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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## “You Die Slower If U Work Out”

Peter Jordan examines why kids at Saratoga High are embracing CrossFit. Whatever the reason, fitness is becoming more important for many students.

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By Peter Jordan CrossFit Sawmill

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All images courtesy of Tony Palma

There are a number of stereotypes associated with Saratoga High School. One is the relative importance placed by the community on academics (very high) as opposed to athletics (not so high). Marching band falls somewhere in the middle, if not in reality, certainly in the mythology.

Our rival school, the other one in a district of just two schools, beat us in the big football game 28 years in a row. But our API score (Academic Performance Index) is 932, and theirs is 873. As a nod to this—or maybe a playful dig—we don't name our WODs after girls; we name them after institutions of higher learning.

"University of Wisconsin" was a particularly dreadful workout. In retrospect, had we anticipated how tough it would be, we probably would have agreed to scale it back a little to mollify the innocent, trusting, generally willing and agreeable mostly freshman boys and girls who comprise our physical-education classes.

Too late. The clock had started: 50 wall-ball shots for time, with 4 burpees every minute on the minute. One of those workouts where there really isn't a forgiving strategy. You just have to gut it out. That is exactly what they were doing. The facial expressions were familiar. Pain, pride, resignation and determination were all there in various mixtures, while classmates counted reps and offered encouragement.

Later, when asked to describe their "least favorite WOD," many would recall this day. Ironically, several would rank this as "most favorite." Go figure.

Go faster? The wall-ball will wear you out. Go slower? The burpees will kill you. How about just quitting altogether? What's the worst that could happen? Depending on the teacher, maybe the deduction of a couple of "participation points," with negligible long-term effects. If accompanied by "this hurts my knee" or "I can't breathe" or "I think I'm gonna be sick," the result would just as likely be a little sympathy and encouragement to take it easy. Try not to miss the bucket.

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### What motivates teenagers to take on demanding physical challenges?

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But nobody quit. We began to wonder why.

What motivates teenagers to take on demanding physical challenges? How hard are they actually working? What kind of results are they seeing, or hoping to see? These



***A survey revealed most students at CrossFit Sawmill are putting high levels of effort into every workout.***

are some of the questions we explored in a survey of 230 CrossFitting students in our P.E. classes at Saratoga High. In the July 2010 *CrossFit Journal* article [Facebook or Fitness?](#), we looked at the difficulty of adjustment for students being introduced to a new kind of P.E. based wholly on a CrossFit model. Now in the second year of implementation, CrossFit, for most students, is simply the way it's always been. We administered our second survey at the end of the fall semester (January 2011). Of the 230 respondents, about 55 percent were male, about 60 percent freshmen and 35 percent sophomores, and all were among the students of four instructors—each with multiple CrossFit certificates and all of whom work collaboratively on programming, lesson planning and methodology—who comprise the P.E. department at Saratoga High, also known as CrossFit Sawmill.

#### **"Estimate your level of effort during demanding activities—like a WOD or mile test."**

The most popular response (33.2 percent of respondents) was 90 out of 100. Just over 70 percent of students reported effort levels of 80, 90 or 100. Only 7 percent rated their level of effort at 50 or below. A few kids are dogging it—but darn few.

We attempted to anticipate some of the factors that might motivate students to work hard toward improved fitness (e.g., “if it helps me to sleep better,” “if it helps me to focus better in class,” “if I were competing against a friend”) and asked students to rate these factors on a scale from 1 to 10. Reinforcing a Saratoga stereotype, the highest percentage of students (66.7 percent) gave an 8, 9 or 10 rating to “if it improved my grade,” followed by “if it helped me to be stronger, faster or more fit” (57.1 percent) and “if I am competing as part of a team” (52.4 percent). Grades before bros.

Despite the lure of good grades, “if it helped me to focus better in class” was least likely to get a high ranking from the students. Evidently focus is not perceived as a useful strategy for grade improvement.

### “Are you motivated to improve your physical fitness?”

When asked outright, 88.6 percent of the students responded “yes.” When asked to elaborate, a number of students indicated the effect that improved fitness would have on their sport:

- Helps me with tennis.
- In the future I might be able to run marathons.
- I can become a better lacrosse player.
- Increase my chances of playing pro baseball.
- Because I do tae kwon do.

Other practical applications were identified as well:

- I need to overcome a problem with asthma and to prove that someone with a sort of disability can still be as fit if not better than those without these problems.
- Because if there is a stalker guy chasing me, I want to be able to outrun him.

But the vast majority of responses addressed general benefits of improved fitness:

- Live a more healthy life.
- Maintain a healthy body.
- It helps me do things easier.
- To be strong.

