

Elite Soldiers, Elite Fitness

A Scout Sniper instructor implements CrossFit in his training program and sees dramatic results.

Staff Sgt. Matthew Kostielney, U.S. Marines



Cpl. D.A. Haynes/United States Marine Corps

I have felt no better satisfaction nor shared any greater responsibility than serving my country with my fellow Marines. I consider my duty to be both a privilege and a skilled profession that requires great commitment.

Before I get hot and heavy into the concept of combat fitness and my own experience gained by the implementation of the CrossFit method at the United States Marine Corps Scout Sniper School, I want to be perfectly clear: I don't give a shit about test tubes, biomedical chemistry experiments and the biological processes involved with physiological adaptations from exercise.

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The Soldier and Fitness

I have taken the time to research and understand the principles governing exercise physiology, but I'm intelligent enough to realize that they are minuscule in importance when compared to the overall goal. This goal is fitness—not just any type of fitness, but elite fitness.

CrossFit provides a means to that goal, and it's a protocol adaptable to men and women of all ages, sizes and, most importantly, levels of skill. I will give my best effort to explain what I do, what my students do, what we were doing before, and what we are doing better now with the direction given by Greg and Lauren Glassman and the rest of the CrossFit team.

I currently serve as an instructor at the United States Marine Corps Scout Sniper School. Greater detail is not needed. What the enemy doesn't know can kill them—which is a good thing. I have deployed several times in support of operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. I have learned a great deal of the demands encountered when pursuing, hunting and killing our enemies abroad.

What I can take from my experiences is this: in war, you should expect to find yourself in a confrontation in which you are fighting an enemy in a multitude of rapidly changing situations. You'll test your cardiorespiratory endurance while trekking the mountainous peaks of Afghanistan, and in an instant you'll have to possess the strength and agility needed to root out your foe house to house, room by room, just like you're in the alleyways of Al Ramadi or Fallujah. This is what it takes to perform America's business and achieve victory. This is who I am, and this is what I do.

So, you're dealing with a Marine with recent combat experience, and he says war is an ever-changing animal. Sweet—but what the hell does that have to do with your everyday nine-to-five routine filled with work, kids, daycare, and maybe dinner and a movie? I'll tell you that it means everything in the arena of fitness and survival because CrossFit will allow you, just like the soldier, to prepare for any circumstances and perform in any situation.

Courtesy of Staff Sgt. Matthew Kostielney



Staff Sgt. Kostielney says candidates at the United States Marine Corps Scout Sniper School have experienced less injuries as a result of CrossFit training.

A Letter to Greg Glassman

Allow me to discuss what I have witnessed during my implementation of the CrossFit method at the Marine Corps Scout Sniper School. I'll start by presenting a letter I wrote to Greg Glassman, which I later discussed with Neil Anderson on [CrossFit Radio](#).

Greg,

You and I crossed paths the other day at your recent Level 1 Certification at CrossFit Camp Pendleton. We discussed the performance of my students at the USMC Scout Sniper course over the past eight weeks and the impact of CrossFit on their final fitness evaluation. I am a Scout Sniper instructor and a very calculated man, but you do not have to be a genius to analyze the results. They are as follows:

July 7-Sept. 5, 2008

31 Scout Sniper candidates

12 CrossFit sessions

5 conditioning hikes

4 endurance runs

Scout Sniper candidates performed a benchmark CrossFit workout every Monday and Wednesday. They were in the standard Girls and Hero formats, and in the beginning we had to scale these for most students to ensure proper form. In the end, over 93 percent of the class was performing these evolutions as required.

Every even Friday, we performed a conditioning hike ranging from 5 to 15 miles through the hills of Camp Pendleton at the fastest pace the individual candidate could maintain. GPS data from a Garmin Foretrex 101 indicates an average pace of 4.5-5.3 miles per hour, as well as breadcrumb trails indicating frequent gains in elevation ranging from 300 to 900 feet mean sea level. Loads carried by the candidate were incrementally increased by 5 lb. starting with an initial load of 35 lb. and progressing to a load of 55 lb.

Every odd Friday, we performed an endurance run ranging in distance from 4 to 7 miles in full utility uniform, holding a pace of 6:45-7:45 per mile across uneven terrain.

Initial Average	Final Average	Performance Differential
Body weight:		
176.23 lb.	173.55 lb.	-2.68
Physical Fitness Test score (out of 300):		
272.3	288.8	+16.5
PFT score above 285:		
10	25	+15
3-mile run:		
20:44	19:15	-1:29

The most significant observation was there were absolutely no injuries encountered throughout the training regimen. Candidates did not develop rhabdomyolysis, stress fractures, ITB overuse, ACL tears or muscle strains. This comes as a surprise considering that past records indicate we regularly dis-enroll three to four candidates per class for medical afflictions sustained directly from training.

These students were specifically selected from the Fleet Marine Force to attend Scout Sniper School. Most have served and fought in combative areas of operation. In other words, they were seasoned veterans but adhered to the old standard of five days of long, slow runs and limited calisthenics sessions. These Marines are now more capable of shooting, moving, communicating and ultimately killing. They are a testament to your training principles. More people should hear your voice and most importantly listen! I thank you for your contributions to CrossFit Camp Pendleton, and even more so, for your patriotism.

Thanks, Coach.

Forging Elite Combat Fitness

This was simply the beginning. In essence, I was just starting to scratch the surface of the potential CrossFit had for improving my combat fitness and that of my Marines.

Over time and through trial and error, I've played with the amount of conditioning hikes and endurance runs, as well as the frequency and number of CrossFit sessions. In doing so, I've seen reduced injuries and an overall increase in fitness in a relatively short period of time. This approach to training better prepares my Marines for combat and makes them more lethal when applying the skills they learn at Scout Sniper School.

