

Triathlete Does CrossFit, Gets Faster—and Gets a Life

World Championship Improvement on Less Training Time for Canadian Age-Grouper

Karl MacPhee



In my early years of training for triathlon, I bought into the philosophy of volume, volume, volume: that through more swimming, biking and running, I would soon be pushing out faster times in my races. Of course, it worked. I did get faster, and my race times overall improved—until I reached a plateau. At that point, I found that in order to get faster, I would again have to turn up the volume, increasing my time in the saddle, on the pavement and in the pool. So I did, and I got even faster. And I increasingly hung out with people who shared the same philosophy: other multi-sport athletes. I joined them in a world all our own, doing triathlete things with triathlete people.

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Eventually, after a few years of living on my own planet, I began to realize that I had family and friends outside the triathlon world that I had been neglecting over the years. So, in order to continue competing in triathlons, I would have to come up with a more effective, less time-consuming approach to training that achieved similar, if not better, results than my previous training style. Considering that many triathletes become brainwashed with the idea that there is only swimming, biking and running, and nothing else, the fact that I was willing to consider change was a big first step.

My position as a high-school strength and conditioning coach has many demands, from football, soccer, basketball and volleyball to cheerleading; so researching and developing programs for various sport programs was something that I was used to doing. Initially, I realized that I was lacking in overall strength, so I began training in the programs that I prescribed for the football team, which consisted mainly of the core lifts (deadlift, squat, pull, press, rotations, and Olympic lifting), with speed, agility, and core training to supplement their strength and power. Compared to the mainstream “endurance training” that I was using to train for triathlon, this style certainly got boring with its longer rest periods and the repetition of drills each week. I get bored very quickly, so to follow one style of training for a month is a long stretch for me. Over time I became more familiar with the Olympic lifts, and my strength certainly increased, but there was still something missing.

I was then introduced to a more “holistic” style of training which involved a combination of strength, endurance, and cardiovascular training as well as Ashtanga yoga, meditation, and a more conscious approach to nutrition and daily activities. As much as I appreciated the results of this training—physically, mentally and spiritually—I found that it was difficult to fit in the high volume of training hours and dedication to the small things each day, so I eventually decided to look elsewhere.

Then, three years ago, I came across the CrossFit.com website, and fell in love with the idea that the workouts are short, varied, and always difficult. This style of training fit perfectly with my triathlon racing because it included time for family and friends.

My first workout was Cindy, and I was sore for five or six days. I did 19 rounds, which I thought was a pretty good score, until I saw that the records were up there close to 30 rounds at the time! I was humbled into giving CrossFit a chance for a while.

To immerse myself in the CrossFit philosophy I signed up for the Journal and changed my home page so that I would see the WOD immediately in the morning. I spent countless hours viewing the comments, discussions, and videos. Building upon my background in athletics and six or seven years as a strength and conditioning coach, I applied the CrossFit principles to my own training and work. The athletes I was working with seemed to enjoy the new style. And my own results improved.

In my prime as a multi-sport athlete focusing on swim, bike, and run with some endurance-based weight training, I weighed 155 pounds. At 5-foot-10, this is not a lot of weight, and my friends and family often commented on how thin I was. Ironically, I ate like a horse; I was probably downing close to 3500-4000 kcal per day—yet was always hungry. Again, this is typical for a multi-sport athlete who puts in long hours of cardio each week.

BIG CUTBACKS IN MILEAGE

Within the first six months of training with the CrossFit principles, I gained about 15 pounds and was back to a respectable 170 pounds. Now, I should also mention that I quit swimming altogether, stopped the two weekly cycling sessions with my club, and only ran to work, rather than running on the weekend. So my cardio or LSD training consisted of cycling to work 3-4 times per week, and running to work once a week. This is a 25 km round-trip on the bike and a 12.5 km run (I'd take the bus to get home on run days). I didn't do any more intervals, so my commutes to work were simply joy rides.

My strength-training schedule basically followed the five-day schedule from CrossFit Journal's “Theoretical Template for CrossFit's Programming,” published in February 2003. This was a tremendously helpful resource, and I used it quite often to create triplets, couplets, and single exercise sessions of my own that would soon be hated by all of my athletes! The combination of decreasing my LSD hours and applying the CrossFit principles decreased my training time by about 8-10 hours a week. I was soon noticing consistent results in strength, power, and metabolic conditioning throughout.

After a full year and a half of following the CrossFit principles by using the WOD or a similar self-created workout, I decided to sign up for a local Olympic distance race, the Edmonton BG Triathlon World Cup, which served as a qualifier for the 2006 Age Group Championships in Lausanne, Switzerland. In order to qualify, I would have to finish in the top four in my age group (30-39), traditionally one of the toughest groups.



I signed up for the race four weeks in advance, and decided after 18 months of not swimming that I should train a couple of times a week so that I wouldn't drown during the race. Four weeks later in Edmonton I blasted off the start line with confidence that my last 18 months of training in the gym had given me the ability to qualify. The feeling got stronger as the race went on. I finished comfortably in 2:21, which was good enough to qualify for the World Championships!

This marked the first time that I qualified for the Worlds, and was also my fastest time on this course. One month later, in Kelowna, BC for one more pre-Worlds race, I improved my time and overall standings with a PR of 2:16. Adding to the triumph was the fact that I was able to celebrate it better; instead of my normal post-race headaches and lethargy, my post-race recovery was so good that I actually enjoyed the remainder of the day.

I signed up for my spot on the National Age Group Team and began another six weeks of training for Lausanne.

