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CrossFit Goes to College

A doctor of kinesiology in Louisiana is asked to teach a weight-training course. He introduces his students to CrossFit in hopes of producing a new and better breed of fitness professional.

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Andrew Hatchett

CrossFit is an example of effective and efficient training.

That statement is no surprise to anyone who has chosen CrossFit as his or her fitness regime. As a faculty member and loyal CrossFitter who teaches in the field of kinesiology at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, I was recently presented with an exciting opportunity:

Adding CrossFit to the university's curriculum.

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CrossFit for Credit

CrossFit has changed many aspects of my life. More specifically, CrossFit has allowed my definitions of fitness, technique in training, nutrition habits and philosophy of health to evolve from their rudimentary foundations. When the chair of my department approached me last fall about instructing a weight-training course, I naturally became excited about the possibilities the opportunity held. Without hesitation, I requested to teach the course from the CrossFit perspective.

Fortunately, the department chair is open-minded and very trusting of me. Prior to this opportunity, I was the pied piper of CrossFit in the department. I will endlessly talk about CrossFit to anyone—and I have. Therefore, a foundation of CrossFit knowledge had been established with the chair, as well as among the faculty in the department. I believe this made the idea of teaching weight training from a CrossFit perspective easier for them to comprehend, and ultimately it made them more comfortable granting approval.

Consequently, it was necessary to develop a course outline and subsequent syllabi. I have great enthusiasm for CrossFit, but determining how to structure a class that can convey this passion safely, efficiently and effectively was a bit of a conundrum. Like any scientist, I turned to the best resource available: the CrossFit main site.

An e-mail was sent informing the powers that be of my charge and asking if any advice could be offered. As another example of the positive, proactive CrossFit community that's reflected at every level of the organization, a response came in minutes, informing that my message had been forwarded to Coach Greg Glassman.

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Andrew Hatchett decided it was time to address fitness misconceptions at the university level, where so many students earn a degree but don't understand functional movement.

To be honest, I had a “Holy cow!” moment. “What have I done?” crept into my head. A few minutes later Mr. Glassman responded. His recommendation was to follow the format of a Level 1 Certification. An explanation of the certification content was offered, followed by an invitation for me and a colleague to attend any Level 1 Certification we wished. I was floored at this point. It was a truly phenomenal offer.

Andrew Hatchett: PhD, Level 1 CrossFit Trainer

A friend, Charles Allen (director of fitness at the University of Mississippi), and I participated in the Level 1 Certification in Charlotte, N.C., in December 2008. Anyone who has completed a Level 1 Certification is aware that a tremendous amount of information is offered. What I found equally as important as the information offered was the clarity the certification provided. The nine foundational movements were broken down in such a way that the understanding developed was profound. The lectures allowed for a free exchange of information.

Students were also told they would be expected to participate at a level of intensity respective of their current level of fitness. Effort and intensity were emphasized as paramount for success in the course.

As impressive as any aspect of the weekend was the ownership elite trainers such as Chuck Carswell, Pat Sherwood and Andy Stumpf had of the information. The training staff had a great ability to convey reasonably complex material, and fortunate are all participants who attend any of the certifications administered by CrossFit.

Upon return to Louisiana I felt confident not only in my ability to better instruct the movements but also to organize the course in the format of a Level 1 Certification. The course would be divided into specific phases:



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Anyone who thought a weight-training class would be an easy credit soon learned what functional movement is all about in the form of burpees, Tabata intervals and full ranges of motion.

1. Foundational movements.
2. Lectures.
3. WODs.

The class is scheduled to meet in the weight room of the university's student recreation center. The space is woefully inadequate to support the instruction of any weight-training course. Included in this space are the traditional selectorized machines, some free weights, an assortment of benches, dumbbells, boxes and a squat rack. Luckily, a classroom is available for use not too far away, along with an indoor track (200 meters).

