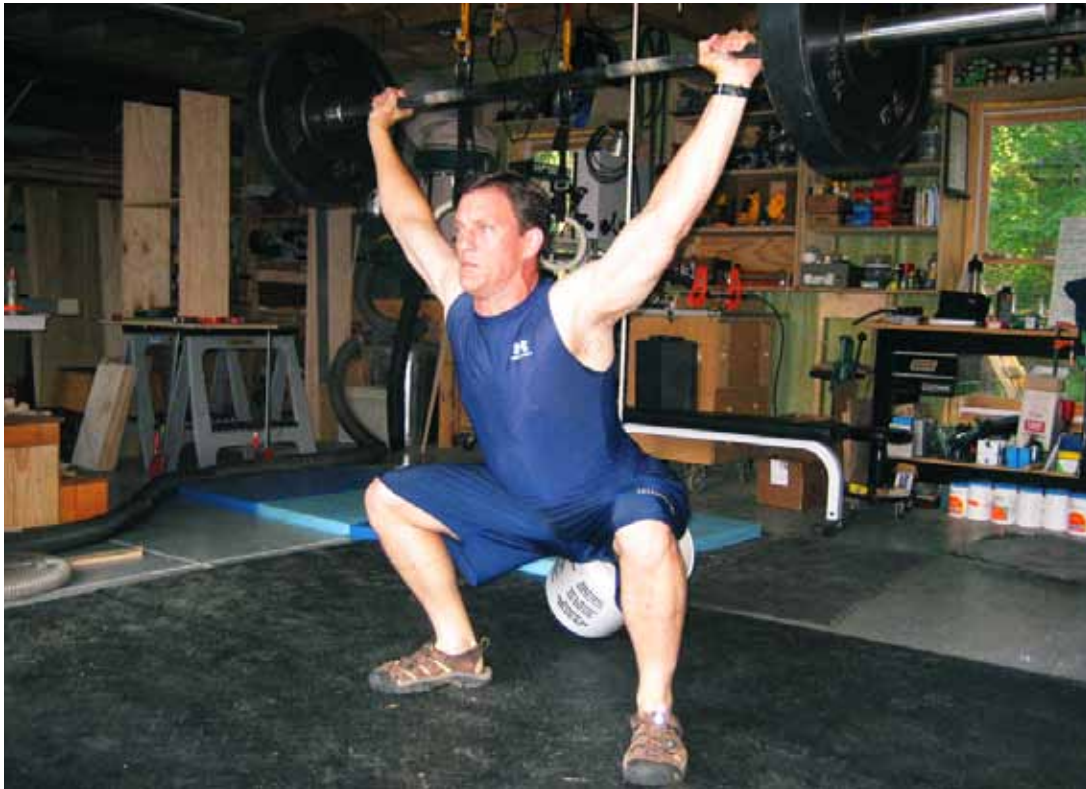


Forty Years in the Fitness Desert

Paul Eich, a.k.a. Apolloswabbie, toiled many years in a wilderness of plyometrics shoes and Bowflex. In 2007 he finally found his way to the Land of Murph and Cindy. This is his story.