- I want to get in better shape.
- So in the future I can have a longer, healthier life.

Or the responses addressed specific effects on physical appearance:

- I want to not be fat.
- To gain weight, look better, better legs.
- I want to get in shape and to make sure I also look like a stud.
- U don't wanna be a fatass.
- So I can lose some weight.
- I want to have ... a better look.
- Lose some weight.
- Look better.
- Look skinnier.
- I do not want to be fat.
- To look attractive.
- To look good and be attractive on the beach.
- Fear of gaining weight and looking fat. 😊
- More muscular.
- I want that bedroom bod.
- Because I want to get a six pack.
- I wanna be jacked.
- I think I will feel better about myself.

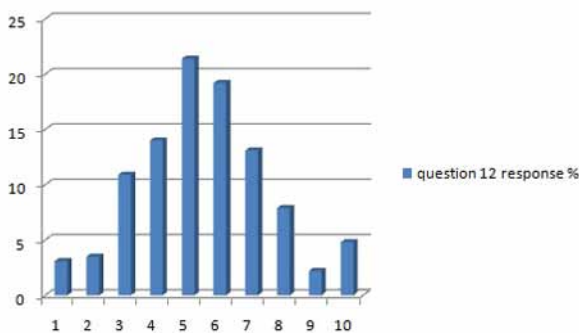
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**“I want to get in shape and to make sure I also look like a stud.”**

**—Anonymous response on the benefits of fitness**

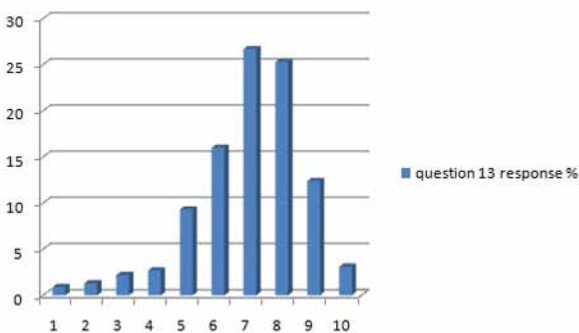
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**“How would you rate your level of physical fitness at the beginning of the semester?” (August 2010)**



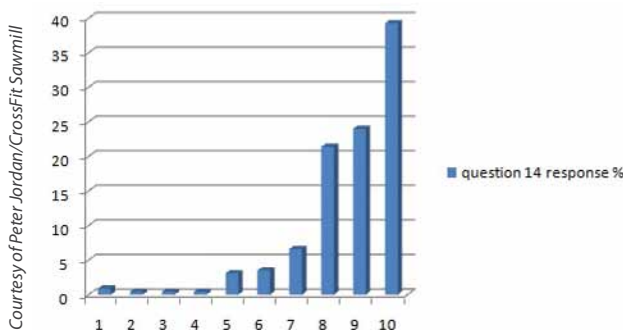
*In August 2010, many students rated their fitness at a 5 or 6.*

**“How would you rate your current level of physical fitness?” (January 2011)**



*In January 2011, more students rated their fitness as a 7 or 8.*

**“What would be your ideal level of physical fitness?”**



*Interestingly, most students want a very high level of fitness.*

Based on this data, it seems safe to conclude that students, after participating in a three-day-per-week CrossFit program, perceive significant improvement toward their ideal levels of physical fitness.

On the survey, we quoted several benefits of exercise as reported in the [Mayo Clinic website](#) and asked students to rate the motivating influence of these benefits. Here is an example:

“Physical activity stimulates various brain chemicals that may leave you feeling happier and more relaxed than you were before you worked out. You’ll also look better and feel better when you exercise regularly, which can boost your confidence and improve your self-esteem. Regular physical activity can even help prevent depression.”

Choices for a response were:

- This doesn’t motivate me at all.
- This motivates me a little.
- This motivates me somewhat.
- This motivates me a lot.
- This totally motivates me.

These questions tended to elicit little bell-shaped curves centered around the response “this motivates me somewhat.” The one exception was significantly skewed toward the high end of things:

“When you engage in physical activity, you burn calories. The more intense the activity, the more calories you burn—and the easier it is to keep your weight under control.”

Nearly half the respondents indicated that this “motivates me a lot” or “totally motivates me.” On a related question, 39.2 percent reported that they are actively trying to lose weight. When responses are filtered by gender, it is revealed that 50 percent of our girls are actively trying to lose weight.