The classroom has technological capabilities that allow Internet access as well as projection for the display of the CrossFit main site. The track is shared with a jogging class at times, allowing the opportunity to coordinate with other faculty (and also to introduce other faculty to CrossFit). What follows are elements of the course syllabus and a description of the course format.

Syllabus Breakdown

Course title—Skills and Techniques of Weight Training. Due to the information presented in the Level 1 Certification and on the main site, convincing administration that the CrossFit method fit under this title was not difficult.

Meeting times—Tuesdays and Thursdays from noon until 1:15 p.m. These 75-minute blocks are perfect for the format of this course. They provide enough time to allow viewing of a video from the CrossFit main site to either inform, inspire or demonstrate movements or specific prescribed workouts.

Course description—This course is designed to provide skills and knowledge of weight training. Techniques and strategies applicable to teaching are emphasized. This course is taught from the philosophical and methodological perspective of an exercise program centered on functional movement. I chose to modify the existing description of the course to maintain consistency among other sections of the course being taught while informing the participants that their studies were going to be based on the CrossFit philosophy and methodology.

Required material—Four items were required for this course. Again, I modified the material required from previously taught sections in order to maintain consistency among sections while providing changes to facilitate the needs of the participants in this section.

1. The traditionally required item is a strength-training anatomy text used as a reference for the participants. During the course, comparisons were routinely made between “bodybuilding” movements and the compound movements we used. If the participants wished to examine the muscles used during a thruster, they were asked to break the movement down into segments and examine the muscular involvement in that manner. This, I believe, develops a more intimate knowledge of the movement, and the participants become more aware of what’s going on from a physiological perspective.

2. A copy of Mark Rippetoe and Lon Kilgore’s text *Starting Strength*.
3. A subscription to the *CrossFit Journal* was required of the participants. Without a doubt, this wealth of information is plenty for anyone to develop a solid foundation of the principles and tenets of CrossFit and a number of other subjects associated with the program. I’ve found the *Journal* to be a phenomenal teaching tool. Many discussions were initiated with, “I was looking at the *Journal* last night and”
4. A 4.5-foot piece of PVC pipe. This equipment is necessary to instruct participants in the nine movements covered in the Level 1 Cert. It also served as advertising for the course. After all, only a select few students were walking around campus with a lengthy piece of PVC—an instant conversation starter.

Course objectives—As expressed in previous syllabi for this course, this is primarily a content-based course. Listed below are the objectives I felt needed to be met as a result of the participant’s experience in the course:

1. The ability to explain the purpose and value of functional movement.
2. The ability to explain how exercise training centered on functional movement can benefit various populations.
3. The ability to explain concepts of functional movement programming.
4. The ability to define terms associated with functional movement exercise.
5. The ability to apply concepts to ensure safety (i.e., cues to movement and movement etiquette).
6. The ability to identify the primary and assistant muscle groups in addition to the kind of joint movement involved in all movements.
7. The ability to practically demonstrate instruction of the nine foundational movements.
8. The ability to explain strategies for weight control as well as suggest nutritional guidelines.
9. The ability to explain the physiological adaptations of chronic functional exercise.

Course requirements—Included in the course requirements were the departmental attendance policy and notification of absence policy. Additionally, participants were informed that they would be required to perform exercise in appropriate attire. Students were also told they would be expected to participate at a level of intensity respective of their current level of fitness. Effort and intensity were emphasized as paramount for success in the course.

Course evaluation—Each time the class met, an attendance sheet was provided. Essentially, the sheet was used as a method to provide points at the end of the semester based upon the percentage of classes attended (i.e., a student who attended 92 percent of the classes earned 92 points). Two written examinations were administered during the semester. The first examination evaluated the participants' knowledge and understanding of the nine foundational movements. Questions were posed to determine if the appropriate cues to the respective movements were known and what to look for if certain form was not found during that movement. The second examination was used to determine the understanding of the various lecture topics throughout the semester. These topics included:

What is fitness?

What is functional movement training?

Programming for functional movement.

Nutrition.



