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A Muddy Good Time

Meg Green crawls through mud, jumps into icy water and discovers she can conquer just about any obstacle.

By Meg Green

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Kim Bjorheim

A year ago, if you had told me I would pay good money to run the Tough Mudder, I'd have asked what pharmaceutical enrichment program you were on.

Back then, if you had told me that not only would I be one of the 76 percent to finish the event, but I would also be smiling most of the entire time, I'd have asked you to share those pharmaceuticals.

That was before I had discovered CrossFit, and before CrossFit helped me rediscover my inner athlete.

The Buy-In: Ironman Meets Burning Man

Held at various locations throughout the country, the Tough Mudder is a 10-to-12-mile obstacle course designed by British Special Forces. The organizers say that it will test all-around strength, stamina, mental grit and camaraderie, and that only those in “strong physical condition” should attempt it.

In the case of the Tough Mudder held April 9 and 10 at Bear Creek Mountain Resort, just outside Allentown, Pa., it was 11.2 miles of mud, rocks, icy water and snowy ski slopes. It was running on wooded trails littered with ankle-twisting rocks and climbing grades so steep in places that many resorted to crawling up on all fours.

Highlights of the 25 obstacles include running through live electrical wires juiced with 10,000 volts of electricity, jumping off a 15-foot platform into 39-degree water, climbing 12-foot wooden walls, crawling through claustrophobia-inducing tunnels, and slogging through pits and waist-deep muddy trenches.

The event is not timed, save for the first 100 finishers in the first wave. The idea is just to finish.

If you’re reading this, you likely already know all about CrossFit and how it prepares you physically and mentally for real-life challenges.

I’d never heard of it when I stumbled into CrossFit Advanced in Easton, Pa. I had come to take a bootcamp, CrossFit-esque program with coach and owner Greg Tymon. He calls it TuffCamp, which stands for Tymon’s Ultimate Family Fitness Camp, and it’s open to everyone, including children.

I knew I had to do something to get back into shape—my sequined belly-dance belts were getting too tight—and a bootcamp program sounded like fun. And one with kids? Well, how tough could it be?

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Tough Mudder

Super Bowl XLII hero David Tyree assists another competitor over a 12-foot wall.

Yikes! Let’s just say I quickly discovered that kettlebells are not what Salvation Army volunteers ring at Christmas time, a burpee is not a tiny belch, and, as it turns out, a Turkish get-up is not a hick way of describing a belly-dance costume made in Istanbul.

It is humbling to get your butt kicked by children, but you have to start somewhere, and that’s where I started.

I was the slowest runner and often the last one to finish the workout. Sometimes the hour ran out before I could finish. That’s when I liked to quote Vince Lombardi, who said, “The Green Bay Packers never lost a football game. They just ran out of time.”

Every day was something I’d never seen: wall-balls, box jumps, sumo deadlift high pulls. We also flipped giant tractor tires, slammed sledgehammers and attempted double-unders.



CrossFit Advanced

Greg Tymon of CrossFit Advanced led the Mudder competitors through challenging training sessions before the event.

The rower was my favorite because at least you get to sit down.

The TuffCamp slogan is “Want results? Just show up.” And I did. And got results.

I got leaner and more physically fit, dropped a pants size or two. And sometimes, once in awhile, I wasn’t the last one to finish the workout. I started to beat the clock, too.

While we cooled down, I’d watch in awe as the CrossFitters, who worked out after TuffCamp, did gravity-defying things like handstand push-ups, skin-the-cats and muscle-ups. They climbed the 15-foot rope to touch the ceiling as easily and casually as cats—if cats did things like climb 15-foot ropes in a gym, that is.

I began to think of TuffCamp as “CrossFit: junior varsity” and wanted to move up to varsity.

TuffCamp workouts are longer in duration than CrossFit and less complex so “anyone can walk in and get a great workout with only a little instruction,” Tymon said.

CrossFit, with its Olympic lifts, gymnastic moves and higher weights, requires more instruction, either through three private, hour-long foundation classes with a coach or through a one-month beginner membership.

“Both TuffCamp and CrossFit are as challenging as you are willing to challenge yourself—with the gentle encouragement of the instructor,” Tymon said, winking.

The WOD

I’d been working out with TuffCamp three days a week for about four months when in December Tymon announced a training program for the upcoming Tough Mudder event in April. The program involved coming four times a week to either CrossFit or TuffCamp, plus running drills on your own. We’d have about four months to get ready.



Kim Bjorheim

Just another workout ... with fire.

Even though the Tough Mudder website was loaded with pictures of the ridiculous obstacles, including running through fire, the event appealed to me. They call it a challenge, not a race, and it raises money for the Wounded Warrior Project, which aids injured vets.

