
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

The Crucible

A workout is a great time for learning about yourself and your movements. Justin Keane outlines one way to make the most of your time under the microscope.

By Justin Keane

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“Watch me jumpstart as the old skin is peeled. See an opening and bust into the field. Hidden longings no longer concealed.”

—*Watch Me Jumpstart, Guided by Voices*

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Knee—er—hip deep in my struggle with the air squat, I went to Jon Gilson for advice one night at a barbecue joint.

"I can't get out of my own head when I squat," I complained. "It's taking me, like, two minutes to do 20."

If I remember correctly, I was also hitting some skill work on stating the obvious that month. So I did: "I guess I'm thinking too much."

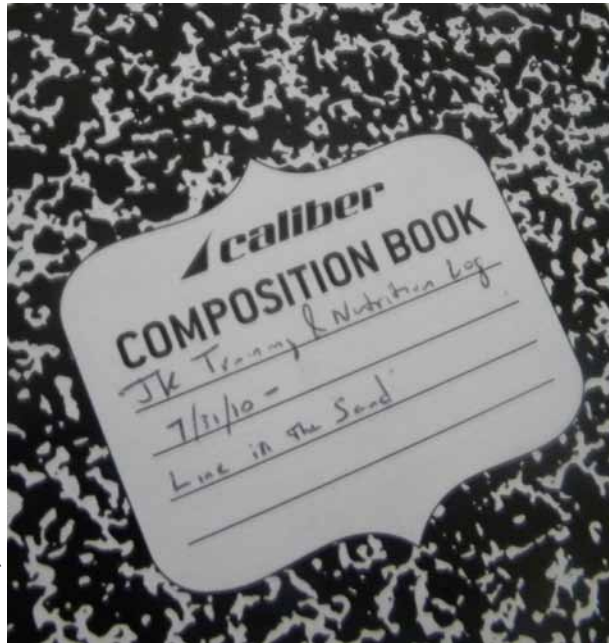
Jon thought for a second or two, then nodded.

"It's like with wide receivers, right? In practice they run their pass patterns and at game time ... they just fly."

And there it was, the perfect metaphor. And then we ate some ribs.

like our coach yelling, "3, 2, 1... Go!" And to a degree, this is a very useful dichotomy. How we respond under the klieg light of a WOD will reveal much: our wind, our guts and, yes, our heart. We go so hard at our practices in order that we might fail at the *margins* of our experience rather than in the thick of the thing. Running on muscle memory four minutes into Fran, we realize it is a beautiful thing indeed to be confronted with the essential question, "Who am I and how bad do I want it?" instead of its mundane second cousin twice removed, "Wait—do I drive out of the bottom of a thruster with my elbows or my shoulders?"

It's ultimately that caliber of unbending and clinical focus on our smaller triumphs and failings that will make us better CrossFitters.



Courtesy of Justin Keane

A training journal can be a powerful tool for any athlete.

Write It Down!

As CrossFitters, we make daily distinction between our pass patterns and our game routes. The former is "skill work"; the latter is "the WOD." Or perhaps we call one "strength work" and the other "conditioning." Whatever our nomenclature, there is most often a palpable sense that our entry to the real proving ground—such as it is—sounds a hell of a lot

like our coach yelling, "3, 2, 1... Go!" And to a degree, this is a very useful dichotomy. How we respond under the klieg light of a WOD will reveal much: our wind, our guts and, yes, our heart. We go so hard at our practices in order that we might fail at the *margins* of our experience rather than in the thick of the thing. Running on muscle memory four minutes into Fran, we realize it is a beautiful thing indeed to be confronted with the essential question, "Who am I and how bad do I want it?" instead of its mundane second cousin twice removed, "Wait—do I drive out of the bottom of a thruster with my elbows or my shoulders?"