(This begs the obvious question, are our kids fat? A purely subjective assessment suggests obesity in this school population is probably less of a problem than in other parts of the state; the majority ethnicity is Asian, the level of affluence is high, and education level of parents is high—all factors associated with lower obesity rates. Ninth-grade students are assessed for BMI—among other things—as part of the required annual state mandated physical fitness test. Data is not yet available for this current group of survey respondents; the last group for which this data is

accessible on the state website is from the 2008-09 school year, where 91.8 percent of girls and 88.8 percent of boys at Saratoga High had BMIs in the "Healthy Fitness Zone.")

The group concern about weight loss and appearance was echoed when students were asked to identify other benefits of optimal physical fitness:

- You become fit and healthy and comfortable about your body.
- Better physique.
- Look better.
- Losing weight.
- Getting a six pack.
- Less fat, but you can eat more at the same time.
- Grow buff.
- You get hot girls.

However, a number of other practical benefits were identified:

- You sleep better.
- You live longer.
- You feel more refreshed after ... the exercise.
- Better concentration during the day.
- You are able to do more things without getting tired ...
- To handle day-to-day activities better ... like lifting boxes for Christmas decorations.
- Spiritual well-being.
- Feeling good about yourself.
- The ability to run away from a crazed gunman.

My favorite:

- You get into shape, which is good, and you will learn how to work out, which would come in handy after you turn 40 and your body turns for the worst.

And a close second:

- You die slower if u work out.

The experience of slow death during a CrossFit workout is something that many of us can relate to, especially after turning 40.

### **"Think about your favorite WOD so far this year. What did you like about it?"**

- Favorite WOD?
- Ummm, I didn't really like any of them terribly much.
- I did not like any WOD.
- I can't say I like any of them.
- None.

These types of responses were surprisingly rare. Some students preferred workouts with a running emphasis, others liked weightlifting, and some mentioned a preference for WODs with rest intervals. Some liked "easier" or shorter WODs, and others liked more challenging ones. A few mentioned "University of Wisconsin" specifically.



**According to Peter Jordan, some students at Saratoga High now see CrossFit simply as "P.E."**



***Did you ever work this hard in your P.E. classes?***

But the overwhelming favorite was a WOD called Team Cindy (10 jumping pull-ups, 10 push-ups and 10 air squats, AMRAP for varied time intervals. The workout is performed in teams of three, and no one can move until each team member has completed his or her exercise):

- ... simply because we got to work as teams.
- Because you are able to work with your friends.
- When we work as a team and compete with others.
- Because you're competing, and that makes everyone work harder.
- Because you get a rest while you're waiting for the other people to finish.
- I liked the part that it's a team.
- Because the people you work with really push you along.
- The fact that we have a team ... really helps you do better in the WODs and helps you give it your best effort.
- I like exercising with and motivating my friends.
- I felt a part of a team and was obligated to do my job.
- I like working with my friends.

**“Think about your least favorite WOD so far this year. What is it you didn't like?”**

- Team Cindy; if you fail, your teammates fail.
- Team Cindy, hated it just because.
- Can't think of any I actually hated.
- One of the AMRAP in 10-15 min ones because they take freaking forever and you still suffer even if you work fast.
- I don't have a least favorite WOD so far ... .
- I love all WODs!
- They make all of me hurt and they made me sore the next day. They required a lot of energy and made me tired, annoyed and pissed at the world.
- The one with the 200 m runs because running is horrible and outlandish and makes me feel like a caveman chasing a lion that is just going to eat you anyway.
- My least favorite WOD this year was the one where we had to do 50 wall-balls as fast as possible, doing burpees every minute as well until we finished. I liked it the least ... although it was worth it.
- The one that made everyone sore for the entire weekend. Guess what I don't like about it.
- It was painful to do, and you feel like a rock afterwards. A really sore rock.
- I wasn't self-fulfilled by it.

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**“Running is horrible and outlandish and makes me feel like a caveman chasing a lion that is just going to eat you anyway.”**

**—Anonymous response  
when asked about their least-  
favorite WOD**

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Our failure at universal self-fulfillment aside, we see a number of positive take-aways from the survey data. Our observation and the students' own reports suggest that they are working at a high level of effort.

1. Grades are a powerful motivator for our students.
2. Students report significant gains in physical fitness as a result of participating in our program.
3. Students are able to identify a number of benefits of improved physical fitness.
4. Students want to become more fit.
5. Students as a group are highly motivated to work hard by their desire to improve their appearance.
6. Students are likely to work harder if they are part of a team.

As teachers, we try to reinforce high levels of effort in a variety of ways. Names go on the whiteboards for exceptional individual and team performance, students can

earn T-shirts for exceeding minimum standards, high fives abound, and Otter Pops are distributed liberally for hard work. We asked students for other suggestions. Can you guess what they want?

