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Fight Gone CrossFit

Jack Goodson examines the link between mixed martial arts and CrossFit.

By Jack Goodson

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Staff/CrossFit Journal

Fight Gone Bad—famed mixed martial artist B.J. Penn named it. CrossFitters both love and fear it.

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The workout, a benchmark in the CrossFit community, was designed to match the metabolic demands of an organized MMA fight. Five minutes on, 1 minute off for 3-5 rounds. Sounds simple enough.

Sure. Words such as “brutal” or “savage”—and assorted others—come to mind when describing just how taxing this workout is. Penn, when quizzed on how it compared to an actual bout in the cage, commented that it was akin to a fight gone bad. The rest, as they say, is history.

CrossFit has grown exponentially since CrossFit founder and CEO Greg Glassman teamed with Penn to name this monster at the turn of the millennium. As of 2011, the number of affiliate gyms has increased from 18 in 2005 to over 2,400. Astounding. Perhaps the only comparable realm to experience a similar growth in popularity over the past decade or so is, of course, mixed martial arts.

These two disciplines have been linked for several years, even prior to Penn’s foray into Glassman’s world of functional fitness. They appear, at least on the surface, to be vastly different. However, the parallels between the two reach far deeper than many likely would expect.

A Shared Philosophy

The similarities—they start with a common axiom.

John Hackleman literally needs no introduction. The long-time trainer of Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) Hall of Fame fighter Chuck Liddell, Hackleman has been reshaping the MMA landscape for more than two decades at The Pit, his very own slice of MMA and conditioning heaven now located in Arroyo Grande, Calif.

Hackleman stresses physical conditioning, power and discipline. Very CrossFit.

In fact, Hackleman—The Pit Master, as he is known around town—began living a CrossFit-esque lifestyle long before CrossFit was actually CrossFit.

“I was doing similar stuff to CrossFit in the early 1980s,” Hackleman said while in Las Vegas prepping Pit fight team member Antonio Banuelos for his pay-per-view debut at UFC 126.

“Then I met Glassman and we really hit it off. I fell in love with what he was doing and started training up in Santa Cruz. We kind of combined forces.”



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MMA legend John Hackleman has been using CrossFit principles for years at The Pit in California.

Hackleman began implementing CrossFit into his MMA regimen. And vice versa. The fusion of the two styles, fittingly known as CrossPit, has been a staple of his training sessions ever since.

It was a practical move forward. Practicality—another shared thread between CrossFit and mixed martial arts.

“More than the moves or techniques, it’s the philosophy,” Hackleman said. “Functional. Practical. Use what works, disregard the rest. That parallels with the martial arts. Together the two make for a good combination.”

“What (CrossFit) does is help produce an all-around athlete by doing various functional movements at a high intensity. It’s a great philosophy.”

—Jeremy Lafreniere

Jeremy Lafreniere, owner of Capital Mixed Martial Arts & Elite Fitness, is in agreement.

“The thing about CrossFit is that it’s an elite fitness experience,” said Lafreniere, a disciple of MMA legend and pioneer Royce Gracie.

“It doesn’t claim to be the master of one specific sport,” he said. “What it does is help produce an all-around athlete by doing various functional movements at a high intensity. It’s a great philosophy.”

Lafreniere is seasoned in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, having studied the art since 1997. He has been teaching the discipline for about a decade, first at a small club inside the Alexandria, Va., elementary school at which he taught. The seven years since have seen the 37-year-old brown belt’s classroom expand dramatically; his network in the Washington, D.C., area now features three Capital MMA locations—all CrossFit affiliates. They’re home to some 1,000 active students.

Gracie, like Liddell, is a UFC Hall of Famer. He won two of the first three UFC tournaments. Lafreniere, like Hackleman, believes CrossFit and the martial arts enjoy a mirrored perspective with regard to fitness.

“Fitness is 100 percent the backbone of MMA. You have to be fit to fight,” Lafreniere said. “The movements in CrossFit teach fighters how to be ballistic, how to move their body quickly—basic agility components. All of this transfers seamlessly into the world of mixed martial arts.”

