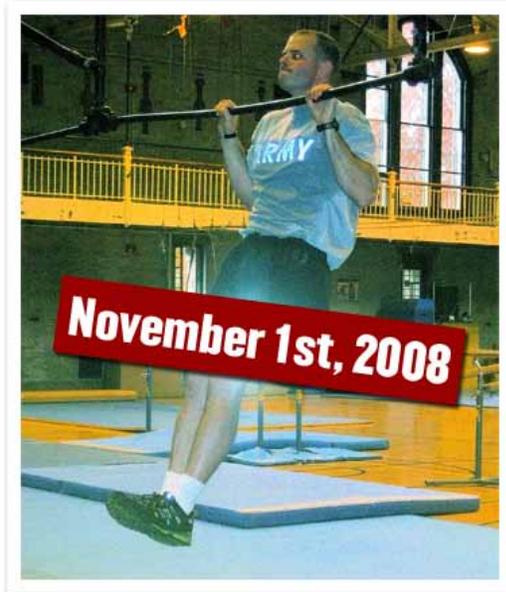


Winning the Battle of the Bulge

How CrossFit helped a hefty West Point officer shape up—and get new leadership skills, too.

Major James Maxwell



"Are you kidding me?" I couldn't believe it. I weighed over 200 pounds again. How is this possible? I had been in the army for over 16 years, doing daily PT, lifting weights... and was over 200 pounds. Diets, starving, taking caffeine pills... over 200 pounds. Thirty-five years old and five-foot ten inches tall... over 200 pounds. Nearly two decades of daily exercise—cross-country and swimming at West Point Prep School, endless activity as a cadet, and starting every day with physical training as a soldier. Still over 200 pounds. Airborne school, Air Assault school, tank company commander in Baghdad. Still over 200 pounds!

"How is this possible?" I wondered. Why is every weigh-in before the semi-annual PT test like a weigh-in for a wrestler?

In December 2007, while assigned to the Department of Military Instruction (DMI) at West Point, I struggled to stay in shape as usual. It had been this way for me since my junior year as a cadet over 12 years ago. I had gone at it hard, swimming at lunch, running, lifting, following a fad diet, but once again injuries started to impact my ability to sustain my program. The pounds came right back on, as usual. I was in a cycle where I would weigh 188 pounds on the day of the PT test, but 195 two weeks later, and back to 200 two weeks after that. Again.

I was at the point where I nearly felt like giving up. No matter what I tried, I could never get and stay where I felt I needed to be to lead soldiers effectively. I started to doubt my ability to stay in the army as a combat leader. It was heartbreaking.

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About this time I heard about a group of infantrymen and an artilleryman assigned to the department who were doing this thing called CrossFit. It was introduced to them by Lieutenant Colonel Bill Butler, the Chief of Military Training in the Department of Military Instruction. All of them had Ranger tabs. I thought to myself, *“No way could I ever do that. No way. I’m a fat tanker, and fat tankers don’t do PT that is THAT hard.”*

But, being over 200 pounds again, it was time to do something. So I typed in a web address with no idea that it would change my life: www.crossfit.com.

“No way can I do this! What the hell is a ‘Muscle Up’? Thirty of them? I can barely do a pull-up!” Doubt filled my head. I almost clicked that “X” in the upper-right-hand corner and closed my browser. *“No, I need to do this,” I decided.*

I secured a notebook for my logbook and started. I weighed and taped myself. I started doing CrossFit on January 3rd, 2008, weighing 201 pounds with 31% body-fat. I wrote in the front of my logbook, *“Be an Iron Major.”*

My first two days I followed the scaled WODs found under the “Start Here” tab, before deciding to follow the WODs on the main site. Determination became my best friend as I struggled to get through the warm-up, using the Gravitron machine for nearly all the pull-ups and dips. The WODs were worse. My mechanics and form on Olympic lifts were worse than awful; they were non-existent. Each day began for me at 10 pm when the next day’s WOD would post—followed by research on the exercises and workouts. I couldn’t sleep some nights, filled with anticipation of the next day’s WOD, figuring out how I could move equipment in the MWR gym to complete the WOD.