It's one of life's most resonant tropes, the athletic realm as crucible. And if the receipts from the *Rocky* franchise are an accurate barometer, millions of moviegoers and several of Sly Stallone's ex-wives stand in agreement. It is a pretty seductive notion, after all: we go in one end and, under fire, emerge through the other somehow bigger and deeper. Better. It's such a seductive notion, in fact, that I'd argue we almost always shortchange the time spent within the crucible in favor of its sexier end result. Sure, it's approximately 50 times more fun to say "I shaved 10 seconds off my Fran time" than it is to limn out the dirty dirties like "I didn't give up on the set of 15 like I did last time," but it's ultimately that caliber of unbending and clinical focus on our smaller triumphs and failings that will make us better CrossFitters. Or: Show me a better journal; I'll show you a better CrossFitter.

I realize this isn't exactly revolutionary stuff, the assertion that journaling your workouts will get you where you want to go as a CrossFitter (and yes, shave 10 seconds off your Fran time), but it doesn't have to be. It just has to be true. And while there are a million ways to skin a cat, journal-wise (and here are two great examples: one from the aforementioned Jon Gilson over at [Again Faster](#), the other from Scott Hagnas at [CrossFit Portland](#)), I'd like to focus on one that I and several of my athletes have put to good use: The Sticking Point Journal.



Courtesy of Justin Keane

Journaling just might help you fight through sticking points in any movements you find particularly challenging.

If we stipulate that what happens within the crucible of our workouts is as important as what comes out in the proverbial wash, then it's incumbent upon us to document where, when and how we failed so that we might succeed the next time, or the time thereafter. In this regard, un-sticking our sticking points becomes its own music: the numbers sing with possibility, clang amidst stasis and thrive on surgical focus.

Reflection for Perfection

For example: Athlete A is in the middle of a three-month strength focus using the linear progression model straight out of Mark Rippetoe's *Starting Strength*.

She squats, presses, power cleans, bench presses, and deadlifts, and she adds weight as her ability to hold serve on form dictates. We'll use her Monday and Wednesday squats, at working weights of 185 and 190 lb. respectively, to illustrate the usage and efficacy of a Sticking Point Journal within her progression.

On Monday, she begins her workout as she always does: five minutes on the C2 rower. Nothing special. She feels loose, pulled well, rowed at her customary warm-up pace and kicked it in a little bit when she hit Minute 5. Had she deviated from the norm—pulled harder, faster, slower—she'd note it in her journal. But a standard is a standard, and that's all she'll write next to "warm-up": "status quo."

From there, she'll squat with the empty bar for 2 sets of 5. She will use these 2 warm-up sets to establish a full range of motion within the squat. If she feels any restriction on movement or has difficulty hitting depth, she'll make a note of it and will take another 1 or 2 sets with the empty bar until she's squatting through a full range of motion. As of now, her journal entry will look like this:

Warm-up: 5 min C2, status quo

Squats: Empty bar x 5 x 2—Difficulty with depth, sitting on top of legs, not between them—Sit back and down.

Empty bar x 5 x 1: Hit full ROM, back on heels nicely (position: feet slightly outside hips).

Moving toward her working weight on the squat, she'll begin to annotate her sets more acutely, assessing her work with a coach's eye on one particular teaching point per set. Was there a form fault throughout? Was one rep a lot better—or worse—than the rest? And, globally, she will ask herself, "What is the one thing I could do to make the next set better than the last?"

(We should hasten to note that safety concerns trump any and all smaller form faults. If a lifter feels herself initiating two or three reps with her knees but positively dive-bombs into her last rep mid-breath, the more egregious concern is noted or highlighted: "Don't rush the last rep—stay tight and safe!")

And so Athlete A's warm-up and work sets might look like this:

2-3 min rest between warm-up sets

75 x 5: Bar got forward of mid-foot on last two reps (elbows back, chest up!).

115 x 3: Light weight! No more than 5 seconds from un-racking to first squat.

155 x 1: Little high—sit butt back (feel stretch).