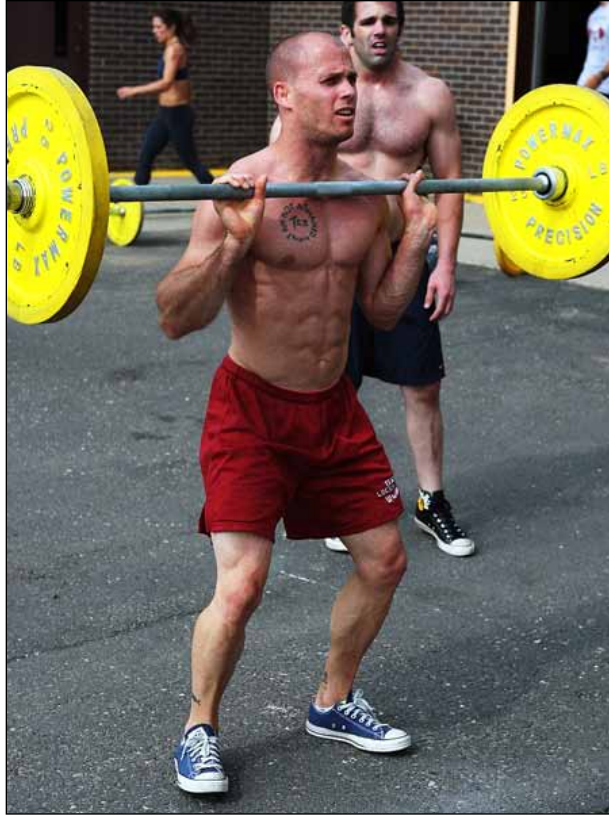
Paul Eich



Courtesy of Paul Eich

I hit a couple of home runs in the fourth grade. From then on, my athletic career was mostly downhill. In 2007, I discovered CrossFit and everything changed. It's been quite a journey, with many lessons learned along the way.

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Chris Spealler helped Eich live his dream of performing Olympic lifts.

I think of myself as a blue-collar athlete, which is to say I work to be fit and have consistently done so since I was 18. But I don't have a lot to show for it. Sure, I ran a sub-six-minute mile in college and squatted 375 once upon a time. I earned a black belt in a traditional karate school. But my fitness score was exactly in the 50th percentile during Aviation Officer's Candidate School, and I've never run further than 10 miles. These kinds of numbers don't even impress me. I'd put my hat in the ring for two years of Division 3 football but didn't record much playing time. There were always small triumphs along the way, such as learning to kick-turn at age 28 or playing on an undefeated intramural flag football team. In very small ponds, I sometimes enjoyed moments of dominance. But the more competitive the arena, the more obvious my limitations became.

I've wasted a bunch of time feeling frustrated with those athletic limitations but recognized long ago how much better my life was when I worked at some aspect of fitness. I always expected my athletic breakthrough was

right around the corner. I tried it all: everything from calisthenics and hill sprints to working plyometrics with funky platform shoes to a sordid affair with a Bowflex. I sweated through many hours of weight-room work but didn't know the difference between bodybuilding and powerlifting. I dreamed, but only dreamed, of being able to do the Olympic lifts.

My life never felt boring, but it got more exciting in February 2006. I got a call out of the blue to saddle up and ride to Iraq. I was a happily married 42-year-old father of three. I was struggling to make time to train and wasn't expecting to be on the ground in combat. Five days after getting the call, I was running in formation at a U.S. Army base.

I'd always trained hard when deployed. Over the years, my workouts and goals had varied. For the days leading up to my Iraq deployment, and after settling into Camp Victory on the outskirts of Baghdad, I did short-to-medium runs combined with some bodybuilding and powerlifting. Days with 200-meter sprints added needed intensity. I had "invented" a workout consisting of reps to failure of power cleans, followed by reps to failure of back squats, followed by air squats. But workouts that used to generate rapid improvement were no longer working. I had been lucky enough to have outlived the potency of my previous training methods and needed a better program to sustain my blue-collar athleticism.

The breakthrough came in Baghdad in December 2006. A fine young soldier, Sergeant Alan Fetter, suggested I look at crossfit.com. I scanned the site for about three weeks and started reading about the concepts behind the crazy workouts. My first actual workout came on Jan. 9, 2007. The prescribed WOD was a 5x5 shoulder press. Soon after I attempted and survived notable CrossFit WODs such as Helen and the Filthy 50, and I knew I was onto something good.

Almost 40 years after starting, I was stumbling out of the fitness wilderness.

Fulfilling a Dream—35 Years Later

The old saying goes, "When the student is willing, the teacher will be there," and I did my best as a CrossFit student. I read every article, watched every training video and tapped the comment boards for advice. Before our garage gym was completed, I didn't always have all the equipment I needed for the workouts. I managed pretty well to meet the intent of the WODs in Camp Victory, and after my return home I found that a \$125 barbell/

weight package and a backyard pull-up bar worked wonders. Participation in my command's fitness workouts prevented obsessive three-on, one-off pursuit of the main-site WODs. Eventually, I took a leadership role so I could help my fellow sailors while sustaining my own CrossFit goals. They called me "The Punisher" but came back for more.