- A "get out of P.E. free" card.
- Skip a workout of our choice.
- A pass to sit out of P.E.
- Have a day off.

"Getting out of P.E." is part of the Saratoga High stereotype. Extracurricular activities, including sports, are seen by some as a way to get out of P.E. Marching band, enormously popular at our school, gets you out of P.E. This attitude—that P.E. is an annoying graduation requirement, a hurdle that should be leaped with the least possible investment of time and effort—has been a part of the culture for many years, long before CrossFit. Now that students are expected to work hard in P.E., is the situation worse?



*Some students now actually want to take P.E. classes, which is a new phenomenon at Saratoga High.*



***CrossFit Sawmill is hoping to produce well-rounded students who are smart and fit.***

This year, when the fall sports season ended, a handful of students asked to enroll in our P.E. classes for the remainder of the semester. They didn't get any "credit" for this. There was no requirement for them to be there. They just wanted to get more fit. This had never happened before. Guidance counselors and their computers had no provision for this.

Another handful of students, including some from the marching band, asked if they could participate in our after-school strength and conditioning program. They now work out side-by-side with after-school athletes, teachers, alumni and others who share our vision of CrossFit Sawmill as a fitness hub for the community. At the start of the second semester, over 50 off-season athletes, as well as a number of students in active sports, asked to enroll in a P.E.

class so that they could continue to work on fitness improvement during the school day. This effectively makes P.E. an elective course at Saratoga High for the first time that anyone can remember.

At Saratoga High, the culture of fitness is evolving, stereotypes are changing and the notion of a "well rounded" student is beginning to embrace the physical as well as the intellectual and artistic. Even among athletes, the concept of generalized fitness is gaining credibility. Perhaps it's a coincidence, but for the first time in 29 years, our football team won the big game this year against our next-town rivals. And so did our lacrosse team, and our basketball team, and our soccer team. Twice. Coincidence or not, our identity as a school community is changing, rapidly and profoundly.



### U of W

Fifty wall-ball shots, 4 burpees on the minute. Why didn't anybody quit?

Despite all the good-natured whining, the prejudices about P.E. and the difficulty of the task, they didn't quit *because they must be getting something out of it*. CrossFit has helped us to create a culture of fitness where for many students, meeting a challenge has become intrinsically rewarding:

- I love being able to work really hard but still get it done quickly.
- Every time I've done it, my results have been significantly better.
- It was very exciting and challenging.
- We got really into it and had fun.
- I liked how it pushed you to the limits.
- I liked it because it was challenging.
- I remember pushing myself a ton on that WOD. Therefore it was my favorite.
- I just thought that the more challenging WODs were better cuz I could tell that they were actually making me work harder.
- I like it because it targets all muscles and shows me where I am weak and strong every single time I perform it.

We wanted to be able to provide a protein/carb replacement drink so that our students could refuel after a workout and before forgetting to eat during orchestra practice or tutoring or SAT prep class or whatever. If we wanted a vending machine, our school has a contract that would limit us to Pepsi products. Pepsi makes Muscle Milk, and we decided we could live with that. Unfortunately, school food laws say Muscle Milk does not meet the lofty standards of the State of California as a beverage suitable for school-day consumption because it is not:

- Water with no added sweetener.
- 2 percent, 1 percent or non-fat milk, soy milk, rice milk and other similar non-dairy milk.
- Fruit- or vegetable-based drinks that are composed of at least 50 percent fruit or vegetable juice and have no added sweetener.

- Electrolyte-replacement beverages that have no more than 42 grams added sweetener per 20-oz. serving (42 grams of sugar, by the way, is about 10.5 teaspoons—just saying).

In the end, we were allowed to stock the vending machine but can only permit the sale of our illicit beverage 30 minutes before or after the school day.

This is not how we are going to motivate teens to take charge of their fitness; not by banning sodas from school campuses, not by legislating low-fat cookies over regular cookies or Gatorade over Muscle Milk, not even by requiring students to take P.E. classes. Our experience tells us that we can make a difference, however, if we give our students the chance to learn what better fitness feels like. We will have succeeded when we've taught our students this:

"Just to have the satisfaction that I achieved something higher than I did last time; so it will be easier next time."



### About the Author

*Peter Jordan is the Saratoga High School athletic director and physical-education department chair, and he is part-owner and operator of CrossFit Sawmill, along with fellow P.E. teachers Rick Ellis, Tim Lugo and Yuko Aoki.*