-tinged but clear, not pus. Rather than dig deeper in her palm, the doctor recommended starting oral antibiotics immediately. He prescribed her Bactrim DS, two pills twice per day, and gave her some ibuprofen right away. She was a little reluctant to take the latter, not wanting to blunt the effects of her most recent training, but the hand really hurt, and in the end she relented.



Caroline M. Foresman/CrossFit Chesapeake

Bacteria can enter through small tears too small to see, so proper hygiene is essential even if you don't see blood.

If the care provider suspects cellulitis or other infection, the patient is started on antibiotics. Abscesses that occur without cellulitis do not benefit from antibiotics. Before the emergence of MRSA, cellulitis was usually treated with a penicillin or a similar antibiotic such as cephalexin, also known as Keflex, and these medications are still used for certain infections. Nowadays, at least in the United States, people are most likely to receive a prescription for either trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole (also known as Septra or Bactrim) or doxycycline or clindamycin, either alone or with another antibiotic.

A 10-day course of oral antibiotics will clear up most mild cases of cellulitis, but more significant infections, especially those involving delicate structures like the hand or on the face, may require intravenous antibiotics, most frequently vancomycin, though other antibiotics effective against MRSA may be used. When a patient is started on IV antibiotics, he or she is most commonly hospitalized overnight.



Cody Settle

Suck it up and wash your tears immediately to prevent infection.

Many factors may alter the antibiotic selections described above, including a patient's allergies, particular wound circumstances (such as a wound occurring in fresh or salt water), or the resistance profile of bacteria in a community.

**If it is a wound of
any significance,
bandage it.**

The redness on the skin may be outlined with an indelible marker to allow for easy assessment of progress. Once antibiotics are started, the redness should start to recede within a day or so. If it continues to get worse, something else needs to be done. This might include re-assessment for abscess or foreign body, change in antibiotic, or a switch to intravenous antibiotics. The usual duration of antibiotics for an established skin infection is around 10 days.

Her hand continued to hurt for several days after starting the antibiotic. It even seemed like after the first day it might have become a little worse, both in terms of the pain and the redness. Her doctor wondered aloud about starting intravenous treatment, but she really wanted to try a little longer on the oral medication. By the second day, it seemed a little better, and by the third it was hurting a lot less. A week after she started the antibiotics, her hand didn't hurt at all anymore and she was able to work out again, though she avoided thick pull-up bars until her hand was completely healed. Her doctor was visibly relieved, and one night at dinner I confessed it was a lot harder on me to treat my wife and see her discomfort than it was to manage most of my patients.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

If a minor wound starts to get red and painful, get it checked immediately.

Take Steps to Avoid Infection

The best cure is prevention, and the first step in the gym is basic hygiene. Infection is only possible if an organism is present. If a bar or other piece of equipment is especially dirty, clean it. If it is bloody, disinfect it. The discussion here has been centered on skin infections, but it is conceivable that HIV or hepatitis could be transmitted as well. Standard household or commercial cleaners should be sufficient for general cleaning. Use something containing an antiseptic like bleach or iodine for blood.

If you haven't had a tetanus shot in 10 years, get one. Ask your care provider if you should get the pertussis vaccine.

Try to have at least somewhat clean hands when working out. Some workouts might make that difficult if you're carrying sandbags, flipping a tire or doing bear crawls, but I try to at least wash my hands before exercising. Please don't hear that I recommend against these movements; I don't. The idea is to use what reasonable precautions you can.

Do your best to avoid injuries, especially to the hands. Use one of the many taping techniques to protect yourself if you know you will be doing a lot of pull-ups, or tape your wrists for false-grip muscle-ups. If you tear your hands, scrape your shins or suffer some other abrasion or cut, assuming it doesn't need medical attention immediately, wash it with soap and water. This step alone—cleaning the wound carefully—will dramatically reduce the risk of infection and is my single most important recommendation.

If it is a wound of any significance, bandage it, ideally after applying some antibiotic ointment. Really try to protect it during your next workout.

If you start to notice redness or worsening pain and tenderness, get it checked.



Tyler Jones

Cleaning your equipment regularly will also reduce the chances of infections.

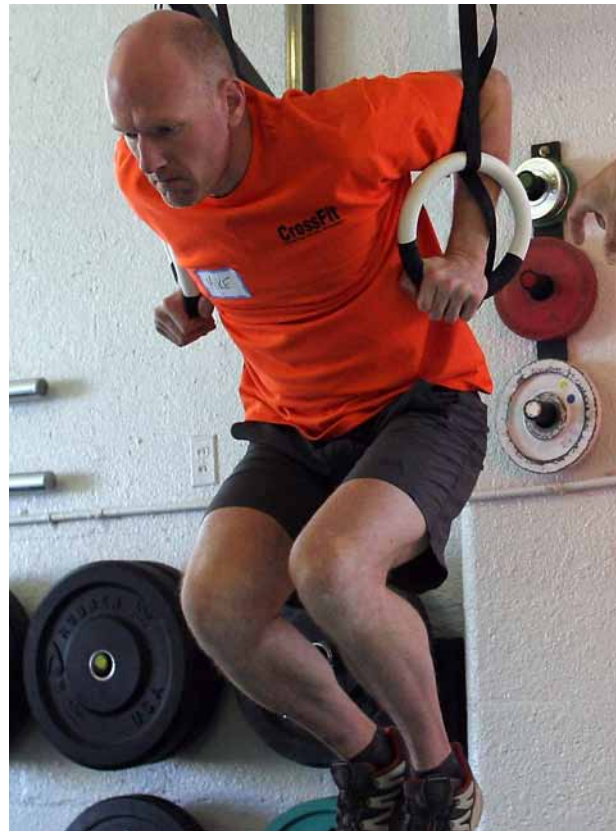
Here are the most important points:

- Be up to date on tetanus immunization.
- Wash your hands before a workout, and clean equipment if it needs it.
- If you get an injury, clean it thoroughly with soap and water, and then bandage it. Use common sense about what you can manage yourself and what needs medical attention.
- If an injury is getting worse and not better, have it checked. Ask your care provider if you should be given antibiotics for MRSA.



About the Author

Dr. Mike Ray is the co-owner of [CrossFit Flagstaff](#). He enjoys everything from adventure racing to rock climbing, martial arts, trail running and beyond. He is married to Lisa Ray, who finished 44th in the 2009 CrossFit Games and is a member of CrossFit HQ's traveling certification staff.