5 min rest

(Work)

185 x 5: Bar rode up toward traps on Rep 3—break across back.

185 x 5: Last rep best, thought with my hips—back and down, back and down.

185 x 5: Rested extra minute before set; keep low back tight on reps 4-5.

And she'll press, and she'll power clean, and she'll call it a day. Now, it's Wednesday, and the rubber is about to hit the road for our Sticking Point Journal. Athlete A begins again with her warm-up on the C2 and 2 sets of 5 squats with the empty bar. This time around, she feels free and easy, burying her empty-bar warm-ups. In fact, she feels a little less restriction in her left hip than she has in several workouts and can widen her stance accordingly.

Warm-up: 5 min rower, felt great. Humid day, nice and loose.

Squats: Empty bar x 5 x 2: Full ROM, hips loose, feet under shoulders.

We most often find that all it takes for our athletes to correct their last session's corresponding form fault is the simple mental goose of seeing it in their own handwriting.

Not needing any extra work with the empty bar, she'll begin to push the weight up. However, for her coaching cues she'll be looking at Monday's record and that of her current workout in equal measure. For instance, as she readies for her first warm-up set at 75 lb., she'll look to Monday's set at 75 for her marching orders while also minding any form faults from the set she's just completed. So, she'll want to keep her elbows back and chest up (Monday's cue) while keeping her feet right under her shoulders and working that width and full range of motion (a cue from her last set completed).

In theory, it seems as though we're asking the lifter to keep her eye on two moving targets; in practice, we most often find that all it takes for our athletes to correct their last session's corresponding form fault is the simple mental goose of seeing it in their own handwriting. This correction, as it were, happens before Rep 1 and frees the athlete up to address the present day's most expedient form fault for the duration of that set.

Moreover, we seek to correct corresponding sets from workout to workout, in this case because it very directly underscores the beauty of a linear progression. Whether an athlete is essaying that progression in classic *Starting Strength* mode or not, we build by adding, and adding, and adding, then stepping back, then adding, and adding. In that regard, a Sticking Point Journal might come to resemble a general contractor's job book from day to day, workout to workout.

Making Sense of Variety

So too might a CrossFitter following the more consistently varied programming endemic to CrossFit.com or most affiliates benefit from a Sticking Point Journal. Although here, I'd argue we're better served by getting at the gestalt of the thing rather than the thing itself. (Am I quoting Maude Lebowksi? Sounds like something she'd say, and yes—I'm taking a shot at myself.) Let's backpedal a bit.

It's not only possible but highly probable that you may have to wait four or 12 months to repeat a CrossFit WOD. Further, it's just as likely you'll encounter two or three derivations on an original theme before returning to the

theme itself: a WOD with 30 push presses and 45 wall-balls, first in 10-10-10/15-15-15, the next as part of a chipper, the next during Fight Gone Bad. Now, of course, we'll take the same care to log our WOD in the journal as we did with our strength work, but we'll do so with two concessions in mind. First, as we'll be logging the WOD after it's done rather than piecemeal through each work set, we'll understand that our accounting may be slightly Cheech and Chong. Hypoxia is a powerful thing, after all. We may not remember where the fifth rep of the second round of push presses broke down; we'll almost surely remember how it felt when we had to drop the bar and what we said to ourselves to make it start happening again. Like, you know, "Pick that bar up, maaan." Hold that thought.

When we note, for instance, that we broke down a little bit after the first 5 or 6 minutes but hauled ass over the last, we're providing ourselves with some important data and a little mental jumpstart for the next WOD in that ballpark.



Courtesy of Justin Keane

When studied before and after a workout, a journal can help you identify where you can improve your performance.

We'll also note that we're going to have a pretty tough time taking pen to paper in anticipation of what form faults we might have occasion to correct during our next workout. Not only don't we know when we'll do what we just did again, but we've also got a far more incipient concern: we've got no idea what we're doing tomorrow. It's all well and good to know that we struggled with lockout during the second round of push presses. How's that going to help us during tomorrow's 5K? Hold that thought, too.