Jason MacDonald’s world is mixed martial arts. The 35-year-old Canadian, currently a member of the UFC roster, has won 24 of 38 professional fights, including three of his past four.

Courtesy of Jeremy Lafreniere



“Regularly learn and play new sports.”



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Hackleman might be working, or he might be working out. Same thing, really.

And, yes, he's a dedicated CrossFitter.

MacDonald first realized the impact CrossFit could play in his life during a trip to one of Randy Couture's early gyms in Portland, Ore., around 2001. They both engaged in a WOD that included squats, presses, cleans and high pulls mixed with high-intensity plyometrics. Couture completed 6 rounds, MacDonald only 1.

It was a wake-up call. Since, MacDonald has visited the Holy Land—CrossFit Santa Cruz—earned his CrossFit trainer designation and opened his own gym, PURE Fitness and MMA, in Red Deer, Alta.

He can't say enough about how the two arenas intertwine.

"There are a ton of similarities between MMA and CrossFit," MacDonald said. "I think they both forge all the best skills and techniques in their respective areas. MMA takes all the best techniques from all the respective martial arts and mixes them together to produce a highly effective combat sport.

"CrossFit does the same thing. It pulls from the most functional skills and techniques in all areas of fitness—Olympic lifting, gymnastics, sprinting and endurance training, just to name a few."

Variation in Programming

CrossFit and mixed martial arts find themselves sharing common paths. Said paths, however, aren't likely to feature similar terrain.

Hackleman is blunt. He is adamant when he says that fighters should not engage in strict CrossFit. He repeats that the CrossFit philosophy is indeed the best philosophy. However, for martial artists, he says, the program must be changed and adapted for their benefit. Sport-specific programming is vital.

"Fighters should always be working toward their goal: working toward being better martial artists, not CrossFitters," Hackleman said. "CrossFit athletes train for overall fitness, the Games. We train to knock people out. The psychological aspect is the same, but the endgame is very different."

This is where, for Hackleman, CrossFit bridges the gap.

CrossFit, like CrossFit, is simple in its design: a multidisciplinary approach that takes what works and discards what doesn't. Obviously, what works is what succeeds in the cage. The main difference between CrossFit and CrossFit is that, while fitness itself is the goal of CrossFit, the goal of CrossFit is to transform novice fighters into good fighters and good fighters into great ones. Sure, stamina and strength are imperative to a fight, but both are useless without the ability to effectively translate them into strikes.

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MMA moves."**

—John Hackleman



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Striking, after all, is a big part of mixed martial arts.

"I love Fran, but it's not exactly framed for what we do," Hackleman said. "So we have our own version, Pit Fran. We just add components that include MMA moves. Sometimes we'll remove thrusters and replace them with bag slams. Stuff like that. Same but different."

Overtraining is another variable that must be confronted.

Tyler Minton is a promising young mixed martial artist. He just so happens to also be a CrossFit trainer at CrossFit Johnson City in Northeast Tennessee.

Minton, 23, has steadily risen to notoriety in diehard MMA circles over the past three years. He was 8-1 as an amateur—a former XFN U.S. Southeast and U.S. Middleweight champion—and recently dominated his professional debut against former professional boxer Karl Willis.

Overtraining is his primary concern when it comes to strength and conditioning. That's not to say CrossFit isn't beneficial, however. Far from it, he says, as long as you understand how to tailor the program for your benefit.

"MMA training should obviously be the most important aspect of your training, but a strength and conditioning program like CrossFit can appropriately fill the gaps," Minton said. "That being said, I think it's good to program specific intensities on specific days. For instance, if an athlete has a heavy sparring day the same day each week, it would be wise to program conditioning work accordingly."

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—Tyler Minton

Lafreniere takes a similar view.

"We don't want them overtraining. How do you manage it, then?" he asks. "Well, you start by removing the constantly varied component of CrossFit. You break it down and create workouts with a heavy emphasis on MMA."