Courtesy of Dr. Mike Ray

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

School of Fitness: Part 1

CrossFit Vancouver started out as a humble CrossFit box, but it's now a provincially registered school of fitness. Emily Beers explains.

By Emily Beers with Tony Leyland

December 2010



Courtesy of CrossFit Vancouver School of Fitness

Six years ago, Craig Patterson, 39, started training a handful of clients, a dedicated group mostly made up of his close friends, who paid a mere \$5 an hour for personal training.

"Then I raised my price to \$10 an hour and I lost half my clients," Patterson said.

Courtesy of CrossFit Vancouver School of Fitness



CrossFit Vancouver now has 7,000 square feet of space, but it's taken several moves to find the right box.

Today, Patterson is the owner of CrossFit Vancouver School of Fitness, a venue that boasts six full-time coaches, 18 apprentice coaches, in-house coaching programs and an executive business-mentorship program. More than 100 students walk through its doors each day.

Laying the foundation

Vancouver's School of Fitness, located in East Vancouver, is a spacious 7,000-square-foot training facility with a loft that hosts a fully furnished lounge and bar. With more than 400 students currently enrolled, the facility is always bustling with energy.

But the road to establishing the school wasn't an easy one. After graduating from McGill University in 1995, Patterson worked as a mechanical engineer for a number of years before discovering CrossFit in 2004.

"It was a stressful time at work, and then I met Greg (Glassman) and started CrossFitting in Seattle," Patterson said. Glassman has been mentoring him ever since.

Soon, Patterson found himself commuting three hours from Vancouver to Seattle on a regular basis. Stateside, he started working out at Dave Werner's CrossFit Seattle, the first CrossFit affiliate in the world. Patterson also continued spending time with Glassman in California—it became his escape from engineering. Before Patterson knew it, as the story goes for so many CrossFitters, he became utterly addicted to the sport.

"I felt like I was on steroids," he says of his early CrossFit days.

That's when Patterson, a former university hockey player, decided to bring CrossFit to Canada and open his own affiliate.

**"I thought to myself,
'If I'm going to start a new
business, I might as well be
helping people.'"**

—Craig Patterson

"I was getting kicked out of places all the time. Some lady complained that I was sweating too much, so the community center got their management team together, had a meeting and kicked me out," he said.

At the time, Patterson's engineering business was booming, but his partnership agreement was not, so he sold out and moved forward with his plan to open the first CrossFit affiliate in Canada.

"I thought to myself, 'If I'm going to start a new business, I might as well be helping people,'" he said.

The Maiden Box: The First Big Mistake

In May 2005, Patterson opened his first Vancouver facility, and right away problems arose.

"We opened the doors, and we immediately messed everything up," he explained. "Within a month, business split in half because we stopped personal training and we just threw everyone into classes."

Personal training is something Patterson feels very strongly about. Today, whenever current or aspiring CrossFit affiliate owners ask him for business advice, he tells them the same thing:

"They're all making the same mistake. They're just putting people right into classes without personal-training sessions first. CrossFit has become too hard and too technical to bring people right in," he said.

Patterson learned this lesson the hard way. He is the first to admit that he had no idea what he was doing in those days. The result: coaches weren't developed properly, and neither were their students.

**It's taken Patterson
almost six years, four gyms
and a ton of money
to get the formula right.**

"Within four or five months (after opening), we were going bankrupt quickly," he said.

Although Patterson narrowly avoided bankruptcy, CrossFit Vancouver continued to flounder. In addition to its struggling clientele, CrossFit Vancouver received an eviction notice in September 2005 because the athletes were making too much noise.



Courtesy of CrossFit Vancouver School of Fitness

"If you build it, they will come."

"We shook the building when we did Grace," said Patterson, who was forced to move locations for the first time in the fall of 2005, just a few months after opening.

New Facilities: Learning From Mistakes

The first change CrossFit Vancouver made at its second location was to resume one-on-one personal-training sessions, which significantly helped the financial end of the business. But the new venue presented new problems, as did the gym after that. And the one after that. In total, CrossFit Vancouver has been forced to relocate three times for various reasons since the first facility opened in 2005.

Chris Saini, 39, who has been a coach at CrossFit Vancouver since February 2007, says most of CrossFit Vancouver's problems could have been avoided with better initial facility selection.

"All our capital has gone into building new gyms, which has cost the business a ton of money," Saini said.

Besides noise complaints, facility size also made venue changes necessary.

"We have a product—CrossFit—that just keeps growing, which is great. Everyone wants growth, but you have to be careful what you wish for," Saini said.

Patterson says simply, "Don't underestimate the importance of the facility."

Whether you're a CrossFit vocational school or a gym, Patterson lists the following as important criteria for a world-class training facility:

1. Adequate square footage
2. Being able to drop weights
3. High ceilings
4. Bay doors
5. The ability to run on the street
6. Adequate parking
7. Natural light

It's taken Patterson almost six years, four gyms and a ton of money to get the formula right.

Developing Coaches

It also took a while for CrossFit Vancouver to find the right way to develop coaches. In the early days, CrossFit Vancouver paid all of its coaches 70 per cent of the revenue

they generated, while the gym kept the other 30 per cent. Patterson, a wholehearted believer in the free market, opened his affiliate to anyone who wanted to coach.

"We opened the floodgates and started handing the keys to anyone (who had his Level 1 Certification), but it was a disaster," he said. "You have to choose the right people and make them earn it. You need to weed out the people who don't fit into your community, who don't embrace the team."

Patterson is the first to take the blame.

"We didn't give proper guidance to our coaches then. What we really needed to start doing was properly teaching people how to coach," he said. "This is one of the purposes of the school today."

Patterson explains that the only way to do this is to have a free-market system with some regulation, where the top coaches are both the regulators and the teachers. But it's not just coaches you have to develop. Patterson insists that in order to have a successful CrossFit business, you also have to develop your students, the school's culture, and eventually your business partners. After the many

Courtesy of CrossFit Vancouver School of Fitness



Developing a tight-knit group of coaches who believe in your gym's philosophy is essential to success.

business lessons Patterson has learned in the last six years, the most important one might be the simplest one of all: the community. He believes the school's culture and community are the heartbeat of CrossFit Vancouver.