Also, Mudders take a pledge at the start and promise to put the needs of their fellow Mudders ahead of their own time. It was an excellent incentive to step up my workouts and start going to CrossFit.

CrossFit was frustrating. Just as I was beginning to feel confident in the TuffCamp activities, I was challenged to learn yet more moves I had never seen before.

Deadlifts. Snatches. Clean and jerks. Forget about lifting heavy weight; I was struggling just to get the movement down.

That's not unusual.

Novice CrossFitters are often more limited by their lack of flexibility rather than their strength, so working on mobility is an important component, Tymon said. Practice is key, and so is having a good coach who'll correct your form when you need it. We were fortunate to have Tymon, plus two other coaches, Tony Kramer and John Pozzetta. Tymon, who's run his own personal-training business for 15 years, has been a CrossFit coach for about a year and a half.

The CFA box had 20 Tough Mudders in training, six of whom had contacted Tymon for specific Tough Mudder training and 14 existing CrossFit or TuffCamp athletes. One group was young, firebreathing CrossFitters who did nothing special to train for the Tough Mudder other than their usual CrossFit workouts. The other group was new to CrossFit and felt that CrossFit training would be the most effective way to get ready for the Mudder. These were my peeps, the "oxygenbreathers."

Tymon admitted that no four-month program would be enough to get people ready to climb 12-foot walls by themselves, especially if they hadn't had much training before. However, CrossFit could get people ready to handle the Tough Mudder—as long as they used teamwork to scale the walls and face other major obstacles.

"We are building general physical preparedness," Pozzetta said.

Physical preparedness gives athletes the confidence to do everything from running a Tough Mudder to everyday activities like climbing on top of the kitchen sink to change a light bulb.

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"The beauty of CrossFit is that it's infinitely scalable," Tymon said. "The workouts don't differ from person to person. Everyone does the same workout, it's just scaled down to what they are capable of in that stage of their fitness development."

From newbies like me to David Tyree, retired NFL player with the New York Giants, CrossFit proved to be great training for the Tough Mudder. Tyree prepared to run the Tough Mudder in Allentown by training with CrossFit KOA in Cranford, N.J. As a professional athlete, Tyree was used to training hard but found CrossFit to be a challenge.

"The most fun thing we did was a 400-meter run while holding a 45-lb plate overhead," Tyree said. "There was no easy way to hold it."

Tyree, who is best known for using his helmet to catch a critical fourth-quarter pass from Eli Manning during the 2008 Super Bowl, said the CrossFit program "excited me as an athlete. You have to find different ways to sharpen your body."

CrossFit Goes Tough Mudder

To help prepare the CFA athletes for the Tough Mudder, one CrossFitter built a six-foot moveable wall. The firebreathers were able to scale the wall quickly without any assistance. Some of them were able to jump back and forth over the wall like teenagers jumping over a couch.

The oxygenbreathers learned how to scale the wall as a team. Athletes used their bodies as human stepladders, letting others step on their bended knees or giving a teammate's foot a boost with hands and a well-timed shove.



Tough Mudder

Famous for his dramatic catch late in the 2008 Super Bowl, Tyree used CrossFit to prepare for the Tough Mudder.

The day of the Tough Mudder, we could have just counted down 3, 2, 1 ... Go! It was our WOD—a really long WOD.”

—Greg Tymon

Tymon brought in sandbags ranging from 50 to 70 lb. to mimic the Tough Mudder’s “Hold Your Wood” obstacle, which involves carrying a log up and down the ski slope. Athletes also took advantage of a nearby steep incline for practicing hill climbs.

Pull-ups and push-ups built upper-body strength for athletes to beat Mudder obstacles like the greased monkey bars, cargo nets and walls. Explosive lifts gave athletes the spring-like jumps and bursts of strength needed to scale obstacles. Sprints, burpees and wall-balls built the endurance needed to keep moving on the 11-mile course.

Otherwise, the routine CrossFit program “was perfectly designed for Tough Mudder training,” Tymon said. “For some, we worked more on general conditioning rather than power development, but the day of the Tough Mudder, we could have just counted down 3, 2, 1 ... go! It was our WOD—a really long WOD.”

Barefoot Running

Tymon laid out monthly schedules of running workouts for the Mudders to do on their own and also worked with athletes to learn Pose or barefoot running techniques.

I was vaguely aware that some African marathoners had great success running barefoot, but when Tymon told me to take off my sneakers and run across the floor in my socks, well, let’s just say I had my doubts.

“Run like a ninja,” he said. “Quietly.”