Using CrossFit, I exceeded previous PRs in every lift but the squat and bench press in about six months' time. I was by nearly every measure more fit than when I played collegiate sports. My progress accelerated after I attended a Level 1 Certification. But why spend over \$1,000 US to attend a certification when I had no intention of ever becoming a trainer? I was dead set on learning all I could. At the cert I was stunned at how bad my form was for even "simple stuff" like air squats and deadlifts. So I started squatting a lot: furtively at work, around the house, whenever I could. It helped. But when I attended a Level 2 Cert in May 2008, I discovered my squat needed still more work. I'm plugging away, with my compass set for virtuosity and mastery of the basics.

Everything I needed to know was available for free on the main site, as Coach Glassman told us at the Level 1 Cert. But correct implementation eluded me. I had run into the same stumbling block many CrossFitters encounter: the inability to self-coach. Few of us are skilled enough or learned enough to maximize our own improvement. Those who shy away from paying for coaching may be giving up performance. Many of us end up wanting to kick ourselves in the ass after discovering how much faster we improve with good coaching.

CrossFit reignited a long-held dream of mine: learning the Olympic lifts I had first seen as an eight-year-old watching the 1972 Olympics on TV. But until August 2007, I had never done more than a few medicine-ball cleans and

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Paul Eich and Josh

Feb. 26, 2007, was a nasty time in Iraq.

I had left home exactly 12 months prior and was within two months of redeployment. I was excited to get home and get to know my then-15-month-old son. My mom's cancer was in remission, and I had lot of catching up to do with my wife and our older kids.

As I looked for that day's WOD, I found it was [Josh](#): 21 95-pound overhead squats and 42 pull-ups, 15 overhead squats and 30 pull-ups, and 9 overhead squats and 18 pull-ups. Staff Sergeant Josh Hager died less than 60 miles away from me at a time when many soldiers, sailors, and Marines were making the ultimate sacrifice in Ramadi specifically and Al Anbar generally. I took a deep sense of grief and purpose with me the entire day.

It seemed strange. I was confronted with the death of fellow Americans daily, some I had trained with. I didn't know Josh. Why I was able to, and why I chose to, hold onto the grief I experienced isn't clear to me. My grief built through the day as CrossFitters posted both their thoughts and their times. It was moving when Josh's teammates and commanding officer weighed in. It became nearly overwhelming when Josh's wife, Heather, and his father, Kris, reached out to us. I was eager to get to the gym and grateful to have a workout to give my grief to.

It was as significant a day for me as any I spent in Iraq, as I made the simple and obvious connection between the grief we feel for the fallen and how I could use that grief in a meaningful way—to "earn it." The point was made in the film *Saving Private Ryan*: it is on all of us to "earn it."

continued...

... Paul Eich and Josh

hang cleans. Then I had the good fortune to cross paths with Chris Spealler, the elite CrossFit athlete who owns CrossFit Park City.

When Chris put me on an Oly platform, I had no idea what I was in for. I was near collapse from the double whammy of Elizabeth done properly (with squat cleans) and the lack of oxygen at 7,000 feet above sea level. I have never been so humbled. But by December 2007 I was able to do a 15-minute workout that included both 10 cleans at 205 pounds and 100 pullups. It was a breakthrough, and I recently broke the 10-minute mark on Elizabeth. Breaking through the clean barrier reminded me of one of Yogi Berra's best: CrossFit "is 90 per cent mental, and the other half is physical."

If we're going to mention physical benefits, I should note that CrossFit has changed my appearance so significantly that people actually talk about it out loud and to my face. After my return from Iraq, just three months into my CrossFit journey, a superior proclaimed, "Paul is back, and *he is in shape!*" It was a typical comment. Strangely enough, I've twice been asked, "What do you do for your chest?" No one ever asked about my "chesticles" back when heavy chest days were the heart of my training. CrossFit's functional movements have me seeing and feeling muscles I never knew I had.