On January 8th I did “Cindy” for the first time. Three rounds as prescribed before I had to use the Gravitron machine to complete another eight rounds. I looked at the message board and could not believe what I read—twenty rounds was considered “good.”

On January 15th I did what would become my personal and favorite workout: the “Filthy Fifty.” What a train wreck that was! 51:09, and nothing was done right. My knees to elbows were simply knee raises. I had to use a 12-pound ball. I wish I had my burpees on video—I moved a mat over so I could collapse on it, do a push-up, crawl to my feet, jump and clap. After completing 100 singles instead of double-unders, I threw up. I had to pull my truck over on the way home because I kept blacking out.

I was hardly an “Iron Major.” I was a weak slob who could talk a good game about Army stuff. I needed to do better. I knew I could.

Nowhere to Go but Down

In a few weeks I started to see improvement. “Cindy” showed up again on January 28th and I was able to do 12 rounds, as prescribed. My confidence was starting to build. I didn’t have the equipment to do the WOD posted on February 8th, so I substituted “Filthy Fifty” for it – 50:53. February 14th brought my first “Fran.” Having to substitute 55 pounds for the thrusters allowed me to complete it in 9:47. On February 29th I met “Murph” and finished it in 56:59.

A month later I began to see the results. The “Filthy Fifty” reared its head again. This time I was able to get through everything as prescribed, except the double-unders, in 43:06. I was elated—I wrote “BIATCH!” in my logbook. The results were there after 60 days. After 90 days I clocked another “Filthy Fifty,” this one at 35:12, with half the number of prescribed double-unders.

Ninety days since starting CrossFit, I took my first Army Physical Fitness Test. The APFT consists of max reps of push-ups in two minutes, max reps of sit-ups in two minutes, and a timed two-mile run with a score assigned for each. I was able to execute 85 push-ups and 81 sit-ups – both for a hundred points each, and ran the two miles in 14:10, for 92 points. 292 is not too bad, and I was happy. My weight was down from 201 on January 3rd to 186 on April 15th. Then, on May 10th I completed “Fran” for the first time as prescribed, in 9:31. No, not an elite time, but I finished it as prescribed. I felt pretty good about where I was.

About a week later, I posted a twenty-round “Cindy”—a “good” score. But something more than good times and good scores was happening to me. I felt as though I was no longer just a guy who did CrossFit. I was becoming—in fact, had become—a “CrossFitter.”

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CrossFit wasn’t just a part of my day by then, but had become a part of my life.

I started buying rings and kettlebells, building plyo-boxes and parallettes, and looking at how to get to a Level 1 certification. My confidence in my performance got to the point where I started to attend the morning WODs with the DMI “CrossFit Crew.” A fat tanker with airborne rangers—and I was right there with them some days. It felt good—I no longer felt as though I was a weak slob.

On May 28th, I smoked my 22-year-old brother-in-law, a cadet here at West Point, in the posted WOD by five minutes (5 rounds for time of 25 of each: 2 pood kettlebell swings, sit-ups, back-extensions, and knees-to-elbows). I still haven’t let him forget.

During the summer months, our department would meet and conduct PT every Thursday morning as a group. On June 26th, I was responsible for our department’s morning PT. I filled various-sized ammo cans with dirt, made

medicine balls out of sandbags, and put the department through a field-expedient “Fight Gone Bad.” The morning DMI CrossFit crew loved it; everyone else hated it. It was absolutely beautiful. The following day I clocked a 36:22 “Murph.” Writing “PR” next to my times had become a habit.

On July 11th, I was able to complete the “Filthy Fifty” in 24:15, this time 100% as prescribed.

I couldn’t believe how far I had come. My weight was 185 pounds. Fran, Nancy, Helen were my constant companions. My now-pregnant wife, recently returned from deployment to Kuwait, pleaded with me to STOP talking about all these other “women.”

Building Bodies—and Leadership

On July 20th I was able to use CrossFit for the first time as a direct leadership tool. During the summer training period, I was assigned as the Officer-in-Charge of a group of returning graduates—Second Lieutenants—ordered to assist as trainers. One of these lieutenants failed an entry run for the US Army’s Air Assault School. He was given to me to “fix.” In the initial counseling, I learned he had a background with Olympic lifts. Perfect. I administered a diagnostic APFT, which he failed, scoring 187 with 59 push-ups, 58 sit-ups, and 18:56 on his run. He also failed to meet height-weight standards with a 26% body-fat content. He was now officially my “project lieutenant.” My first leadership experiment with CrossFit had begun.