"The community absolutely drives this place," he said. "It keeps us alive."

Saini agrees: "We really try to vibe our students, to pump them up. The bottom line comes down to the vibe in the box."



Courtesy of CrossFit Vancouver School of Fitness

Craig Patterson (top row, center) was the first affiliate owner in Canada.

A More Promising Future

By 2007, as CrossFit Vancouver began figuring things out, other CrossFit affiliates around the world started to turn to them for advice. Patterson started mentoring both clients and affiliate owners and quickly realized he was giving away all his business experience for free. He was spending so much time on the phone and answering e-mails that it was taking away from his own CrossFit community. This led to the establishment of the official mentorship program, a way to cover the costs for his time.

The first man to benefit from Patterson's mentorship program was Chris Isernio, owner of CrossFit Old Bethpage in New York.

"Chris called me up, and he more or less said, 'I need help: My wife's going to leave me. I hate life. My job sucks.' So I told him to come on out to Vancouver for a weekend seminar. He said he couldn't. So I asked, 'What do you want me to do?' He said, 'Just talk to me on the phone. Tell me what to do. How about I give you \$500 for a few hours of your time and we'll see how that works?'" remembered Patterson.

So Patterson mentored Isernio, and shortly after Isernio's business went through the roof. The same is true for the next 30 affiliate owners Patterson spoke with.

"And all I did was talk to them on the phone," Patterson said. "We didn't even talk about developing coaches. We just talked about the business component of owning an affiliate."

As Patterson began acting as a teacher of sorts to his own coaches and other CrossFit affiliate owners, the idea of turning the gym into a full-fledged school started to form.

In British Columbia alone, Patterson's mentoring has affected more than 30 other CrossFit gyms that have opened in recent years.

"Some people give us some credit. Others give us more credit," he said.

At the end of the day, Patterson has noticed everyone he mentors is making the same mistakes.

"It's like there are four levels to this thing. People get stuck at the same places, and they don't know how to get over the hump in order for business to grow," he said.

As Patterson began acting as a teacher of sorts to his own coaches and other CrossFit affiliate owners, the idea of turning the gym into a full-fledged school started to form. But there were a lot of wrinkles that still needed ironing out before the transition could be made.

Courtesy of CrossFit Vancouver School of Fitness



School of fitness or CrossFit box? Is there a difference?

A Registered School of Fitness

By 2009, Patterson was in a bit of a catch-22. The facility he wanted for his gym—the 7,000-square-foot warehouse with high ceilings and bay doors, where you could drop weights and run on the street—was in an area of the city where gyms aren't allowed. However, if CrossFit Vancouver became a school, it could, in fact, rent this facility. Sounds simple enough. The wheels were set in motion, but Patterson quickly learned that becoming a registered vocational school wasn't so easy, after all.

"It's a huge process. You have to get a business license from the city, you have to become registered with the province, you have to follow all these provincial guidelines," Patterson said.

In short, CrossFit Vancouver needed a complete makeover before it could become a vocational school. But the group pushed forward anyway, and as one might expect, dealing with bureaucrats, government officials, never-ending red tape and laborious paperwork made the process of receiving provincial approval for the school long, tedious and stressful.

For Patterson, the spring and summer of 2009 were marred by sleepless nights, challenging days, and much scotch drinking in what he calls the most stressful time of

"I can still hear Glassman telling me, 'Patty, the best coach isn't the one with a few elite athletes. It's the one with the most clients.'"

—Craig Patterson

his life since his first year of engineering. There were times when he thought he might lose it all and go bankrupt, and it wasn't just his livelihood at stake this time—his loyal coaches depended on him as well.

"We've always seen this as a family. You pay your dues, and then you become a part of the family," Patterson said.

In the end, the application to become registered as a school went through, and today CrossFit Vancouver is a provincially registered school of fitness, where students graduate through the system just like in a regular school, earning their diplomas through completion of the school's apprenticeship program.



Courtesy of CrossFit Vancouver School of Fitness

How the School Works

Students must CrossFit for at least six months and complete their Level 1 CrossFit Certification before they are eligible to apply to become an apprentice coach. As an apprentice, they begin by shadowing senior coaches at the school until they're ready to begin training their own students. They work their way up from making 20 per cent of their sales revenue to 30 per cent, and eventually up to 60 per cent.

Although CrossFit Vancouver is more regulated than it used to be, Patterson still believes the free market is at the heart of the system.

"The free market still decides who the best coaches are," Patterson said, echoing something he learned from Glassman. "I can still hear Glassman telling me, 'Patty, the best coach isn't the one with a few elite athletes. It's the one with the most clients, the one who is making the most difference in the world.'"

And under the school system, Patterson believes he can reach his long-term goal: true professionalization of the fitness industry.

"That's the big picture," he said. "Traditionally in the fitness industry, you have one owner of a big company, and they pay employees \$12-\$15 an hour. These people can't make more than \$30,000 a year, and by the time they're 30 they have to go out and find a real job."

The way CrossFit Vancouver's School of Fitness works is more like an engineering or law firm, Patterson insists. His rationale is this: a law firm with more lawyers has more to offer, and it's the same with a CrossFit facility. You can make just as much money and have way more resources if you have specialists. At a law firm, you have lawyers who specialize in family law, criminal law or business law.

"Here, we have teachers who have additional specializations in Olympic weightlifting, in running, in gymnastics," Patterson said.

In a sense, this system allows Patterson to continue to create a real brotherhood, where coaches aren't working against each other. Eventually, when the school graduates enough students, CrossFit Vancouver will open up satellite boxes—sister schools—where graduates can go not only to work but also to become business owners themselves one day.

"There's a true benefit to having a bunch of business owners working together," Patterson said. "Then when we retire, we can sell our shares and leave a legacy."

The School's Professors

One man who has been with Patterson practically since Day 1 is Trevor Lindwall, a former civil engineer. Lindwall joined the CrossFit Vancouver team in October 2005, and he remains an integral member of the school today. Lindwall laughs when he looks at how far CrossFit Vancouver has come.

"Back then (2005), I had five, maybe seven clients. All our Fran times were up in the 15 minutes. We were striving to hit 10 pull-ups. None of us had pistols. We thought a 135-lb. clean and jerk was heavy. My first Grace was 22 minutes," he said. "We didn't have a clue what we were doing back then."