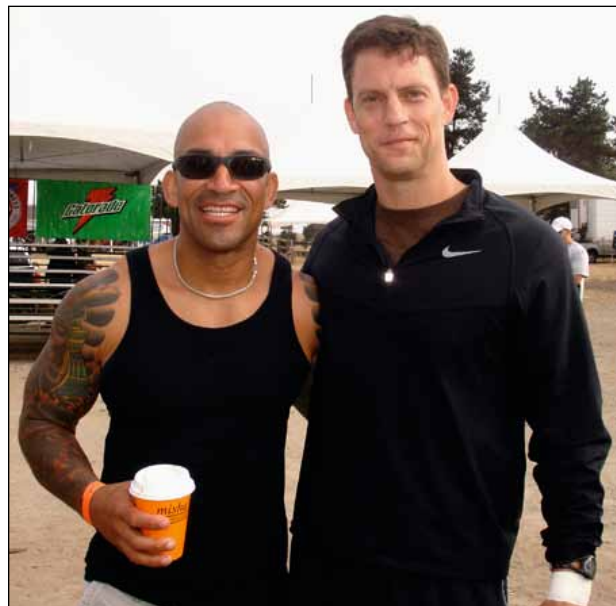
CrossFit: Dangerous or Therapeutic?

As I got more acquainted with CrossFit, I've never been able to understand the folks condemning CrossFit for its supposed dangers. Driving is dangerous. More Americans die in car accidents than via a combination of war, CrossFit, poisonous snakes, skydiving and lightning strikes, but we're all expected to weigh the risks and make the choice to drive or not. Fitness is the same. The question is not whether CrossFit has risk but whether the benefits outweigh the potential dangers—but people ignore the numbers. CrossFit has fewer injuries per hour than basketball, soccer or softball.

When I started CrossFit, I had plenty of medical issues, including chronic shoulder pain and a surgically rebuilt knee. I couldn't do a squat with full range of motion because my knee wouldn't bend far enough. I couldn't hang from a bar to do a pull-up without special care to prevent sharp shoulder pain. I had hurt my back due to my lack of strength and my ignorance of how to use what strength I had.

How we earn what we've been given is likely different for us all. For me, the essence is making the best of each day, each moment, each chance to be loving to the ones we love, and always seeking what is good.

My children know about Josh Hager. I hope they'll learn what it means to "earn it." I find in each Hero WOD a renewed commitment to relish the liberty I have. It's an infinitesimal marker of that pursuit that I completed Josh's workout five minutes and four seconds faster in 2009.



Courtesy of Paul Eich

After forsaking Bowflex, Paul Eich had many great CrossFit moments, including competing in the 2008 CrossFit Games and meeting Freddy Camacho of CrossFit One World.

I bought a book about shoulder rehab about a month before stumbling out of the wilderness. This book prescribed a series of exercises that would have consumed more than an hour of training time each week. A month into CrossFit, my shoulder pain was a thing of the past and no tedious hours were wasted on shoulder rehab.

CrossFit is helping people to restore normal functionality to bodies that have been deprived of it by lives spent in chairs.

It's taken two years, but I've added six inches of depth in squatting. A recent workout included 3x3 heavy front squats, 1x20 back squats and a WOD with 45 95-pound overhead squats. The next day, I had no knee pain.

I'm required to have an annual flight physical, which has provided me with a chance to document the impact of the CrossFit. My blood lipid profile wasn't bad before I started CrossFit, but in the last two years I've sustained HDL cholesterol above 60 points, LDL levels are down 10 points, and triglycerides have been below 50. My blood pressure, at 120/70, is the lowest I've seen as an adult. In college it was always 130/90.

If you listen long enough, you'll hear this kind of story repeated often. CrossFit is helping people restore normal functionality to bodies that have been deprived of it by lives spent in chairs. This is one element Coach Glassman



Courtesy of Paul Eich

The author's children, Hambone, The Bee and Rainbow (l-r), are happy to have a fit, confident CrossFit dad around to get them on the path to the perfect overhead squat.

