

The Dead Elk and the CrossFit Question

Paul (Apolloswabbie) Eich finds himself on top of a mountain wondering if his CrossFit training will pay off.

Paul Eich



Courtesy of Paul Eich

In retrospect, you might say it was all part of life's rich pageant. At the time, I was preoccupied by an immediate concern: how the hell would I move a 500-lb. elk carcass through the deep snow, down a mountain and into a vehicle before the sunset brought mountaintop cold, coyotes and perhaps mountain lions?

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The Hunt Is On

It was January 2009. I was pursuing a boyhood dream of hunting elk and found myself testing CrossFit's claims to produce a general physical preparedness that lends itself well to unknown and unknowable challenges. It was Day 4 of a five-day elk-hunting trip. I was on snowshoes in almost two feet of fresh snow, 6,500 feet up a mountain in Utah.

My companion was family friend Ed Little. We had yet to harvest an elk, but I'd picked up useful skills, including the ability to spot and distinguish game through binoculars at ranges of over 800 yards. I was still an elk-hunting novice, but I was no longer dead weight.

And my CrossFit workouts had already paid off. Early on, I'd figured out that a Pose-style forefoot-weighted step was best for a good snowshoe stride. Forefoot weighting ensured I didn't sink back in the shoe, which was both awkward and dangerous to my bad knee. I had followed Brian MacKenzie's advice to "focus on the hamstring pull" and kept my feet under me with short, quick steps.

By Day 4, both Ed and I were feeling the effects of our snowshoe exertions, having covered a GPS-verified 10 miles. When we spotted elk a good two miles from the truck, Ed tried to shake out his sore hips and knees. Sixty-plus years of wear and tear were telling him "no go." Ed bowed out of the hunt. I was on my own.

As I made my way up the mountainside, I noted that CrossFit has fundamentally changed how I move. My previous climbing method included a forward lean of the torso, loading up the quads and extending what felt like my knee. That was much less efficient than a CrossFit-inspired vertical torso that enabled maximal glute and hamstring engagement to drive powerful hip extension. It sounds like a subtle change, but the effect was dramatic after a long climb. My training in functional movements was helping me use my body better.

I sneaked across the peak of the southern end of a ridge, moving toward the elk cows I had spotted earlier. It was then that I saw the head of a lone cow not 30 yards in front of me, crossing left to right. I chose not to take the moving shot and ran forward to try to get on the same side of the hill as the animal. I did, and she stopped running. I fired, but with overmuch haste. The cow ran off and out of sight.



Courtesy of Paul Eich

"Sixty-year-old mountain goat" Ed Little accompanied the author on his elk hunt/CrossFit workout.



Courtesy of Paul Eich

After spotting a herd making its way up a ridge, Eich had thoughts of adding elk meat to his diet.

I followed and saw the cow running up the next ridge, many hundreds of yards away. She ran directly up its face, blazing a trail through what I soon discovered was the steepest terrain I would hike. I searched for her tracks and followed them for over a half mile. It was slow going in deep, soft snow. I knew I wasn't going to catch up with the animal. I'd burned up a couple hours tracking, and I needed to take stock and find more elk.

That's when I saw the next herd working its way up the next ridge. The week's biggest lesson became clear: persistence is the key, especially for a novice.

Inventing a New WOD

This herd of elk, a dozen or so cows with a few bulls, was higher than I was. To get a shot, I had to close distance by moving up and over the crest of the ridge I was on. I arranged my gear to enable a long belly crawl. I covered 120 yards this way, stopping every so often to check my position relative to the elk. When the rangefinder told me they were only 325 yards away, I settled into the snow for the shot. My rifle was as steady as if shooting from a bench. When shooting at live game in the field, one can't help but be reminded of the Buddhist idea of "one perfect moment." The demands of the moment and the uncertainty in the outcome can produce a sublime experience. When done right, the "Boom!" comes as a bit of a surprise. My cow collapsed at the shot.

When I found the cow, I couldn't get over how beautiful the animal was, though it makes perfect evolutionary sense that a human would perceive the source of such dense, potent nutrition as "beautiful." I wished I had more time to soak it in, but I had a long drag ahead of me after field-dressing an animal that weighed approximately 500 pounds. And I only had three hours until sunset.

All of a sudden, the day began to feel like a CrossFit WOD: Dead Cow Drag.

I shucked a knife and taught myself how to field-dress an elk. Turns out it's not all that different than field-dressing a deer, except you get elbow-deep as opposed to wrist-deep. It was a new experience to field-dress an animal while managing the risk of having the animal slip down the mountain and taking me with it.

The cow had come to rest on an incline, which was good, but it was covered with thin slush and littered with rocks exposed by the sun. That was bad, as the rocks and oak scrub made for poor footing and high friction. The slush

Courtesy of Paul Eich



Eich found the Pose technique works during a WOD or a snowshoe hike at 6,500 feet.

provided a little help in sliding but increased the tricky footing. The hill wasn't going the way I needed to move the animal. That meant a drag across the ridge face—I would have some help from gravity, but not much.

The pulls were intense. They felt like a succession of 300-plus-lb. deadlifts, with the complication of rocks to trip over and slush to slip in. I could only pull hard enough to move the animal if I left my gear. All of a sudden, the day began to feel like a CrossFit WOD:

Dead Cow Drag

Before the sun sets:

Pull a bunch of off-balance 300-lb. deadlifts

Backtrack 20 meters up a mountain to grab 40 pounds of gear

Run/slide back down to animal and repeat until one mile is covered.