A student at Capital not in a fight cycle does CrossFit three to four days per week in addition to MMA training. Lafreniere notes that CrossFit is "perfect" for someone not currently in a fight cycle.

An athlete preparing for an upcoming fight, however, is subjected to a more MMA-intensive docket. The programming varies—twice a day three days per week, once a day twice per week, etc.—but the essence is the same: drill specific pieces of the game, such as escaping guards, mounting; add two to three days of pre- and post-training conditioning per week. Simple.

"Not many people can get beat up in training then do some grappling work and then go out and do Murph," Hackleman said. "What people don't realize is that grappling for 40 minutes is a cardio/power/strength workout. Sometimes that's all you need."

MacDonald, meanwhile, is currently in the middle of a fight cycle. He will be making his long-awaited comeback—after being absent from the mainstream for nearly a year because of various injuries—at UFC 129 against Ryan Jensen on April 30 in Toronto.

How has he been preparing for the homecoming? With a solid dose of sport-specific training. And a sprinkle of CrossFit, of course.

MacDonald, like Lafreniere, prioritizes his training. Sport-specific preparation takes over in camp, with CrossFit becoming more of a complement than a focus. He cuts his CrossFit workouts to three to four times per week, mostly dependent on how his body is reacting and recovering.

A typical training day for MacDonald includes 15 minutes of running or biking sprints, a WOD (one usually lasting no longer than 15 minutes), sparring and technique work—any of boxing, kickboxing, wrestling, Jiu-Jitsu—with 2 hours of additional fight-specific drilling following later in the day.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Many MMA fighters believe CrossFit conditioning can give them an edge at the upper levels of their sport.

“As a CrossFitter, I’m fit year round and can hit the ground running when camp opens.”

—Jason MacDonald

He also credits CrossFit with placing him ahead of the curve when it comes time to hit the mat.

“Many fighters spend that first month of their training camps just trying to get their fitness level back,” MacDonald said. “As a CrossFitter, I’m fit year round and can hit the ground running when camp opens. I can start in full blast, which is a massive boost.

“Regardless of how fit I am, the constantly varying program keeps my body guessing, forcing me to focus and fight through regardless of how tired I am. This is important because it resembles a fight. The variables are always changing.”

A Different Breed

There are two types of MMA athletes, according to Lafreniere: there are the people who need a goal, a fight or the idea of a fight, to keep them motivated, or otherwise they will stop training altogether. Then there are the people who live the lifestyle. Fight or no fight, they are training with the goal of improving. Those who opt for CrossFit—in its sport-specific adaptation or no—and MMA are, it’s safe to say, the latter.

“Nobody is successful in a sport unless they are fit,” Lafreniere said. “Football players just don’t play football. A sport requires conditioning your body well and beyond normal demands. Mixed martial arts is no different.

“MMA fighters must be ballistic. What better fitness approach to aid them than CrossFit? CrossFit develops fighters over all modalities. You use your entire body so that you’re that much more prepared for your fight cycle when it surfaces.”

Lafreniere is clearly one of the latter. So is Hackleman.

MacDonald, too.

“The rigors CrossFit puts my body through mentally and physically carry over into my fighting and my fight preparation,” MacDonald said. “It helps me stay healthy, to stay strong. It makes me confident. Conditioning is the one variable I can control going into a fight, meaning I have one less thing to concentrate on.

“At the end of the day, everyone has their own system that works, but I feel CrossFit has made me a better person, a better teacher and a better fighter.”



Courtesy of Jack Goodson

About the Author

Jack Goodson, 29, is a professional journalist located in Northeast Tennessee. A graduate of the University of Richmond, Jack has been a member of the sports staff at the Kingsport Times-News since 2004. Additionally, his musings about the English Premier League can be seen on a variety of national websites, including [The Offside](#). Jack began his CrossFit journey in June 2009 and has since been satisfying his addiction daily.