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## Old School for New Ideas

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

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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.

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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.

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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

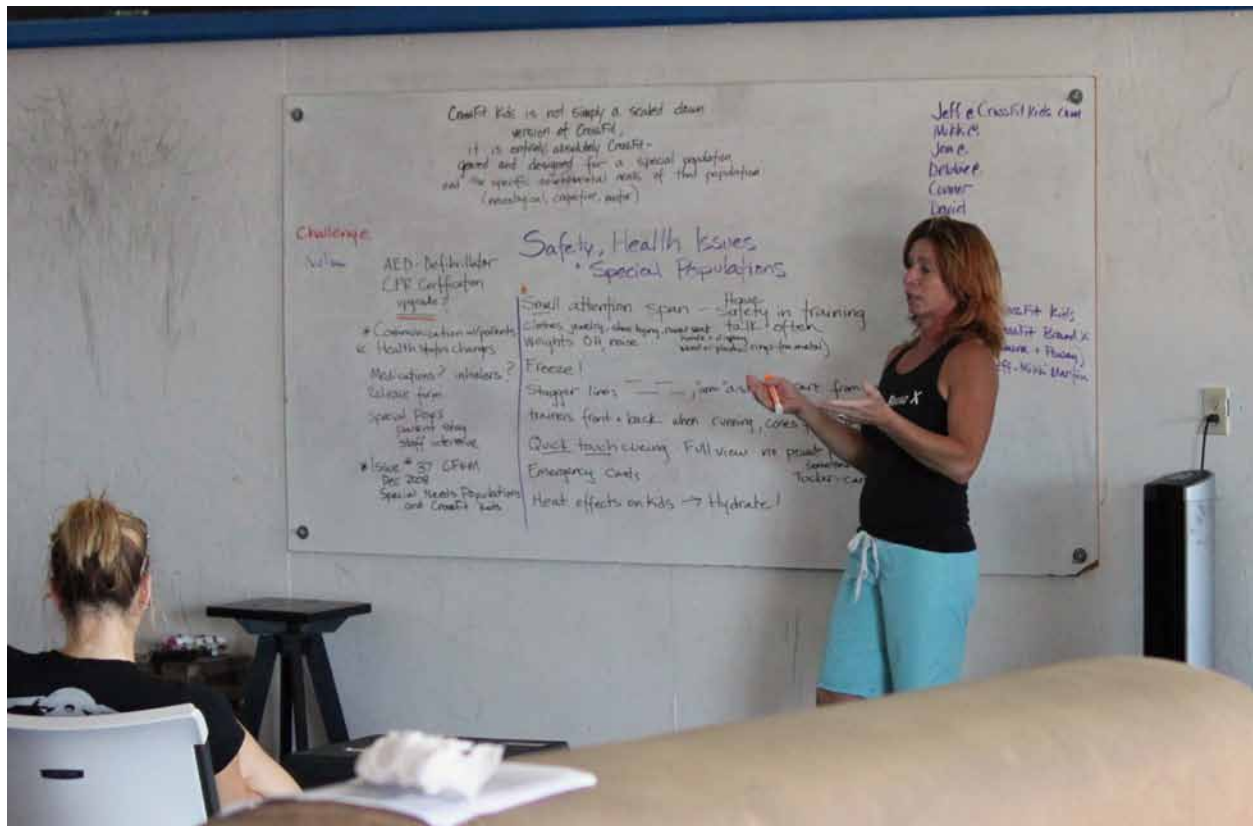
is world class. The Martins and their band of merry trainers truly believe they are the future of CrossFit and the future of youth fitness. This author agrees. Coach Glassman is nothing if not a visionary, and I believe he knew this from the beginning.

### 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.

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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.*