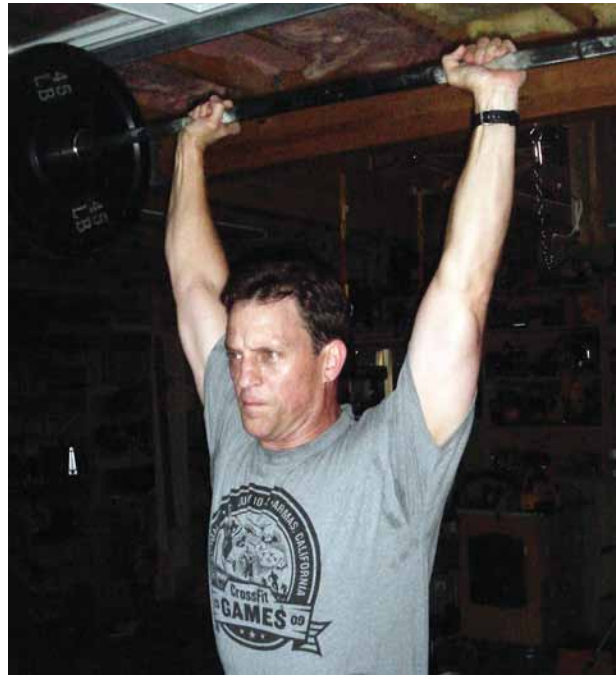
It was beautiful in a very CrossFit way.

Embracing the suck on punishing WODs such as Mr. Joshua had in fact prepared me for a challenge I had never imagined.

I pulled for an hour, covering a quarter mile before the cavalry arrived. Reinforcements consisted of Ed; a local hunter called M.D., who had given us hunting tips; and M.D.'s son. Apparently they had been keeping tabs on my progress with binoculars. M.D.'s first question was, "How many times did you fall?" Ed, M.D.'s son and I pulled the elk for another hour to reach the snowmobiles nearly a mile away.

In getting the cow around or over obstacles, "work capacity under the curve" was on display from start to finish.

My hosts tossed a beer my way, and I was humbled that they thought I had earned it. Earning the respect of the locals should never be taken for granted.



Courtesy of Paul Eich

Paul (Apolloswabbie) Eich believes CrossFit prepared him to drag a 500-lb. elk across the wilds of Utah.



Courtesy of Paul Eich

The author after setting a new PR on the unofficial CrossFit WOD Dead Cow Drag.

The sun was almost gone and the temperature had plummeted. As if to say to goodbye, a group of six or so cows creased the ridge above us as we sat around chewing the day's events over. A quick check showed they were a scant 325 yards away. They checked us out as if we were quite interesting, and we laughed. Sitting on our butts swapping stories and laughing was a much easier way to hunt.

We crowded onto snowmobiles, and after withstanding the 30-mile-an-hour blasts of air and managing not to fall off during the ride back, I watched as M.D. and his team effortlessly hung the elk in their barn.

At that point, the impact of the four-mile hike in snowshoes at altitude, the dead cow drag, and a sunrise-to-sunset dose of snow-reflected sun hit me with the force of Three Bars of Death. I couldn't stop shivering, even after 20 minutes of the truck ride home. I could just muster the focus to speak. The shower helped, but the real recovery didn't start for over an hour after I was out of the elements. Bone tired? Hell, yes—but thrilled and ready for some celebratory Lagavulin single malt, followed by my first taste of bacon-fried elk heart.

Mastering the Unknown and Unknowable

My work capacity across broad time and modal domains was tested—and then some. The 14-plus miles on snowshoes tested the oxidative energy pathway, the sub-maximal efforts such as the hillside ascents and much of the cow dragging tested the glycolytic pathway, and the short, maximal efforts challenged the phosphagen pathway. In getting the cow around or over obstacles, “work capacity under the curve” was on display from start to finish.

Throughout, I never wondered whether I could go where needed. I never doubted I could get the animal off the mountain. At the time of the kill shot, my fatigue level was not a hindrance. I have little in the way of observable, measurable and repeatable criteria to evaluate my performance under the curve, but I'll substitute the following subjective report: I met the unknown and unknowable challenges that arose.

That night, I went to bed expecting to feel sore the next morning. I woke up feeling fine. After completing the final tasks—skinning the carcass and delivering it to the butcher—I visited CrossFit Park City and jumped into a workout. Thanks, as always, to Chris and Sarah Spealler for their hospitality.

Of greater significance than the Dead Cow Drag WOD was filling my freezer with nearly 150 pounds of the best meat one can get. Paleo Diet geeks, eat your hearts out. I look forward to the next two years or so, when I can take my oldest son elk hunting in the wild to get in touch with our paleolithic roots.

When you reach a milestone in your life, you make certain realizations that persist even after time passes. One of those lessons is that the pursuit and sometimes accomplishment of large goals can take us to a better, more vivid life. I have meat in the freezer, memories to relish, experience to give my next hunt a higher probability of success, and friendships made and strengthened. That's pretty close to “as good as it gets.”



About the Author

Paul (Apolloswabbie) Eich is a CrossFit Level 2 certified instructor. He is in his 19th year of service as a naval officer and has logged over 3,000 hours in U.S. Navy aircraft. Paul trains in his garage gym and at CrossFit Memphis, and he blogs at apolloswabbie.blogspot.com.



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