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Fit to Fight

Sara Ayaz describes how CrossFit and Krav Maga work together to produce finely tuned martial artists.

By Sara Ayaz

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All images: Courtesy of Sara Ayaz

When I first started Krav Maga, it was the single most intense and awesome thing I had ever encountered. As a lifelong martial artist, I was looking for a system that was more ardent and practical than what I had previously done. Krav Maga was that system.

1 of 5



Krav Maga is similar to CrossFit in that the classes are interval-oriented and the focus is on practical, real-world scenarios.

Krav Maga is a self-defense system created by Imi Lichtenfeld, and it focuses on practical approaches to modern-day threats. It was forged in a hostile environment and is ever-evolving.

Each class starts with a 10-minute warm-up that consists of cardio, calisthenics and working our basic stance. Classes are interval-oriented. After two-to-three years of Krav, your athletic ability should be at a fairly high level. Each ranking in Krav consists of a three-to-five-hour endurance test involving punching, kicking, sparring and whatever other creative calisthenics hell the person running the test can think up.

One might say Krav Maga is the full package: self-defense, fighting and fitness.

Enter CrossFit.

Creating a Hybrid

Mid-South Krav Maga (MSKM) has always had a fitness program since it was founded in 2003. Our cardio kickboxing class was our main fitness class, supplemented by circuit training and, more recently, CrossFit. Rob Yahn, a Level 1 CrossFit coach and instructor at MSKM, introduced lead instructor Michael Hooker to CrossFit.

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Hooker fell in love with the CrossFit workouts but found a lot of the students were scared to venture into this high-intensity training.

"I was in great shape as far as the martial-arts world was concerned but found myself at the bottom of the barrel with CrossFit," Hooker says. "This gave me the drive to pursue CrossFit. I believe that me starting at the bottom helped me to influence more of our Krav Maga students to jump into the trenches with me.

"I took the CrossFit workouts that I felt we could scale to our abilities in the beginning, and we worked through them together. As it evolved, I found myself gearing more toward the fighter, leaving out some of the Oly lifts and heavier weight training. The atmosphere that is created by the group and the non-competitive nature has increased the enthusiasm of the group as a whole."

A personal favorite workout that we do is "Annie Plus Cindy": 20 minutes to perform Annie for time followed by as many rounds of Cindy as possible in the time remaining. (We call it "AMRAP ITLOO," or "as many rounds as possible in time left out of 20.") What I particularly enjoy about this workout is that even if people's Annie times are varied, everyone starts and finishes together.

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Some might say it is the perfect marriage.

Ready for Anything

Krav Maga is designed for use by anyone from any walk of life. A bodybuilder, a petite female and a college athlete can be equally efficient.

The biggest equalizer in a street fight is aggression. We train to function under stress and to be very aggressive. We don't play by rules. These elements are what equalize a fight between a 100-lb. female and a 230-lb. man.

When I started Krav, I was around 128 lb. I wasn't in awful shape, but I was certainly nowhere near fit. As I began progressing through the system, it became clear that my major weaknesses were in my lack of strength and aggression.

Just over a year after I started doing our fitness program religiously, doing two-to-four WODs a week, I tested again. The difference in strength, muscle recovery and cardio was unbelievable. Four-and-a-half hours of non-stop activity and I never struggled.



Krav Maga trains fighters to use aggression and function under stress—essential skills in a street fight.

The street fight generally lasts less than a minute. In that minute, your heart rate will triple and your adrenaline will be through the roof—a feeling those of us who endure hellish WODs are well acquainted with. While Krav Maga is solely centered toward the street fight, some people train in both mixed martial arts and Krav, and some students have ventured into amateur ring fights for the experience.

The CrossFit-style programming produces massive advantages in the ring fight. The muscle recovery, cardio and strength are assets every fighter wants. A difficult part of ring fighting and mixed martial arts is the constant transitioning from ground fighting to stand-up fighting, but with the conditioning CrossFit brings, this becomes much less difficult.

For everything that is practiced and trained in Krav, CrossFit supplements it perfectly. For myself and many other students, this dynamic approach to fitness has become the final piece in our journey.

"Coaching CrossFit has given me some practical tools in my Krav Maga instruction, such as Tabata punching drills," says John Whitman, president of the Krav Maga Alliance and owner/lead instructor of Focus Self-Defense and CrossFit.

"It has given me a deeper understanding of high-intensity work," he continues. "And as a practitioner, I find that CrossFit has allowed me to become even stronger and more explosive than before. It is becoming more common for students to train in both Krav Maga and CrossFit, and they are seeing huge benefits in both areas."

John Covington, a Krav Maga instructor and co-coordinator of the fitness program, has seen similar benefits.

"At 42 I feel like I'm in the best shape of my life. Not only do I feel stronger and have more endurance than I've ever had, but I find I'm much more happy and stress-free."

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**—John Whitman,
Krav Maga Alliance**

In Krav, we learn to push our limits. We hit our wall and push past it. The ability to draw on every bit of energy, strength and determination you have is what might potentially save your life in a fight.

Combining this mindset with the drive CrossFit instills to push yourself to the max has produced incredible results, even for those people doing two WODs per week as opposed to three or more.



CrossFit training helps fighters transition from ground fighting to stand-up fighting, one of the most difficult aspects of mixed martial arts.



Try this move in your next CrossFit warm-up.

The willingness to push past what you think you can do and what might hurt and to see what you are physically capable of is often a scary concept. To be in an environment that constantly encourages you to progress and succeed, to extend those limits, has an immense impact on every aspect of life.

Diversity

Our new approach to fitness has gained an almost cult following with people including college students, law-enforcement personnel, lawyers, doctors, ex-service-people, housewives and everyone in between. This diversity is commonly found in both CrossFit and Krav Maga, though not often seen in other fitness and martial-arts programs.



Always do toes-to-bar near the speakers for maximum motivation.

As a lifelong martial artist, I can only say that the feeling of being strong and capable and knowing I can walk in peace with the skills that Krav has given me is something I want to share with everyone.



About the Author

A lifelong martial artist, Sara Ayaz has studied various styles including karate, Chinese kenpo, kung-fu and kali. She has competed in state-wide and nationwide karate tournaments. She became addicted to CrossFit after her first workout in early 2010. She is now an apprentice instructor at Krav Maga Desoto, owned by Michael Hooker. She is planning on competing in next year's CrossFit Games season.