

## All (Mistakenly) Bow to Fran

In a system built on continuous variety, is it a danger that the classic 21-15-9 thruster/pull-up WOD, CrossFit's highest power-output workout, has become so important?

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As we all know, "Fran" is one of the classic benchmark CrossFit workouts that combines a weight lifting movement with a calisthenic movement. The rep range of 21-15-9 developed by Greg Glassman is known for its ability to improve metabolic conditioning, but it also helps maximize work capacity. The thruster epitomizes the idea of moving a "large load a long distance quickly" (another concept vital for power production), while the kipping pull-up requires a coordinated and eloquent full-body "wave of contraction" to be done quickly and effectively. Fran has captured the hearts of most, if not all CrossFitters. This bothers me.

Fran appeared as the WOD on the main site on September 15th, and there were over 1,000 posts to the comments. On December 3rd, the number of posts was over 900. Why is that? What is the allure of Fran? Why the hell is it so popular?

Before we get into all that, I think it's relevant that you know a little bit about me. I've been CrossFitting since late March of 2008, and even though my CrossFit career is relatively short, I consider myself to be in the upper percentile regarding performance. Prior to December 3rd, my PR on Fran was 2:30, Rx'd on June 24th. I did that on my second try. Whoop-dee-doo, right?

Since then I did Fran at a Level I Certification (after doing bottom-to-bottom Tabata Squats), and I ripped my hands apart due to high humidity and baby-soft palms. I somehow managed a bloody 3:47 Rx'd. After the certification, I opened an affiliate with my co-owners and hit a 2:57, Rx'd on September 9th a day after doing ["The Chief"](#). (For those of you who did "The Chief," you should remember it).

So, do you see the problem so far? I've put Fran on a pedestal already by using it to describe myself for this article. I've defined my CrossFit existence to you, the reader, by talking about my experience with Fran. And I hate myself for it.

December 3rd rolls around, and Fran is the WOD. Long story short, I'm anticipating Fran as if I'm getting prepared to play a NFL playoff game. My adrenaline was pumping, and I hadn't even finished breakfast. Fast forward a few hours later, and it was finally game time. I cranked out Fran in unbroken sets, and collapsed on the floor. My good ol' pal AC ran up to shout out my time; 2:15. I lie on the ground, doing the typical "I'm a fish sucking air" bit while my hands undergo a compressing pain, but I feel victorious. As a CrossFitter, I'm sure you know this feeling. I'm sure you've come to love this feeling.

Well, AC and I videotaped my workout. I was interested in seeing what my form looks like in an all-out effort. It looks pretty good, real good in fact...right up until I did only 12 reps for the second set of thrusters. I remember my thought process during that set. I was strategizing my effort, and I lost count of my reps. I thought I was off by a rep or so, but couldn't know for sure. It's not like I was going to stop and ask my two-person audience what rep I was on. The tape showed me I was off by three friggin'

reps. Look, it's not like I expected to be the second person to get a sub 2:00 Fran. But, damn it, I thought I had a PR. I immediately started brooding.

Do you see the problem again? Fran has become so important to our community, and to me, that by not PR'ing on the workout I've turned into an irritable jackass. Fran has seemingly developed into the quintessential CrossFit workout. In the Globo Gym, you'll be greeted with, "Hey, how much do you bench?" In CrossFit it's, "Hey, what's your Fran time?" But why is it so important? Why does it sit on that pedestal?

### Power-wise, Nothing Else Comes Close

The first thought that comes to mind is this: it's damn hard. Fran is not an easy workout. And it gets even worse because the better you get at it, the worse you feel afterwards. Fran epitomizes the classic "love/hate" relationship in life. The few seconds after you get off the bar after the last pull-up, whether you tried it for the first time, have a firefighter's outfit on, or hit a PR, your thought process is something along the lines of, "Well, that was a dumbass idea." But then you love the feeling you get when you exert yourself to your maximum potential, especially if you stand (or lie) victorious. As humans we feel successful after doing something that is damn hard, and Fran is no exception.