Lindwall still remembers getting his first paycheck from Patterson. The amount was \$300. To put that in perspective, Lindwall, who is the school's most knowledgeable gymnastics and nutrition coach, now consistently brings the school of fitness more than \$12,000 a month in revenue all by himself.

Courtesy of CrossFit Vancouver School of Fitness



Through an apprentice program, CrossFit Vancouver produces the coaches who are responsible for creating great athletes and fitter Canadians.

Andrew Swartz, 35, is another specialist who brings formidable knowledge to the school. Swartz is an accomplished athlete in his own right, placing second at the Canada West Regional Qualifier in 2009 and 23rd at the 2009 CrossFit Games. Swartz is a born technician. If he has a chance to attend a seminar, whether it's about Olympic weightlifting, nutrition or joint mobility, he's there in a heartbeat, and he's always willing to share his new knowledge with eager students. On top of this, in September 2009 Swartz started hosting stretch therapy seminars at the school.

Like Lindwall and Swartz, Saini, the school's general manager, has established himself as a specialist: he's the running and sports-science guru. Saini has felt many of the growing pains the school has been through to get where it is today.

"It's been a lot of trial and error. We've sort of been figuring this out as we go," he said. "When I came on board, nothing was getting done, and the facility was disgustingly dirty. Now, it's a lot more organized, and we have proper systems in place. But now that it's a bigger herd and a registered school, it's also more of a challenge to steer the ship."

"There have been a lot of ups and downs, but we have a really strong product now, a product that we're now exporting through our business-mentorship program."

He concluded: "From the structure of bringing people through our system—through personal training and then to group classes—to our stretching, running, nutrition and rowing seminars, to our social events, to the lounge we built, it makes us an eclectic and unique community, and I don't think we could have become what we are any other way."

Looking Back—and Forward

Despite all the stress Patterson has been through since opening his first box back in 2005, he still believes it's been worth it:

"Seeing my coaches making a difference, and watching them earn enough money to buy houses and have families—giving them the opportunity to make close to \$100,000 a year—that's been my biggest success. And with my own students, seeing the difference CrossFit has made in their lives, I'm so proud of the community that we have created."

Patterson insists he wouldn't have the community he does today if it weren't for Glassman's continuous mentoring.

"Glassman's early words will always ring in my ears: 'Patty,' he said, 'You can spend all of your time on the wrong people and be miserable, or you can embrace those that light you up. They will bring in more people who light everyone up, and you will have a great community,'" Patterson said. "And that's exactly what we've always done in Vancouver."

Part 2 of this story will look at where most CrossFit affiliates get stuck and the steps required for a business to grow. It will also provide details of the different diploma programs CrossFit Vancouver offers: its in-house program and its executive business-mentorship program. It will offer a breakdown of the school's curriculum and will examine its long-term business goals of professionalizing the fitness industry.



About the authors:

Emily Beers finished a master's degree in journalism at the University of Western Ontario in the spring of 2009. Prior to that, she completed a bachelor's degree at the University of British Columbia, where she majored in political science and minored in history. In 2009, she won both the CBC Joan Mead journalism scholarship and the Global21 journalism writing contest. Last year, she worked as a reporter/sportswriter at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games, where she covered figure skating and short-track speed skating. Currently, she hosts *Bathroom Graffiti*, a not-always-PG publication of the CrossFit Vancouver School of Fitness. She also writes for Wolf Worster Associates and for Human Motion Inc., a Vancouver-based strength and conditioning and sports-science company.

As an athlete and CrossFitter, Beers started out as a gymnast, competing to the national level. After growing too tall for gymnastics, she played NCAA Division 1 basketball for the University of Idaho, then returned home and played for the University of British Columbia. After three years of playing basketball, she started rowing, competing at the varsity level at the University of Western Ontario for two years. While trying to make the National Rowing Team in 2009, she discovered CrossFit and became utterly addicted. Soon, CrossFit was meant to be a way to cross-train for rowing but became her greatest passion. She moved back to Vancouver in September 2009 and found CrossFit Vancouver. In her first season competing in the sport, she won the B.C. Sectional competition in 2010. Regionals were less kind to her, but that's only made her more determined to get to the Games in 2011. On top of being an athlete at CrossFit Vancouver, she's also an apprentice coach and writer for the School of Fitness.

Tony Leyland is a senior lecturer in the Department of Biomedical Physiology and Kinesiology at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, B.C. He has taught at the university level for 27 years and has been heavily involved in competitive sports such as soccer, tennis, squash and rugby as both an athlete and a coach for over 45 years. Tony has authored numerous **CrossFit Journal** articles. He is a professional member of the National Strength and Conditioning Association and the British Columbia Association of Kinesiologists. Tony is a Canadian National B-licensed soccer coach, a Level 1 CrossFit trainer and is currently head coach/technical director of North Fraser Selects, an elite soccer program for young athletes.

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Postural Alignment for the CrossFit Athlete

Daily life can create imbalances in your body. Peter A. Chamis suggests a few places you can start making alignment corrections.

By Peter A. Chamis

December 2010



All images courtesy of Peter A. Chamis

In the design of almost any musculoskeletal fitness program, elements such as strength training, flexibility and cardiovascular activity are universal. CrossFit is no exception.

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But when implementing any exercise program, it's important to assure the body has a correct structural foundation that's balanced and aligned. If this is not the case, strength gains will potentially enhance and further develop these areas that are misaligned and structurally lacking. Therefore, as CrossFit athletes (recreational or elite) strive to improve their overall fitness levels, it's critical to break the cycle of poor posture and consider implementing postural-alignment exercises into their daily routine.

Before this can be achieved, it's important to understand how poor posture develops, what ideal posture is, and what can be done to correct misalignment.

How Poor Posture Develops

Posture can be defined as the structural alignment of the body. It can further be broken down into two categories: static posture (alignment while not moving) and dynamic posture (alignment while moving). Over the course of time, when our bodies engage in standing or moving postures that are not congruent with correct alignment, the kinetic chain can become altered, leading to poor postural-distortion patterns.

