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Born of Lunacy

Gary McLean tells his humorous story of how he discovered CrossFit and why it's always good to be strong.

By Gary McLean

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All images: Courtesy of Gary McLean

At a young age I knew it was going to be better to be strong.

When I was 13 years old my mother forced me to go to a theme park under the “you’ll enjoy yourself and meet new people” promise.

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It's hard not to PR with blue gorillas cheering you on.

It was lunchtime in a large open-air picnic area where there were more people than blades of grass. A number of disabled visitors were there that day, and I distinctly remember a very affectionate Down-syndrome child attempting to hug everyone he could reach as I dodged him on the way into the bathroom.

At the urinal trough with my pants undone and in mid-unstoppable flow, I heard the words that still give me chills today: "Huggy, huggy!" The overly affectionate Down-syndrome boy grabbed me in a bear hug from behind and swung me away from the urinal with my hands stuck down on my sides and my dignity on show for all to see.

After being paraded around the picnic area for what seemed like forever, I sat eating my sandwiches with everyone snickering, and I knew my life was going to be better if I was stronger.

The last comment I remember from that day was from my mother, who said, "At least he was a nice boy showing you around."

Yup, stronger was going to be better.

Training With the Lunatics

Years of training in front of a mirror with the incomparable belief that anyone can be the same size as Arnold with the right genetics, dedication, diet and supplements was brought to a crushing end when the realization that chemists had a big part to play in bodybuilding hit me square in the eye.

Left in the wilderness of training, caught between some weights, some cardio and just moving without purpose, I picked up training with my step-brother and his band of lunatics. These lunatics talked of Thomas Inch dumbbells, kettlebells, bear crawls and grip strength. My first invite: "Meet us in my garage and have a crueller!"

Flashback: I'm into my third one-minute station, which is jumping in the air with a 10-kg medicine ball, and I'm panicking big time that these strangers and my step-brother are just about to see me hurl all over the garage floor. OK, it's not a "huggy moment," but it could end badly.

**Someone has planned this
and knows why the pain
feels so good.**

The lunatics are all martial artists and training for functional fitness with high intensity, and the endorphins following are high! This shit is off the chain and I am hooked.

I stand in the shower following my first functional fitness workout with soap replacing skin that the kettlebell stole from my hands and start shaking like a shitting dog and wonder, "Why the hell do I love this feeling?"

How do I contribute to this group of mindless pain freaks? How do I keep up with them? Why do they all run up and down sand dunes and swing kettlebells and don't have any desire to take a mirror out with us? I needed to do research because I was onto something.

After watching hours of MMA circuits, Mountain Athlete clips and high-impact interval training on YouTube, this woman appears on the screen, standing in a parking lot with a barbell and a rack. The amount of bumper plates on the bar suggest a back-squat-in-a-parking-lot scene is about to start, and I'm just about to click on the next clip when this woman push-presses the bar and starts to overhead squat it! Lord, help me—this woman is possessed by the devil. And just as I'm getting to grips with this high-intensity training, this shit happens!

Nicole Carroll and her clips of amazing physical feats and cerebral conversations in front of a whiteboard straighten me out. There is a grand plan out there and not just sand dunes and tire flips. Someone has planned this and knows why the pain feels so good.



McLean thinking about ways to get stronger.



Inside CrossFit 365—the epicenter of strength.

To London

Almost seconds later, I'm preaching to the group of unconverted lunatics about WODs and recording our progress to understand if we are actually getting fitter. "Measurable, observable and repeatable" just rings my bell.

These WODs had put my friend—who thrived on his own fitness—on his arse and had shaken his world.

Those lunatics are still on the sand dunes and absolutely smashing their bodies to within an inch of death every day and loving life. Good luck, guys. I love you for the intro to pain and the true meaning of a workout, but there's a higher calling for me.

So I invited the one I deemed to be the traditionally fittest person I knew around for a WOD at my garage. The person I selected coaches a rugby team and had a long history of training with some seriously switched-on coaches, and my thought process was to test my own abilities to see if these WODs I'd been doing for some nine months made any difference.

Twelve minutes later, Helen was done and [CrossFit 365](#) was born! These WODs had put my friend—who thrived on his own fitness—on his arse and shaken his world.

Before I break for completion of the first chapter of my story, I want to share an excerpt of the next with a story from my trip to London to take the Level 1 Trainer Course. While I was waiting to go through to the restaurant for breakfast, I had a quick nose to see if anyone else looked like he or she might be at my seminar to save me going to CrossFit Central London on my own. I saw Tomas in a matching shell suit like a giant baby romper, which said to me "European." I was right: He was from Denmark.

I wished I'd gone to the seminar on my own because whoever taught Tomas English must have been Welsh! His English lessons must have come from MTV or the Sky Movies because he finished and started every sentence with the expletive "fuck." So here's our first exchange after introductions in the queue for breakfast, surrounded by families.

"Hey Tomas, you eating Zone or Paleo?" I ask.

"Nah, mate, as long as it's fucking clean, I fucking eat the fucking stuff!" Tomas says.

Tomas didn't make as many friends at the seminar as I did.

At the London Level 1, there was a room full of nervous athletes expecting the unexpected and also the air of excitement as to which superstar would arrive. Could it be Mikko Salo or Annie T.? Could we be seriously blessed and have Karl Steadman?



Respect the tea cozy.

This little dude—too little to be an athlete—asks if I had a safe trip to London. He's wearing a tea cozy on his head for a hat, so I quickly maneuver away from this little fella and think, "Between tea-cozy head and potty-mouth Tomas, what the hell have I gotten myself into?" Besides, I didn't want to get bogged down with a nobody when there might be some super athletes in the room. The stranger next to me says, "Can you believe Speal is at our cert?"

An awesome weekend later and I realize I've just become addicted to something for which I didn't and don't have the antidote.

So I leave you for now with three pieces of advice:

1. Never judge an athlete by his or her headgear.
2. If someone takes your back when in full flow at the urinal, turn toward that person fast, so at least the world gets your ass and the assailant gets a piss of their own medicine.
3. It's better to be strong.



About the Author

Gary McLean lives with his fantastic partner, Hayley Thomas, and three awesome children, Chloe, Drew and Bradley. McLean and Thomas own an engineering company. To help relieve the stress of work and have a healthy distraction, they started a gym doing functional workouts in 2008/2009 and affiliated with CrossFit in 2010 after falling in love with the program and its community aspect. McLean was born in Rhodesia and moved to the U.K. in his early teens. His initial sporting years involved representing his country in swimming until he left for the U.K. He, unfortunately, let swimming go because training in indoor pools didn't really suit him, which was just as well because all the better swimmers grew tall while he did not.