Courtesy of Paul Eich



Paul Eich hanging out with Sarah Dunsmore, winner of the 2009 Midwest Regional Qualifier.

is suggesting we examine with the *Three-Dimensional Definition of Fitness and Health*. CrossFit asserts that high-intensity exercise will have the highest impact on favorable physical adaptations. In the coming years, I think we'll see larger and more common corroborative evidence as CrossFitters generate results like these.

More CrossFit Lessons

I'm a slow learner. It took me a long time to figure out abdominal muscles are critical to nearly every functional movement. As I pursued speed and power, I had repeated and delightful "a-ha moments" as I kept discovering abdominal engagement was both necessary and productive. Who knew a strong gut would help with the shoulder press? Obviously, to properly generate and transfer power from the hips, the midline must be rigid, and the abs are an essential ingredient. How did I miss that point for so long?

I've always been piss-poor in any measure of abdominal strength. My excuse was my relatively long waist, and when lost in the fitness wilderness I dodged attempts to develop superior abdominal strength. In one sense I was right to do so—just as no amount of machine-based leg strengthening will enable a big squat, no amount of abdominal crunching or soft-round-ball flopping would have assisted me in establishing the rigid trunk strength I'm chasing now. The upside of my now-stronger but

not-strong-enough core is that even after two years of CrossFit, I know I still have room for improvement. That's exciting.

I also learned about the finer points of lifting. Should you lift with or without a belt? What kind of shoes should you wear? Should you deadlift with an overhand or alternated grip, and should you use a hook grip? The endless debate is unproductive. Variation is a potent element of CrossFit. I don't train with a belt because, by definition, if I'm lifting the most I can lift, it's enough to generate the training effect. I want to gain strength, not lift larger weights.

And shoes? When the unknown and unknowable challenge presents itself, what's the probability you'll face it while standing on a plywood platform wearing heeled Olympic lifting shoes?

I think the desire for transformation is nearly universal—and CrossFit provides it.

What about cleans vs. power cleans? The answer is simple: mix it up. Chase performance gains by varying benchmark WODs, especially after a plateau has been reached. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds," and CrossFit challenges us to be thoughtfully inconsistent. Emerson didn't say, "You pays your money and you takes your chances," but that applies just as well. It's your body: you get to decide for yourself.

Even two years out of the fitness wilderness, I keep learning. I had a breakthrough this spring when James (OPT) FitzGerald discussed scaling and pacing on [CrossFit Radio](http://journal.crossfit.com). Athletes often compromise power production as they fatigue. They pace the workout and the speed at which they execute the movements. It was a "eureka" moment. I thought: "Holy shit, that's me!" So I acted. I still have to break WODs into manageable chunks, but I've sharpened my focus on intense, powerful movements from the start to the finish of a WOD. It's a totally different training experience.

This is a good example of what you can get from *CrossFit Radio*. It's a no-brainer. You can't afford to miss the shows. Find a way to use a PDA or MP3 player to listen in your car or gym.

Milestones

Helen was my first named WOD. I did almost everything wrong: wrong order, wrong numbers and the worst imaginable rookie kettlebell swings. My low-back pain the next day let me know I had more research to do.

My first Helen with unbroken pullups was much celebrated. But my time was still well shy of my 10-minute goal. It took until March 2009 to add that milestone. There was much rejoicing.

Another memorable milestone was reaching 29 pull-ups last summer. That became possible only after I got the correct feel for the kip at my Level 1 Cert. Max pull-ups reached 32 after I learned the butterfly kip. As a young man, my limit was 21.

The Filthy 50 was another named WOD I attempted early on. It took me 51 minutes and I had to sub several movements. But in October 2008 I completed it in under 30 minutes using only one substitution.

I reached a new PR of 365 pounds for the squat in January 2008, which was an increase of 12 percent in 12 months. About a month later I notched a 400-pound deadlift—a 23 percent increase. CrossFit is a strength and conditioning program.