The National Academy of Sports Medicine (NASM) has defined postural-distortion patterns as predictable patterns of tissue overload and dysfunction that lead to decreased neuromuscular control, thus initiating the cumulative injury cycle (1). Essentially, this means over time our bodies have adapted to constant structural misalignment, which causes injuries such as muscle strains, spasm and imbalances. These injuries are a result of other muscles compensating for the prime movers, which leads to synergistic dominance. If these movement patterns are not corrected, the injury cycle continues with the entire kinetic chain being altered and functioning at less than optimal.

Let's use the example of a CrossFit athlete whose day job requires him to sit at a desk for eight hours. If this athlete is like most people, it will be very difficult to maintain an anatomically sound seated position for the entire day. Fatigue will most likely set in, and this athlete will assume a slouched position. As a result, the lumbar spine flexes, as opposed to maintaining its normal lordosis, and the head protracts forward, causing increased external flexion torque on the cervical column (2). Over a period of time, if this athlete does not correct this posture, a dysfunctional pattern will develop.



Using a table, box or other waist-high platform, place feet shoulder width apart. Lean forward and place your hands, palms down, on the platform. Adjust your position so that your legs and torso form a 90-degree angle. Let your head fall forward and relax your shoulders. Hold for 2 minutes. You should feel this in the hamstrings, back and shoulders, and it's great for realignment of forward-rolled shoulders.

When this athlete goes to the local CrossFit gym to train, any fitness gains made are done so with a foundation that is structurally misaligned. This creates breakdowns in the kinetic chain through altered length-tension and force-couple relationships, as muscles are compensating to support movements that are inefficient and distorted.

Ideal Posture

Ideal posture is simply defined as posture that allows for the structural integrity and optimal alignment of each component of the kinetic chain (1). This refers to the proper length-tension relationships of the muscles as well as the force-couple relationships of the muscle groups. While this definition seems rather simple, maintaining proper posture is actually very difficult to achieve. Because of the numerous activities people engage in each day, misalignment is inevitable without conscious effort and frequent training.

Nevertheless, the goal is to obtain as close to ideal posture as possible, and understanding what that entails helps this goal become a reality. Table 1 at the right summarizes ideal posture.

Table 1: Ideal Posture

Structure	Ideal Posture
Head	Neutral, neither forward nor backward
Cervical Spine	Normal curve, convex to anterior
Shoulders	Level, not elevated or depressed
Scapulae	Flat against upper back
Thoracic Spine	Normal curve, convex to posterior
Lumbar Spine	Normal curve, convex to anterior
Pelvis	Neutral, no anterior/posterior tilt
Hip Joints	Neutral, neither fixed or extended
Lower Extremities	Straight
Feet	Parallel



You can also use resistance bands for this stretch if a box or platform is not available.



On the floor, place one leg on top of a box or other platform to create a 90-degree angle. With your ground leg, point your toes to the ceiling and stretch the leg so your torso is in line with your hips. Keep bottom close to platform and arms straight out with palms up. Relax. Gravity will stretch and align the groin and hips while the back and shoulders assume an anatomically aligned position. Do this for 5 minutes per side.

How to Achieve Ideal Posture

Just as it takes quite some time for our bodies to develop poor movement patterns and become structurally misaligned, the same is true for correcting these issues. Slow, gradual steps must be made to achieve optimal posture, always keeping in mind that perfect posture is often unattainable as people age, get injured, etc. That being said, Dr. Paul D'Arezzo, an expert in the field of postural alignment, has designed a series of exercises that can be used to correct misalignment. Dr. D'Arezzo has broken down these techniques into three distinct groups: stretching exercises, strengthening exercises and gravity exercises (3).

Stretching and strengthening exercises are fairly common to anyone involved in CrossFit, and the same exercises are used in Dr. D'Arezzo's program. The one caveat is that each stretching and strengthening exercise is to be completed with excellent static and dynamic posture so the body can

adapt to correct patterns as opposed to incorrect ones. To perform this successfully, the athlete must be conscious of his/her posture and strive to maintain the ideal posture outlined earlier during each movement. The goal is to retrain the body to perform movements anatomically correctly so that postural-distortion patterns can be eliminated and gains in strength and flexibility can occur on a proper foundation.

The last technique Dr. D'Arezzo recommends for postural alignment training is the use of gravity exercises. These are typically less common knowledge for the average CrossFit enthusiast. However, they are simple to learn and use gravity to restore correct alignment. Pages 2 and 4 show illustrations and explanations of two very simple gravity stretches that use the body weight of an individual to achieve alignment.

Conscious Living

In addition to stretching, strengthening and gravity exercises, simply being conscious of your posture throughout the day can lead to improvements. For example, if seated in a chair, strive to maintain a posture where the lumbar spine is in normal lordosis with the chin in. This assures your body weight is distributed equally from the head through the spine. If standing, maintain symmetry with the right and left side of your body while aligning the shoulders, hips, knees, ankles and feet on top of one another.

By being aware of your posture throughout the day and performing basic corrective exercises in addition to the standard workouts of the day, correct structural alignment can be accomplished and a foundation for future training achieved.

This is only a brief introduction to correcting alignment. For more information, please see the list below.



Additional Resources

The Egoscue Method of Health Through Motion
by Pete Egoscue

[MobilityWOD](#) by Kelly Starrett

[Three Popular Corrective Exercises](#) by Justin Price

[Perfect Posture](#) by Vern Gambetta

[Eric Beard's Corrective Exercise and Success Blog](#)
by Eric Beard

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About the Author

Peter Chamis is co-owner of [Coal Creek CrossFit](#) in Lafayette, Colo., and a former professional soccer player in the United Soccer Leagues (USL). He holds a master of science degree in exercise science, as well as CrossFit Level 1 and CrossFit Olympic Lifting certifications. He is currently on active duty in the U.S. Navy and is stationed in Coronado, Calif.

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Where I've Trained, What I've Learned

An early adopter of CrossFit, Russell Greene shares lessons from his first decade of training.

By Russell Greene

December 2010



Eric V. CrossFit Mississauga

As CrossFit has expanded, finding a fully equipped CrossFit gym has become much easier. During our recent honeymoon in Maine, my wife and I found ourselves running into CrossFit gyms by accident. It was a major contrast from when I started CrossFit in 2002.