One of the most compelling characteristics of Fran is that it produces an insane amount of power. This is why such a short workout can literally rock your face off. Have you ever calculated your power output on Fran? Here are some numbers that reflect my PR of 2:30 (using this [Work & Power Output Calculator](#)):

Power Output	
Body Weight	193
Watts	379.4
Horsepower	0.52
ft-lbs/sec	279.83

**Table 1**

**Footnote here: This power calculator generates approximate numbers as it doesn't take anthropometry (limb length in addition to height and weight) into consideration. It is, though, precise enough for the relative calculations and conclusions of this article.**

Turn that power into thermal energy, and that's enough energy to heat .658 gallons of water by 10 degrees Fahrenheit. Ok, maybe that's not so cool, but that power converted to mechanical energy will allow a 3,000 pound car to move at 20.46 miles per hour (according to the [Energy and Power Conversion Calculator](#)). I don't know how to calculate that, but the point is that we have a relatively high work capacity during Fran, and if you compare it to other workouts, they won't come close.

Maybe that is the allure of Fran. Nothing else will put a hit on our musculature and energy systems like this metabolic conditioning gem. It's damn hard because we're producing so much, and that's why we like it. We like workouts that increase our ability to do work, because that is the whole premise of what CrossFit methodology stands for. But has it developed into something more?

When I failed at Fran on December 3rd, I felt like I was running down an open field ready to score a winning touchdown, except I fumbled the ball. When I give you this simile it makes sense to you because CrossFit has developed into the sport of fitness. "Men will die for points," is what Coach Glassman so famously said. Indeed they will. I've bloodied myself silly multiple times for the ever-truthful stopwatch.

In that sense, many of you are just like me. You also probably scour the comments in search of anyone that hammered out a faster time than you. People like us not only want to see a PR on every workout, but they want to try and sit at the top of the field. CrossFit has inevitably promoted a friendly competition not only against yourself, but with all CrossFitters. And that's OK! There's nothing wrong with that. As long as you're not a pompous ass (which I've never run into in this 'sport'). I just hope that we don't lose sight of the true purpose of why we CrossFit.

### **"Increased work capacity across broad time and modal domains."**

IWCABTAMD. That's why we CrossFit. If you've had the pleasure of attending a Level I Certification, the trainers will make sure this idea is ingrained in your head. When Coach Glassman experimented with creating workouts, the above statement was his only goal for his athletes (if using a Smith machine was going to increase work capacity most effectively, then he'd probably use it. Well, probably not, but you get the point...). Everything we do within this methodology revolves around increasing our ability to do work by doing lots of functional movements over an array of time periods. Period.





This should be —and actually is—our *only* goal. We don't do it to look better, to feel better, or to be healthier. These things are merely resultants of our ever-increasing work capacity. In order to increase that work capacity, we need to stress our musculature and our energy systems from all perspectives. We constantly vary our approach because we want to adapt to a varied stress to literally be ready for anything. CrossFitters know that this means we'll always be doing something different. That's why some of us sit at the computer and hit refresh at night waiting for tomorrow's WOD. (And if you're me, you downloaded a browser tool that can refresh every five minutes automatically...).

Now, let's think of the implications of the premise of CrossFit. We constantly vary our workouts to constantly vary the stress. We certainly don't want to specialize in one kind of stress, because we want to be capable to handle all stresses (from a musculature and energy systems perspective). This inherently means that one workout doesn't have precedence over another. One could even say that one workout should not be placed on a pedestal above the others. Do you see where I'm going with this?

The last thing I wanted to do after failing to complete a PR Fran correctly was calculate the power output. However, I think it's helpful to do so. Here is a comparison between my 2:30 Fran, and my attempt that had three less thrusters at a time of 2:15:

Power Output		
Workout	2:30 Rx'd (PR)	2:15 (DQ)
Body Weight	193	197
Watts	379.4	409.02
Horsepower	0.52	0.56
ft-lbs/sec	279.83	301.68

**Table 2**

As you can see in the table, my power output went *up* in my disqualified attempt at Fran. If I look at my latest performance as a competitive CrossFit athlete, it's a bummer because it doesn't count. But if I look at it while remembering the true purpose of CrossFit (IWCABTAMD), then this, my friends, is a victory. Yes, my output would have been higher still had I done it correctly, but even with the minor hiccup I am increasing my ability to do work.



But does Fran deserve to be known as the WOD that has the highest work output?

Well, I had to know. I continued to use the Catalyst Athletics Power Calculator to calculate the work output of some of the benchmark WODs. I was limited by what exercises could be inserted into the calculator, by using only myself as the only data source, and not scouring all of the WODs I have ever done and just sticking to the benchmarks that were usable. I want to preface the following by stating that I am in no way attempting an exuberant display of statistical analysis. Besides, I left grad school before I took that class. Here is what I found:

Please note that I've included the number of times I've completed each workout to give you an idea of my experience with the physical and metabolic demands.