Are these blue-collar numbers? Sure, in the CrossFit pond, as are the other numbers in my progress chart. But in the larger world most of us encounter each day, I have come to believe these are measures of elite fitness.

The Payoffs

Does improving one's benchmark WOD times have an impact outside of CrossFit? Why are CrossFitters, myself included, so passionate about our fitness program to the degree that we are Kool-Aid-drinking, Greg-and-Lauren-admiring, cult-like devotees? Why is that so?

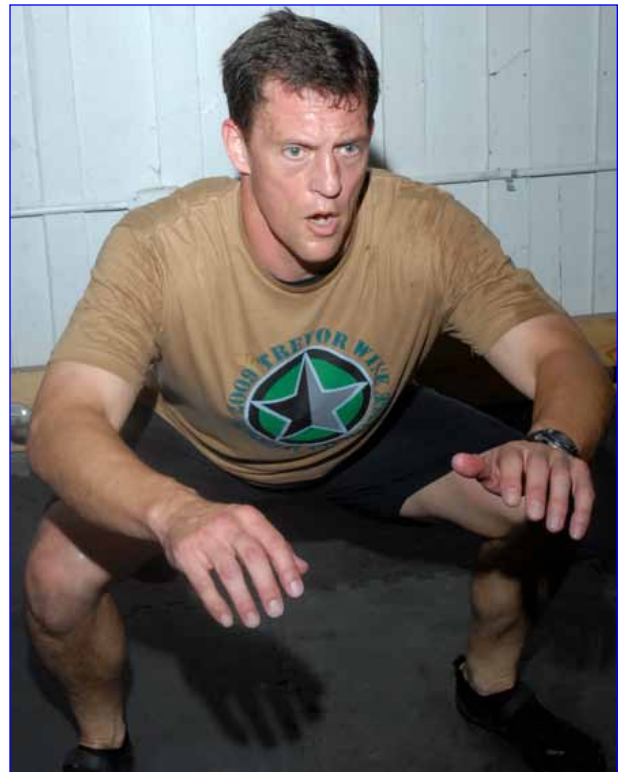
In a word: transformation.

Whether browsing the self-help section of a bookstore or stumbling around Internet ads, we see strong evidence that many folks seek the means to redefine the possibilities in their lives. Many or most of us want to blast through

limits, eliminate self-destructive habits, and build new internal and external resources. I think the desire for transformation is nearly universal—and CrossFit provides it.

For me, it was transformational to have new fitness goals to pursue and a program that allowed me to achieve them. Competing in the 2008 CrossFit Games left me both humbled and fiercely proud, but the life transformation comes in the daily courage check, the chance to test myself physically and mentally against whatever challenge crossfit.com delivers.

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Courtesy of Paul Eich

Paul Eich works on transforming himself, one air squat at a time.

It's transformational to wake up every day knowing I am as fit as I can be, and that confidence transforms how my children see their father. CrossFit transformed my family as we all embraced the fun and learning and intensity of CrossFit. It transformed my wife, Janet. She's been fit since the day I met her, but new is her excitement about chasing performance. She beams while the kids and I cheer victories such as a 400-pound CrossFit Total or reaching another pull-up milestone (her latest was 22).

Like most of us, I've gained potent new friendships and bask in the vibrant, intelligent, intense CrossFit community. For the athlete who will do the work and suffer the discomfort, CrossFit will allow you to redefine your fitness possibilities, and there's unexpected but potent carryover to your day-to-day life, whether your primary job is parent, first responder or military professional.

What's Next?

Performance improvements made it easy to stay with CrossFit in the beginning. Now that I've made all the easy gains, I wonder what will sustain my excitement for working "CrossFit hard." On the other hand, I've only just begun to learn how to bring this transformational fitness to others, and I'm certain that will be an even larger challenge, and potentially more rewarding. I have performance goals, skills goals and coaching goals to pursue in what is now my third year in the fitness promised land.

As I think of these issues, I'm reminded of a favorite lyric from the Rush song *Prime Mover*: "The point of the journey is not to arrive." CrossFit is so broad in scope and deep in technical detail, it may be best to enjoy it one WOD at a time.



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.