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Back then there was only one CrossFit gym, and it was 3,000 miles away. I would estimate that I was one of the first people to try the Crossfit.com WODs in a Globo Gym. From this position, I am in awe of the growth CrossFit has seen. I can't help but find myself a little bit jealous of people who can start their first day of training with a full stock of equipment and a CrossFit trainer. These people have staggering potential to improve their fitness when they start in such an environment.

Every time I worked out, a concerned person would come up to me and warn that I would blow out my knees, pop out a disc or stunt my growth if I kept training that way.

One of my long-term training partners, Jacob Tsytkin, co-owner of CrossFit Monterey, once observed that the mark of a novice athlete is the belief that physical training is primarily a physical endeavor. While I can't objectively show it to be true, most people I know who train seriously agree that the mental component is the larger part of training. I have also observed that the place a person trains is a main factor in determining how training affects them mentally. There is something different to learn and gain from each different training experience and environment.

As I look back on my training history, I hope that one day no one will have to go through the hassles I have endured in working to improve fitness. As with all difficulties, however, we are strengthened by the challenges that we face in getting our training done in non-supportive environments. In this spirit, I'll examine several places I have trained and share something I learned in each place. It's the story of where I have worked out and how those places have made me who I am today.



Courtesy of Russell Greene

Russell Greene has been CrossFitting since way back in "ought-two."

Summit YMCA: Don't Be Afraid to Look Stupid

The YMCA in Summit, N.J., was my first gym. I started training there just a little before their rules allowed me in: two days before my 13th birthday, on Dec. 19, 1999. The personal trainer, Mark, showed me how to use the Y's machine circuit. The loads he prescribed for me were so light that I remember remarking how easy "strength training" was. I soon grew bored of using 20 lb. on the chest-press machine and started to challenge myself with the loads. Improvement became an obsession, and I began to research different training methods. It was not long until I found CrossFit and started doing some of the WODs.

It's funny how upset people get when you don't do what they expect. While I had drawn the admiration of my fellow gym-goers with my dedication to a bench-press, lat-pulldown and curls routine, as soon as I started to perform full squats, heavy deadlifts and Olympic lifts, that respect was gone.

Every time I worked out, a concerned person would come up to me and warn that I would blow out my knees, pop out a disc or stunt my growth if I kept training that way. As stubborn and confident as your average teenager, I disregarded their advice completely. That does not mean I couldn't have used instruction.



Kimberly Malz

Each different training environment will teach you something. This one might teach you to do your own thing by avoiding the “fitness” classes held in front of the resort’s swim-up bar.

Some of the more technical movements gave me trouble. I remember one day coming into the gym and thinking I was going to overhead squat. I was training with a few of my friends at the time, and I told them I was going to show them this cool new exercise. I took a 45-lb. bar out of the rack, pressed it overhead, and tried to perform my first squat. I immediately fell backwards, with the bar flying in front of me. This was not a graceful dump, and I did not find it as funny as my friends did.

In CrossFit, you can’t be afraid to look stupid. We are always learning new skills, and people can look funny when learning a new skill. You also have the issue of training in an environment that’s not friendly to CrossFit. By now, CrossFit has made an impact on popular culture. In 2002 and 2003, however, this style of training was unheard of.

People using elliptical machines and E-Z curl bars don’t know what to think about someone squatting while holding a bar overhead. They think you’re crazy and/or stupid. Obviously, they’re misinformed. These exercises really do work, and the training is effective, but at the time it didn’t always look like that.

When you fall on yourself in a crowded room while lifting 45 lb., it hurts your ego a lot more than it hurts your body. When everyone is staring at you for doing something different, you have a choice: you can either go back to doing the normal thing that doesn’t work as well or you can learn the new, more difficult thing. It’s a choice we face all the time, not just with training. How we handle these decisions determines our character.



Yes, you can do pull-ups anywhere.

Lake Morey: Commitment Blocks Out Pain

The memory gnawed at my conscience. I couldn't think of the Purple Albatross without thinking that I'd quit halfway through the year before. The cold had gotten to me that time, but that wasn't why I had quit. The cold had been bad, but it was manageable enough for a motivated swimmer. I had quit because I didn't care enough to keep going. I had merely entered it on a whim and had no real commitment to finishing. The Purple Albatross is an event as dreadful as its name: a 5-mile swim around the cold waters of Lake Morey, Vt., in the morning when the water is coldest. It's a multi-hour event that tests persistence more than it tests fitness. If you pace yourself, you get very cold. If you swim too fast, you fatigue quickly and threaten your chance of finishing. The only way to succeed is to swim at a high but manageable rate for several hours.

This time, I was determined to swim the full 5 miles. I had thought about the swim many times over the past year, and my quitting had two friends swimming with me. More importantly, I was determined. I took off at a steady pace and only stopped for a quick breather and some Fig Newtons halfway through. The thought of quitting at the halfway point, or at any other point, never even entered my mind.

**In CrossFit,
effort yields results
every time.**

As I turned the final corner of the lake and started swimming for the docks, I realized that, far from being an impossible task, the Purple Albatross was well within my potential. I could have swum much further and faster.

The strange truth was that my second attempt at the Purple Albatross was easier than the first, even though it was at a faster pace and the swim was twice as long. We're accustomed to think that doing better requires more suffering. It often does. But what I noticed this time was that having a clearly defined objective in my mind made the cold less bothersome and the distance a little less daunting. It was as if knowing why I was doing it made the physical challenge feel less painful.

While quitting may be a sign of weakness, it does not last forever. When we imagine that our failures are permanent, we downplay the transformational potential of physical training. Furthermore, we ignore the fact that it is our determination more than our immunity to pain that drives us forward. Training will always hurt. If we are committed to success, however, our motivation will make the pain seem smaller than the magnitude of persevering through adversity.

Training in a Playground: You Can Always Get Better

I was fortunate enough to train in well-equipped facilities such as CrossFit Monterey and Balance Gym for most of the period between 2006 and 2009. In addition, I trained with several different motivated partners who pushed me to new levels of strength and conditioning. For my

programming, I alternated between following the .com WOD's and making up my own programming. I made great progress in my fitness. With graduation from college, and then becoming engaged, my life became a lot more complicated. I suddenly had a whole bunch of things to deal with that were way more important than getting perfect workouts in.