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Students were informed that intensity during workouts was required for a passing grade.

School Is in Session

The first class meeting was an introduction. I introduced myself, offered my credentials and a brief history of my experience instructing similar courses. I then informed the class that the course was going to be taught from the perspective of constantly varied, infinitely scalable, functional movement. I also informed them intensity was one of the criteria they would be evaluated on. It was my intent to make this element of the course abundantly clear. Requirements for the course were also discussed (attendance, material and attitude). What followed was an explanation of CrossFit and the nine foundational movements.

I was under no illusion that a few of the students enrolled in the class were thinking it was going to be their chance to earn credit for lifting weights in the manner of a high-school weightlifting class. This misconception was addressed.

I also talked about the development of a positive community and a team environment. Everyone was going to be treated equally, elitism would not be tolerated, and egos were to be checked at the door. The person who finished first on any given day would be expected to encourage those still working, because the first-place finisher would not be first every day. Course format was also discussed.

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A need to become knowledgeable of CrossFit.com was also conveyed. I offered examples of how the tool can be used by the participants on the days the class did not meet, which led to a discussion regarding the assumption that the participants were to follow the main-site WODs after being taught the nine foundational movements. We discussed scaling and its importance for safety, development and optimal results.

This first meeting also allowed me to evaluate the type of students enrolled in the class. The 27 participants in the class ranged from freshman to seniors and included a few non-traditional students—from a former Marine to a former beauty queen, a few current Division 1 athletes and few people who had never taken part in any type of structured exercise. It was a wonderful opportunity to provide instruction to all.

Homework Assignment: Fran

The second meeting began the formal instruction of the class. A discussion of fitness was conducted, examining the class's perception of fitness and who they believed to be the most fit. Common answers included those who can run, swim or cycle further or faster or perform well at their respective sport.

The topics of specificity of activity and the components of fitness were explored. I took a moment to offer a different perspective on fitness: the most fit people may be those who can move more weight over greater distances in less time across broad modal domains. I believe this began the cognitive investment of the class: it allowed them to actually think about why they were doing what they were doing with this new training.

Making sure everyone performed to his or her highest level, regardless of any scaling of the WOD, was fundamental to the success of the entire class.



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Coach Glassman sent Dr. Hatchett to a Level 1 Cert so the professor could use the information as the basis for his university course.

After this brief discussion we began the squat progression: squat, front squat, overhead squat. The class was systematically brought through the progression in the same manner as in a Level 1 Certification. We found an activity room with enough open space to have the class form a circle in order to perform the movements. The various cues to action were conveyed during each movement, reinforcements were provided and open dialogue was established.

When each member of the class had what I believed to be a proficient ability to perform each movement, a class activity was conducted. At this time the class was introduced to the concept of Tabata intervals. The eight rounds of 20:10 work-rest ratio provided the chance for the class to witness the intensity of the program. This activity also developed the cohesiveness of the class—nothing builds a team more than common discomfort.

The next few class meetings followed a similar format of discussion, review of movement and instruction of the next two sets of progressions (shoulder press, push press, push jerk; deadlift, sumo deadlift high pull, clean), with a class activity to reinforce the movements taught that day.

Bachelors of Burpees?

For the remainder of the semester, the format of the class was designed as follows: on days the main-site prescribed a WOD, the class would perform a version of that WOD. Due to the lack of equipment, variations were developed. Also, with the assumption the main site was being followed on days the class did not formally meet, this format was adopted to maintain the participants' three-on, one-off program. The days the main site prescribed rest, the class met for lecture and to complete written examinations. A positive environment during exercise sessions was translated to the lecture. Participants were engaged in the discussions, readily asking questions and displaying an active interest in the re-shaping of their view of fitness and health.

A typical class involved a brief meeting in the classroom. During this meeting, we engaged in open dialogue regarding any issues the class had with the WODs performed on the days the class did not meet. We reviewed the movements required for that day's WOD and followed up with a discussion of any variation that needed to be made—and why those variations were chosen. A video of the movements was played to re-familiarize the participants.