Rather than wasting my time on long rides, runs and swims, I focused my training in all three disciplines, as well as three WODs per week. I have to admit, none of my training sessions were a cup of tea, and they were all about 45-60 minutes in length, other than the "brick" (back-to-back bike-run) workouts, which I did on the weekends. In the bricks, I created a course that was very similar to the course in Switzerland, and pushed myself through intervals in the bike and run, and added two swim sessions per week. This training schedule had less volume than those of the previous 18 months, yet packed plenty of punch.

I wove CrossFit principles into every workout, treating each swim, bike, and run session as if they were the WOD, and broke them up into sections. Some were for time, while others were for max rounds. In each workout I would complete a quality warm-up of skill drills such as single-leg spinning on the bike, technique drills in the water, and track and field or dynamic movement drills prior to the run. Doing so helped to prepare me mentally and physically for the upcoming training session. I did not experience any injuries throughout my training. Tabata workouts were a favorite for all three disciplines. Favorite is a term that I should use sparingly, as hammering up a hill on the bike or running during several rounds of 20 seconds hard with 10 seconds easy, was not fun. However, after a few weeks I noticed that the power I gained through this format certainly improved my overall conditioning.

Because the course was 40 km in the bike and 10 km in the run, I created a circuit that matched a two-exercise session in the gym. I would hammer on the bike for approximately 3 km, practice my transition and run about 750 m to 1 km and continue this workout to complete as many rounds as possible in 20-30 minutes. In the water, rather than just swimming intervals as I had in the past, I would challenge myself to complete specific distances for time, such as 750 m, or 1000 m. Although these sessions may not be new to many people, and certainly weren't for me, it was the approach to each triplet, couplet, and single-session application that made the difference. Rather than dreading the upcoming session, I created a challenge based on what I learned from the CrossFit workouts I had been doing in the gym. This challenge encouraged me to try to improve on my scores from previous sessions, and, in doing so, this trained me for the feeling that would arise in the minutes before the start of my races.

CrossFitters all know that nervous feeling that they get just before we hear the 3-2-1 GO! Having experienced this in just about all of my workouts, I was less nervous as I joined my competition in Switzerland.

I was ready.

TAKING ON THE WORLDS

Once in Switzerland, I looked back at my training, and appreciated where it had taken me. While talking with the other athletes who were representing Canada, I soon realized how lucky I was not to have wasted away my time in the previous year focusing on triathlons.

In the previous 18 months, I didn't specifically train for triathlon. I didn't swim, and I didn't worry about winning races. I simply trained for life. I enjoyed a variety of activities such as squash, snowshoeing, yoga, and hockey. I appreciated quality time with my family and friends.

Finding CrossFit changed the way I train; it has also changed the way I think about everyday activities such as shoveling the snow, or cutting the grass. I simply get it done, sit back and enjoy the rest of my day. This is how CrossFitters approach their workouts. They don't have to work out, yet they choose to, and when they look at the white board, they turn around, grab their equipment and do it. Once they are done, they stick around and cheer each other on because they know how important community and teamwork is.

So, as I was standing on the dock ready to start the swim, I looked around, took in the mountains of France and Switzerland, and decided to have fun throughout the race, because I deserved it. Each time someone wanted to pass me, I made it harder for them, and each time there was a challenge for me, I put my head down and attacked it, as I would have "Cindy," or "Helen," or a Hero workout. I finished the swim almost dead last, hopped out of the water and ran past 16 people, jumped on my bike and passed a few more, and throughout the run, I thought about my past. Once I ran underneath the banner, I was proud that I had put it all out there, and left nothing on the course. That's what CrossFitters do.

My time for the race (which was longer than a normal Olympic-distance event by an extra 2.4 k of running to accommodate all the bikes in transition) was 2:31. Although that didn't put me in the top 20, I proudly finished 98th out of 140 in my age group, accomplished my goal, and wore my nation's colors at an internationally sanctioned event in a sport that I had been involved in for three years.

When I walked past the finish line, I was strong, proud that I also effectively represented the CrossFit family, and, more importantly, my epilepsy community, from which very few athletes emerge.

Yes, I have epilepsy, and have to deal with it each day. I could long ago have given into the idea that I shouldn't work too hard because I might have another seizure, or that training for triathlons is dangerous for someone like me. But I feel that giving in to the skeptics would be giving up on life. Life is much too short to allow something or someone to keep us from achieving our dreams. At this point in my life, I have competed at the Provincial, National, and International level in three different sports. I have been a UN Peace Keeper, I have traveled to more than ten countries, and I am happily married; having overcome infertility complications we are expecting twins in the spring of 2009. These examples are only a few of the highlights in my life thus far. It is my goal to continue to achieve the things that I dream about each and every day.

The CrossFit community is full of people just like me, who have had to overcome a disability, or disease, or illness, as well as the line-up of people who get in the way. Just as we see from the CrossFit Journal articles featuring Kyle Maynard, who was born a congenital amputee and overcame his situation to compete at the State level in wrestling, I don't feel as though I have a disease or disability; I have a card that has been dealt to me, and I must play it. The CrossFit community is a place of like-minded people who have all played their own cards, and in doing so have been creating a stronger world, one person at a time.



About The Author

Karl MacPhee is the Strength and Conditioning Coach at Ross Sheppard High School in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. He has been a CrossFitter for the past four years and will be attending the Level I Certification in Puyallup, WA, in January 2009. Since capping his success in the 2006 Worlds, Karl and his wife Jennifer both qualified for the 2007 Worlds in Hamburg, Germany, but decided to stop training for triathlon specifically, in order to enjoy more outdoor recreation. They have since climbed their first peak of 12,000 feet in the Rocky Mountains of Alberta and fell in love with the breathtaking views available from nature's playgrounds.