Without a car or a CrossFit gym within walking distance, it became much more difficult to get typical CrossFit-style training in. Inspired by Blair Morrison's blog, [Anywherefit](#), I started surveying the neighborhood for nearby places to train. First of all, I lived on a very steep hill, so running up the hill was a given. I also found a playground that had a place to do box jumps of various heights, dips, pull-ups and bar muscle-ups, and it had a pole I could climb like a rope. My only equipment during this period was a pair of gymnastics rings that hung from a tree. While my training would adapt to the environment, it was not going to cease, and that was great news.

Clearly, without most basic training equipment, I was going to lose part of my fitness during this period. Barbells and dumbbells were a rare luxury when I found the means to get to a gym, and I did not have any odd objects to lift that were anywhere near a reasonable training load. For a while, I was obsessed about what was going to happen to things like my max clean and my Elizabeth time.

I realized something important at this time. I don't train for a heavier clean or faster Elizabeth. Don't get me wrong: it's cool to lift a lot of weight and to tear through circuits in blazingly fast times. That's just not my underlying motivation.

I train because I can always get better at what I work on. As a generalist, there isn't a single area of fitness in which I couldn't make significant progress—from flexibility to stamina to strength. And I know that as long as I put the time in, I will improve in these areas.



Jae

Yes, the hotel's gym is ready for one-arm snatches.

Wang



FYI: "CrossFit" is one word, not two.

Outside of training, the connection between effort and impact is often murky. The world is a complex place, and there are many intervening variables. I have worked really hard on things and obtained no results. On the other hand, I've sometimes been rewarded for doing less than I was capable of. It does not work that way with training. Within myself, I can control enough that there is always at least one aspect of fitness I can get better at. Even if I'm injured or working with minimal equipment, there's always something that I can still do, something that I can improve at. The habit of hard work is important enough that we should take care to reinforce it even when its worldly benefits are unclear. CrossFit training is an excellent means to reinforce this lesson. In CrossFit, effort yields results every time.

Lessons Learned

After years of CrossFit training, some spent in boxes and some not, I think it's a mistake to think of end points in training. This is not to say that goals are bad. Goals are useful, sure, but they usually turn out to be anticlimactic. By the time you've achieved a goal, it never seems as impressive or important as it did when you first created the goal. By the time you can do Fran in four minutes, you're already thinking about going under three minutes. Goals are more like landmarks you see along the way than actual destinations.

Rather than thinking of it as a way to get somewhere, I think of training as a way to live. Training is not a full belief system, or in itself a full life, and it's a mistake to treat it as such. I've certainly made that mistake before. Man needs more than just workouts, sleep and food. Nonetheless, I think we should look at physical training as a valuable component to life. It teaches us lessons that carry over to other aspects of our lives.

Consider the three ideas that I highlighted above: not being afraid to look stupid, using commitment to block out pain, and the fact that there is always something you can get better at. I'd bet you can think of several examples in your life that these points apply to. I'd also bet you can think of several different lessons you've learned from physical training in general and CrossFit specifically—wherever you were working out. Because of its ability to affect us in so many ways, we should value CrossFit as a way to make us better human beings just as much as, if not more than, we value it as a way to make us fitter athletes.



Courtesy of Russell Greene

About the Author:

Russ Greene has trained CrossFit for the past eight years and plans to continue CrossFitting for the next 80 years. He trains out of Monterey, Calif., and writes for Insurgentconsciousness.typepad.com.

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Got Striking?

George Ryan explains how you can improve your fitness by adding striking to your programming.

By George Ryan

December 2010



Courtesy of George Ryan

Since 1995, CrossFit has done an amazing job of creating better athletes and improving overall fitness with its “evidenced-based” program. During this time, many fitness programs have come and gone as mere fads, while CrossFit has continued to grow and expand.

I think the reason for this is threefold:

1. CrossFit truly improves people's fitness levels.
2. CrossFit offers a tremendous diversity of workouts.
3. CrossFit exists as a communal program. As such, people become passionate about CrossFit, and they share their goals and accomplishments along with their ideas and experiences. The result is a cutting-edge fitness program that really works for real people.

Like so many others, I too have been inspired by CrossFit. I have practiced martial arts for over 25 years, I have been a police officer for over 19 years, and I have taught self-defense tactics to both law-enforcement officers and members of the military around the country for over 12 years. As such, I have done a tremendous amount of training in the area of striking; i.e., punching and kicking. Though this striking training is done as self-protection training, it always provides me and my students with a tremendous workout as well. So when I started doing CrossFit, it occurred to me that striking perfectly matches the CrossFit "prescription." It truly is a "constantly varied, high-intensity functional movement."

When training in striking, an athlete utilizes boxing and mixed-martial-arts techniques to engage focus mitts, heavy bags or Muay Thai pads. It is even possible to perform a striking workout without equipment by using shadow-fighting techniques. The workouts can be short or long, but they are very intense. Such striking workouts make people into much better athletes: in order to throw a proper punch—one with true speed and power—you must utilize your entire body. When you add multiple strikes and combinations, you add even greater intensity and output.

As a result, striking workouts can provide you with four major benefits: you can achieve a fighter's fitness level; you can increase your core strength, rotational speed and power; you can develop a sport-specific movement; and you can learn real self-protection skills. These benefits make striking a valuable addition to your CrossFit program.

Achieving a Fighter's Fitness Level

It's no secret first-rate boxers and MMA fighters possess an elite fitness level and are considered some of the world's greatest athletes. A major reason for this is because of the time and effort they spend on their striking training. When fighters are striking with full intensity and proper form, they're operating at a faster and more dynamic frequency



Courtesy of Joanne Hagaki/Ultimate MMA Magazine

**Bas Rutten tangles with Ruben Villareal in WFA:
King of the Streets in 2006.**

than is inherent in many other forms of exercise. Anyone who's done striking exercises such as Olympic punch-out drills, high-intensity heavy-bag workouts or focus-mitt drills with a partner can attest to the conditioning effects this type of training offers an athlete.

Training in this manner requires athletes to perform at a whole new physical and mental fitness level. For example, kicking, kneeing, elbowing and punching a heavy bag with high frequency and intensity for six three-minute rounds will certainly test an athlete's physical and mental fitness level. How? It requires willpower and aggression to complete all these rounds with the same intensity and conviction with which you started them. You see, most athletes can strike a bag using striking combinations with full power for a short period of time, such as one minute. However, it takes physical and mental endurance to strike with the same consistency, intensity and output for all six three-minute rounds. Striking training is, by its nature, designed to be constant, intense and variable, and it helps build a fighter's fitness level.