On the first weekend of August, I earned my Level 1 cert in Virginia Beach. But I knew—as did the other officers from West Point who attended—that this was really JUST the beginning. Major Dan Blackmon and I resolved to follow the guidance of Pat Sherwood, the cert instructor, and observe a strict Zone diet for the next month. When we got home, I started my second logbook. Again I wrote, “Be an Iron Major,” on the inside of the front cover.

I returned to morning WODs with my “project lieutenant.” On August 15th, less than a month after he started CrossFit, I administered another APFT. This time he scored 236, improving his push-ups to 69 reps, his sit-ups to 63 reps, and his 2-mile run time to 16:06. His body-fat content was down to 23%, meeting the U.S. Army’s standard.

Dan Blackmon sent in the application after returning from the cert and a few weeks later it came back approved. CrossFit West Point was a reality. Dan built a website to post daily WODs.

CrossFit really began to change for me at this point; no longer just an exercise program, it became a leader-development tool. CrossFit West Point became a vehicle to interact with cadets essentially as peers. The word started to spread on CFWP. More cadets started showing up at 0530 for the morning WOD and the posts to the CFWP site began to grow.

The Level 1 certification didn't necessarily give us any special increased knowledge about CrossFit—most of the lectures are posted as video clips on the main site—but it did give us an opportunity to build an environment to interact with cadets on a very personable and real level. To quote Colonel BP McCoy, "There's no striking a bold leadership pose after you do 'Fran.'"

The norm for the faculty that does CrossFit is to do it with cadets, whether it is a single cadet or a group. Major Shawn Bault, an instructor in the Department of Physical Education, began discussions with the senior faculty about a location within the Cadet Physical Development Center (Arvin Gym) dedicated to cross training.

“Would you have more confidence and trust in your company commander if he was a CrossFitter?”

While the momentum here at West Point continues to grow for a “cross training” area, my times continue to drop, and my rounds, reps, and strength continue to increase. Using only CrossFit to train, I completed the Army Ten-Miler on October 5th in 1:28:13, an 8:49/mile pace. It is the longest I have ever run in my entire life.

Weighing 176 pounds on October 14th, I missed scoring a perfect 300 on my APFT by four seconds on the run. I finished the two-miler in 13:22; I needed 13:18 to max the text. Every second counts, huh?

In the beginning, it was all about the weight for me. Now I worry if I am losing too much weight; I had “leaned out” at 172 and my performance sputtered. I barely even get on the scale anymore, once a week maybe, because it's right there in the bathroom. It's the first time in years where I haven't been obsessed with, “How much do I weigh?” I've been at 175 for two months now, but that's not my main concern. It's all about posting PRs now, getting stronger, breaking ten minutes on “Helen,” six minutes on “Fran.” I'm at 17 blocks now—that's where I'm at. I'm at the point where things that used to concern me don't concern me. I'm teaching my five-year-old girl to hold a handstand—she likes to do squats and play on the parallettes. I use what I know about nutrition to make sure my wife is eating right during the last trimester of her pregnancy. What is great is that I introduced my brother-in-law to CrossFit, and with that he'll touch forty soldiers in his first assignment as a platoon leader after he graduates in May.

On October 22nd, I had lunch with a group of cadets that were invited to attend a Level 1 certification. These three young men have been assigned to complete a series of articles for the CrossFit Journal in return for their invitation to the cert—more than a fair trade. I reminded them about the points made by Colonel McCoy, in a posted video clip, about mental toughness and discipline. I sat down with them to go over research questions for their upcoming assignment, one of which was a simple, “Would you have more confidence and trust in your company commander if he was a CrossFitter?”

I already know the answer to that one.



About the Author

James Maxwell is a Major in the US Army assigned to the Department of Military Instruction and teaches a course on Officership. He is CrossFit Level 1, CrossFit Gymnastics Level 1, and CrossFit Nutrition certified. He leaves West Point this January to attend the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He is no longer a fat-ass tanker.