CrossFit affords the opportunity to eliminate a tremendous amount, if not all, of the mistruths that infest the fitness industry.

After this brief meeting, the class moved to the exercise area (track, weight room, outside—whatever the WOD demanded). When everyone arrived at the required destination, another explanation of the WOD was offered. This second explanation afforded the participants the chance to develop a more in-depth awareness of the necessary movements. We did a standard warm-up of squats, push-ups, sit-ups, back extensions (supermen) and Samson stretches, and then the class completed the WOD, scaled or as prescribed.

Interestingly, a competitive environment was established. Those individuals of similar ability or perception of similar ability began to compete, and the rivalry needed to be carefully cultivated for the improvement of the entire class. Holding each person accountable for the integrity of the movements assisted in maintaining equality. Making sure everyone performed to his or her highest level, regardless of any scaling of the WOD, was fundamental to the success of the entire class. If at any point the class perceived anything less than full range of motion was allowed, a tendency to sacrifice technique and at worst disengage from the class was likely to occur.

During and at the end of each class, critical assessments were offered. If a few participants were making the same mistakes, an announcement to the entire class was made. If an individual student was making a minor error, a specific guide was offered to that person. Also at the conclusion of each class, praise for effort and a brief review of each movement and its purpose were offered.



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Participants were educated about CrossFit culture and were expected to complete the WOD and then cheer on their classmates.

Go Forth and Deadlift

I have been fortunate enough to teach this class the past two semesters (spring and fall) and found a positive reception by the students and fellow faculty. An additional two faculty members are currently using CrossFit as a guide for their sections of weight-training courses.

What I believe to be the most important result of this class is the fact that several of the participants have adopted CrossFit as their personal fitness program.

It is my intention to have multiple sections of this CrossFit-based course taught each semester. Together with another faculty member who participates in but is not fully sold on CrossFit, we are beginning to discuss the standardization of the weight-training courses offered by the university. I would very much like to have all weight-training courses based on the CrossFit Level 1 protocol, followed by programming for the class based on the main site. I do not believe it is difficult to visualize CrossFit transitioning into other courses, such as exercise testing and prescription, biomechanics, exercise physiology, and psychology of physical activity.

It is profoundly important to educate the future leaders of fitness science and the fitness industry in techniques and practices that allow for a change in the status quo. I view CrossFit as the most effective and efficient fitness program on the planet. CrossFit affords the opportunity to eliminate a tremendous amount, if not all, of the mistruths that infest the fitness industry. It's simply a better way to teach fitness and exercise.

The university level is a logical and influential avenue for providing an educational experience that can change lives. In order for this to occur, university facilities need to be equipped so as to facilitate this effective and efficient program.

As CrossFit gains greater momentum in the university setting, I can speculate that a competition will be created. A collegiate-level CrossFit Games or a national-level CrossFit club sport championship is foreseeable. This brings to mind questions such as affiliation of university programs, standards and procedures of course content, and development and maintenance of qualification to instruct such a course.

I'm sure a number of other questions can be posed with regard to the adoption of CrossFit as a course at institutions of higher learning, but the bottom line here is this: CrossFit is the most effective and efficient method to deliver functional fitness training.

In my opinion, the logical evolution is to offer this training to those who will lead and shape the standards of fitness for years to come. From personal experience I stand firm in my statement that this method is indeed the most effective in the development of fitness. CrossFit is the perfect tool to be used for instruction at any level of education and provides a positive community to operate in and use for support.

Like any course at any level of education, this course is a living organism—always evolving. The center of the course, however, will remain functional movement training.



About the Author

Andrew Hatchett is an assistant professor of kinesiology at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. He recently earned his PhD in exercise science with an emphasis in health behavior. He has participated in CrossFit for a little over a year. Since being exposed to CrossFit, Andrew's wife (Jamie) and their two daughters (Lily and Iris) have begun training with CrossFit as well.