Rotational speed and power come from the core, whether you're swinging your fist or a sledgehammer.



A strong core will make you a more complete athlete.

Increasing Core Strength, Rotational Speed and Power

In order for a person to properly perform a strike with maximum power, he or she must utilize the entire the body from the ground up. In fact, punching is one of the most rudimentary and functional movements involving the core. Proper punching, for example, shares similar biomechanics with throwing a baseball or a shot put: it requires athletes to use dynamic rotational speed and power. Such movement and power comes from the core, so striking training activates and conditions the core muscle groups.

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A stronger, more developed core is a tremendous benefit in and of itself, but it also enhances a person's overall athletic ability. This is because most sports require athletes to be able to twist and rotate; i.e., throw a ball, swing an implement, twist out of a tackle, etc. Thus, adding striking workouts that consist of punching, elbowing, kicking and kneeling to your programming will make you a more functional and better-prepared athlete with improved overall rotational speed and power.

Developing Sport-Specific Movement

In addition to benefiting the core, striking training also develops lateral movement, a skill that's essential to athletics but is often not a part of people's training programs. Think about it: your workout routines generally consist of the basic elements of pushing, pulling, jumping and running. These are all performed in a linear fashion, so, as a consequence, most individual exercises and conditioning routines only involve linear movements.

However, lateral movement is an essential attribute in the sports world. Whether you're playing sports such as football, basketball, baseball or volleyball or if you are fighting, good lateral movement is essential if you want to compete. In fact, when fighters are training in their striking workouts with focus mitts and heavy bags, they must utilize explosive lateral movement after throwing a striking combination. They quickly step off-line in order to avoid a counterstrike or incoming combination. Fighters do this in order to build a conditioned response that allows them to be safer and more effective at their sport. However, training in the footwork related to fighting and striking will allow any athlete to possess a fighter's explosive lateral movement.

Learning Self-Protection Skills

Beyond offering a methodology for developing and improving overall fitness levels, core strength, rotational

power and speed, and lateral movement, striking training also offers people the ability to improve their real-life self-protection skills. Above all, striking training makes people mentally and physically accustomed to punching and kicking. Also, striking training that insists on athletes using proper form and technique means those punches and kicks will be more effective in a real-life self-defense scenario. In short, the ability to strike hard and fast in order to protect yourself can be the difference between being hospitalized and going home to your family.

So, in the spirit of training to be ready for the "unknown and unknowable," striking workouts are a beneficial addition to any athlete's CrossFit programming. As CrossFitter Brian McIntyre so succinctly put it to me in an e-mail, "We can all sit around and sing *Kumbaya*, but like it or not the world is a dangerous place. Besides running, is there anything more elementarily functional than being able to deliver a powerful and well-placed strike?"



Courtesy of Jessica Houston and West Covina PD Officers

Ken Davis takes a blow from Tony Cortina in this demonstration of striking technique.



Courtesy of Jeff Martone

Kettlebell expert Jeff Martone hits the heavy bag at high intensity.

Getting Started

It seems that lots of people are kicking and punching as part of their workouts these days. There are classes, DVDs and commercials everywhere. But striking should be all about proper form and movement. It should not be just extending your arm out in a punching motion or extending your leg out in a kicking motion in order to

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increase your cardio. I therefore urge athletes interested in adding striking to their workouts to start by learning the fundamentals of proper punching, kicking and combination techniques from a striking expert. This person can be a fighter at your gym, a self-protection instructor, a striking coach, etc.

There are two essential reasons I recommend you learn striking skills from an expert: safety and maximum effectiveness. First and foremost is injury prevention. For example, a good instructor is going to show you exactly how to make a fist so that you will not break any bones while punching, and he or she can show you how to position your foot so that you will not damage it while kicking. The instructor will also teach you how to use your whole body to strike so the movements generate real power and effectiveness. This leads to proper technique, but it also leads to true and intensive physical training.

I also want to share a few other notes on working with a striking instructor. It is your job to let that person know what your fitness and goals are and what you expect to get out of the instruction. It is his or her job to guide you in the areas of proper technique and safety. One indicator of a good instructor is that the person will insist you start slowly. Proper striking is all about technique.

In addition, a good striking instructor is going to talk to you about always wearing proper hand and wrist protection when striking a focus mitt or a heavy bag. Some trainers will insist that you wear boxing-type hand wraps under your gloves. When a person is spending a lot of time sparring and hitting the heavy bag for a high number of rounds, this is very prudent.

However, the idea behind integrating striking skills into your overall CrossFit programming is to add the techniques to your existing workouts. For example, you can perform your striking combinations on a heavy bag, then swing a kettlebell or do some push-ups. Therefore, it is imperative that you communicate to your instructor that your goal is to be able to transition readily from striking to other forms of exercise when you are discussing hand protection.

I personally favor wearing high-quality MMA striking/bag gloves because they're more versatile for such workouts. They have an open palm so you can keep the gloves on as you go from one exercise to another. This also means, though, that you must regulate the number of rounds you perform as part of your striking training. But, this insistence on quality over quantity in your striking training will be a benefit and not a hindrance.

Strike It Up

Striking workouts have helped generations of fighters increase their fitness levels and develop a host of skills that will benefit them in the ring, in the gym and in the real world. CrossFitters can take advantage of these many outstanding physical and mental benefits by integrating proper striking exercises into their workouts.



CrossFit Striking

Starting in 2011, CrossFit will be offering striking seminars led by George Ryan.

The first certification will be held Jan. 8-9, 2011, at [CrossFit La Verne](#) in California. CrossFitters can expect to learn proper striking technique as well as how to integrate striking into their workouts.

For a complete description of this course, please visit www.crossfit.com/cf-info/specialty_certs.html.



Courtesy of George Ryan

About the Author

*George Ryan is a member of LAPD SWAT and an inductee into the Martial Arts Masters Hall of Fame. He is also a CrossFit Level 1 and CrossFit Level 1 Kettlebell instructor. In addition, George has taught his defensive-tactics system to law-enforcement and military personnel around the country. Finally, George writes articles about defensive tactics for police officers, and he writes a monthly column called "Street Wise" for **Ultimate MMA Magazine**.*