This fitness program is still in the works, and I keep tabulated scores of all CrossFit sessions performed by my students. I record the tracks and routes of all hikes that we perform aboard MCB Camp Pendleton. I place the students on an unknown course without stating a distance or time standard. I introduce as many variables as possible, all while emphasizing that the maneuver be negotiated as quickly as humanly possible. These hikes are long and they are painful. They are always fast, and they really force you to look deep inside your psyche. But I have to say the CrossFit method has prepared these snipers better for said challenges than the typical shit you find littering the "fitness" section of most magazine stands.

The results of the progress made by my other students are as follows:

Scout Sniper Basic Course 1-09 Oct. 7-Dec. 5, 2008

- 26 Scout Sniper candidates
- 16 CrossFit sessions
- 2 conditioning hikes
- 3 endurance runs

Initial Average	Final Average	Performance Differential
Body weight:		
169.85 lb.	158.37 lb.	-11.48 lb.
Physical Fitness Test score (out of 300):		
260.4	280	+19.6
PFT score above 285:		
2	12	+10
3-mile run:		
20:31	19:23	-1:08

Lance Cpl. Kyle J. Keathley/United States Marine Corps



Functional fitness is critical for deployed soldiers who have no idea what each mission will require of their bodies.

Courtesy of Staff Sgt. Matthew Kostelney



Scout Snipers find themselves in a wide variety of situations. Elite fitness allows them a chance to succeed in all of them.

**Scout Sniper Basic Course 2-09
March 9–May 1, 2009**

- 31 Scout Sniper candidates
- 20 CrossFit sessions
- 2 conditioning hikes
- 3 endurance runs

**Scout Sniper Basic Course 3-09
June 2–July 27, 2009**

- 32 Scout Sniper candidates
- 20 CrossFit sessions
- 3 conditioning hikes
- 3 endurance runs

Initial Average	Final Average	Performance Differential
Body weight:		
172.63 lb.	163.48 lb.	-9.15 lb.
Physical Fitness Test score (out of 300):		
274.4	288.8	+ 14.4
PFT score above 285:		
9	23	+14
3-mile run:		
20:44	19:44	-1:00

Initial Average	Final Average	Performance Differential
Body weight:		
174.59 lb.	171.19 lb.	-3.4 lb.
Physical Fitness Test score (out of 300):		
267.5	283.6	+ 16.1
PFT score above 285:		
4	19	+15
3-mile run:		
21:36	19:58	-1:38

Analyzing the Results

My pay is average, but I would be willing to wager a paycheck that no results of this magnitude have been replicated in such a short time using any other program or fitness regimen.

The Marines who struggled to complete Helen under 12 minutes struggled on the steep inclines and varying terrain experienced during conditioning hikes. Some of this particular pool had what is considered a "High" USMC Physical Fitness Test score. Those who were very strong in the slow lifts were crippled when it came to overall body control demonstrated in the muscle-up or handstand push-up. Marines with a blazing five-kilometer time had issues doing body-weight deadlifts for repetitions.

Overall, the fitness achieved at the end of every course far exceeded the end state observed in previous Sniper courses when we were not using CrossFit.

Marines did what they normally do when they get pissed off. They cursed themselves, taunted each other and, in the end, pushed one another to the limits of their personal work capacity. Pain was common but never ignored. It was more or less embraced, with humiliation and scrutiny acting as the penalty for laziness.

Overall, the fitness achieved at the end of every course far exceeded the end state observed in previous Sniper courses when we were not using CrossFit. Marines gained a "dangerous balance" in their personal ability to perform combat duties. The men who were fast are now fast *and* strong. Those who were strong can now carry that same strength to the fight over a longer distance—and quickly.

I would argue, and many would agree, that these Marines are fitter and more balanced for combat than those who train in a single domain. Would you ever isolate your mind? Why would you dare isolate the body?

We train men to independently carry out high-risk missions forward of friendly lines, often on a condensed timeline with arduous circumstances pending. That kind of sounds like the stress you feel physically when you have Fight Gone Bad coming up at 3:30 in the morning. These Marines learned to thrive in such predicaments, and I would with great confidence employ them anytime and anyplace because they now see no physical or mental task as insurmountable.

Cpl. D.A. Haynes/United States Marine Corps



Data shows that over the last year, three groups of Scout Sniper candidates have improved their fitness significantly with CrossFit workouts.

There is no other physical regimen better suited to produce the results needed by the combat athlete in existence today. Moreover, the CrossFit program is scalable to the needs of all, providing the individual with a fitness that is applicable in any and all eventualities. I enjoy witnessing my students overcoming hardship, and I similarly enjoy the leadership and camaraderie created after a brutal physical task has been undertaken and overcome. I believe the late president John F. Kennedy said it best:

There is no other physical regimen better suited to produce the results needed by the combat athlete in existence today.

"Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty."

During workouts and on long hikes, I am asked, "How far, sergeant?" The answer I give is as simple as it is comical: "All the way!" In my eyes there is no other way to render faithful service to our children and to our home.

Thank you for allowing me to share how CrossFit has impacted and pushed the fitness standard at the United States Marine Corps Scout Sniper School. And to my fellow Snipers, happy hunting!

Semper Fidelis.



About the Author

Staff Sgt. Kostielney has deployed in support of both Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. He has served as a Scout Sniper on numerous combat operations and is now charged with the duty of teaching his skills to infantry Marines.



Courtesy of Staff Sgt. Matthew Kostielney

CrossFit raised the fitness level of candidates at Scout Sniper School, but it also taught them about overcoming adversity.



The author believes CrossFit has helped prepare graduates of Scout Sniper School for the challenges they'll face on the battlefield.