It's quite clear to me why Linda and Elizabeth have a low output since a) I am and was relatively weak at deadlifts and b) inexperienced with the full clean during a met-con respectively (but also because that's what we would expect out of Linda). However, this is still an interesting anecdotal piece of data.

For the most part, the WODs below that have a low power output caused me to suffer more *during* the workout and recover relatively quickly afterwards. Furthermore, the WODs with a higher power output caused me to suffer more *after* the workout, although during the workout I wasn't in as much relative physical pain (apparently it's all relative, huh?). This concept alone could possibly act as a catalyst for all kinds of discussions regarding varying levels of work output and the response from our bodies.

WODs	Result	Completions	Power Output	
			Horsepower	ft-lbs/sec
Linda	33:18 Rx'd (BW=192)	2	0.11	58.71
Elizabeth	8:48 Rx'd	1	0.20	108.92
Angie	11:34 Rx'd	3	0.21	115.88
Isabelle	4:47 Rx'd (Power Snatch)	2	0.22	119.18
Tabata Something Else	481 Reps, Rx'd	2	0.24	131.04
Karen	6:26 w/ 25# ball	3	0.24	128.86
Diane	4:47 Rx'd	1	0.25	138.09
Cindy	25 rounds, Rx'd	3	0.28	154.38
Grace	2:57 Rx'd	1	0.40	218.91
Fran	2:30 Rx'd (PR)	2nd Try	0.52	249.83
Fran	2:15 (DQ)	4th Try	0.56	301.68

Table 3



Does this hold true for all CrossFitters? I don't think it could. The human body is awesomely complex and people are incredibly different, even if they have the same anthropometry. However, my initial reaction is that this may commonly occur in the upper echelon of CrossFitters, yet I am unable to quantify what that echelon actually is. Regardless, I found out that not only is "Fran" a workout that has the highest power output for me, but my failed "Fran" attempt yielded a higher output than my previous PR.

### Bottom line: One workout is not enough

I learned a few lessons after realizing this. First and foremost, as a competitor or as a person trying to succeed in this world, there will be victories and failures. However, your perception of those victories and failures will define your personhood, your character, and your ability to persevere and continue striving for success.

Secondly, the hype surrounding Fran is stupid. I'm as guilty as anyone for putting Fran on a pedestal, but I've gained some perspective on the matter. It's just another workout that is helping me, and all CrossFitters, increase their work capacity. We can still shovel more rock than the average bodybuilder, power lifter, endurance athlete, and average person because of this.

This brings me to my third, and most important, point; CrossFitters shouldn't train for one particular workout. Have you ever heard the story of someone doing Fran once a month or more to "bring their Fran time down"? What about the guy that has the killer Fran time but is mediocre at best in all of the other benchmarks? Or perhaps someone who focuses on producing an ungodly "Fight Gone Bad" score while neglecting other WODs?

Andy Stumpf preached to my Level I Certification last year by stating that the people who are selective with which CrossFit workouts they finish are missing the whole point of CrossFit completely. Broad time and modal domains indeed, Andy. If a CrossFitter trains for one workout specifically, he's specializing his ability, and that's the opposite of what we're trying to accomplish.

I like to think of the "10 General Physical Skills" as a spherical continuum of fitness. We want to enhance that sphere as a whole—not make it into a cone. There are some people that enter CrossFit with a fitness bias towards strength or cardiorespiratory endurance, but that doesn't mean they should focus on one workout in particular to even out their fitness sphere.

For those of you that are training for Fran, or any other workout, keep the true essence of CrossFit in mind. Remove Fran from the pedestal that it sits on. We want to increase our ability to do anything and everything, not just one thing. We can still compete in the sport of fitness without specializing, because if you're overly good at only one thing, it doesn't mean Jack. Don't lose sight of that.

OK, enough talk. Let's get back to (constantly varied) training.



### About the Author

*Justin Lascek (pictured below following his latest Fran) is a 22 year old CrossFit Level II trainer who graduated from Georgia Southern University in the Department of Health and Kinesiology. He loves CrossFit, peanut butter, and Guinness (not at the same time). If she asked, he would not go on a date with Fran, even if she was polite about it.*