Now put those two thoughts you've been holding together and shake 'em up real good, like they're in a two-thought hopper. We want our Sticking Point Journal to function like Athlete A's neat little strength biography—fell down here, got up there, do this next time—but we need it to be something more of a living document, one that truly breathes the unknowable wind of our sport. To that end, we've found the optimal Sticking Point Journal

entry for an athlete following classic CrossFit programming takes on a somewhat informal, largely narrative tack (there's that pesky gestalt of the thing) that answers several questions:

1. What type of WOD did I just hit and where did I break down?
2. What did I learn today that will help me tomorrow?

To the first point, the unknowable isn't necessarily esoteric. We've got our weightlifting WODs, our gymnastic WODs, our metabolic conditioning WODs, and our mixes and matches thereof. Here the classic distinction between strength and conditioning is useful, not antiquated. If we see "Thrusters 1-1-1-1-1" or "Power snatch 10x3" on the whiteboard, we know we're working strength and, to a degree, we're able to log our WOD as our Athlete A did above—form faults by sets or reps, one coaching point per.



Courtesy of Justin Keane

You'll notice differences between logging strength work and met-cons, but you should be able to learn something from all your workouts.

If we've got something like, "AMRAP 15 minutes: 10 burpees, 10 dumbbell snatches left arm, 10 burpees, 10 dumbbell snatches right arm," we know we're driving through met-con city. And grouping these WODs by durations and type—e.g. "medium-duration time priority"—then jotting down a few free-form post-WOD thoughts on performance is a great way to maximize our Sticking Point Journal. When we note, for instance, that we broke down a little bit after the first 5 or 6 minutes but hauled ass over the last, we're providing ourselves with some important data and a little mental jumpstart for the next WOD in that ballpark. Eight months may pass between shots at Fran. Eight days probably won't pass between short-duration task-priority WODs, and when we hit that next burner, we'll reread our notes prior to warm-up, get ourselves amped, and make that sumbitch sing.

Learn From Every Experience

But what about tomorrow? What about the 5K? What good are our notes on today's holy-hell-this-was-heavy burner going to do us around Mile 2 tomorrow? Quite a bit, actually. Where did we fail during our push presses, and what did we think? And what did we learn about ourselves? Reading a narrative like the one below ought to give us a heck of a lot to work with, and it shouldn't be too hard to understand why:

Heavy, short-duration task-priority WOD: 12-9-6 push presses (135 lb.), box jumps (27 inches)—First sets unbroken, second set of pushes 3-3-3, weight felt like it was going to crush me at times. Got back to basics: slight dip, descended from lockout with the weight rather than letting it crash. Keep your head across full ROM; 4:35. Could have pushed harder on third round. Really humid, let that get in my head.

Here's a useful exercise: read something like, "I felt like the barbell was going to crush my chest, but I finished my sets" before a running WOD the very next day. Then try telling yourself "I can't do it" around Mile 2 when the "it" in question is the simple act of putting your feet in front of each other a little faster. "I can't" sounds a little silly now, doesn't it?

And that's the Sticking Point Journal. In a nutshell, it's your crucible, a record of where you fell down or skirted failure and what you learned about yourself, and it's the purposive writing of the next page—every workout, every WOD. Give it and try and let us know how it goes!



Courtesy of Justin Keane

About the Author

Justin Keane is the owner and head trainer at *Crossfit Woodshed*, based in and around Littleton, Mass. He has been CrossFitting since 2007, credits the great majority of his development as an athlete and coach to Neal Thompson of CrossFit Boston and Jon Gilson of *Again Faster*, and will always believe CrossFit Boston is the best gym in the country. He'd love to squat 450 lb. and run a six-minute mile by his 40th birthday but considers it far more important that the athletes at CrossFit Woodshed learn the most important lesson of all: your classmate's PR is just as important as yours.