Do ninjas smoke ganja? I kept that question to myself.

But after reading up on it, I became convinced that running barefoot made a lot of sense. I bought my first pair of Vibram FiveFingers and was hooked.

Our running drills consisted mostly of sprints and interval training, shorter distances, hill climbs and Tabatas (8 rounds of 20 seconds running at a 5K pace with 10 seconds of rest in between). The longest distance I ran before the Tough Mudder was a total of 2.5 miles as part of a Hero WOD the Saturday before. My calves were aching the next two to three days, which convinced me that I wasn’t ready to wear the VFFs for the Mudder, so I opted for an old pair of regular running sneakers instead.

The Mental Workout

While our WODs are posted online, I tried to avoid looking in advance for fear that I would psych myself out and find an excuse not to go. I cannot tell you how many times I walked into the box, saw the WOD written on the whiteboard and thought, “Oh, no way”—as in no way can I run that far or lift that much or jump that high. No way can I do that many reps or no way can I complete this WOD.



Kim Borheim

The author gets by with a little help from her friends.



Kim Bjorheim

Train hard: you never know when you'll have to run through a bunch of live wires.

Then I'd take a deep breath and warm up anyway. "Just do the best you can, one rep at a time," I'd think. And much to my surprise, 10 or 20 or 30 minutes later, I was done!

I have finished every WOD I've tried, albeit with modifications when necessary. The greatest challenge in CrossFit is not any particular move or weight. It's overcoming the idea that you can't do what is being asked of you. That turned out to be perfect training for the Tough Mudder.

No, you can't train to run through mud under wires loaded with 10,000 volts, but you can practice doing the thing you thought you could not do.

The Cash-Out

After four or so months of training, April 9 finally came. The forecast called for a high of about 60 degrees and, blessedly, no rain.

To quote my fellow Mudder Kim Sutton: Tymon did his job, and now it was time to do ours.

Surprisingly, despite my fears, the worst thing about the Tough Mudder wasn't the electric shock field, the last of the 25 obstacles. While it was the obstacle most dreaded by many, "Electric Shock Therapy," a wooden frame loaded with dozens of dangling live wires charged with 10,000 volts, was no worse than hitting an electric fence.

With my hands up to protect my face, I ran through those wires, trying not to slip on the mud underneath, and I only got zapped three times.

The worst part wasn't even the 11.2-miles up and down wooded, rocky trails, nor the steep inclines of the ice- and snow-encrusted ski slope. Thanks to my CrossFit training, I felt prepared to tackle those trails and the hills.

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in CrossFit is not any
particular move or weight.
It's overcoming the idea
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By far, the worst part of my Tough Mudder adventure came about halfway through the event: the jump off a 15-foot platform into a recently de-iced pond.

First of all, it turns out that 15 feet is a lot higher than I thought it was. But once I was able to climb the rope to the top of the platform—with considerable help from other Mudders—it was no longer a question of muscle or training. One step into the void and gravity does the rest.

Hitting that frigid water took my breath away and struck me dumb. I came up for air sputtering and began hyperventilating. I forgot I knew how to swim. Luckily, I'm a great floater and one of those people who could survive for days if dropped off a cruise ship into the Atlantic. Even luckier, a rescuer gave me an orange float to hang onto and pulled me away from the other Mudders ready to jump into the water.

Then my rescuer ordered me to swim. I thought I was already swimming, until he said, "Swim using your arms."

Oh, yeah! Arms! Talk about lucky! I have a couple of those I can use.

Eric LeGrand, the 20-year-old who was paralyzed playing football for Rutgers last fall, isn't so lucky. Tyree, the retired NFL player, ran the Mudder as a fundraiser to help LeGrand.

The Mudder "is a little unorthodox," Tyree said. But helping people like LeGrand "is what the journey is all about," he explained.

That attitude seemed to be the main focus of the event. Mudders had raised money for the Wounded Warrior Project or, like Tyree, picked another charitable cause. We had pledged to not whine and put the needs of other Mudders over our own need for speed.

The atmosphere was similar to that of our CrossFit Hero



Kim Bjorheim

***Frigid water was the worst part of the Mudder,
according to the author.***

workouts, where we dedicate ourselves to the memory of a fallen soldier, police officer or firefighter. No matter how hard the WOD, there's no whining when you are sweating to honor a hero.

Just like in life, sometimes you need help to get over



Kim Bjorheim

Before the event, all Mudders pledge to help fellow athletes get through the course.

I'm proud to say I'm one of the 76 percent of the 10,000 Mudders who finished the event that weekend.

obstacles, and in the Tough Mudder, I had help from many, many people. Some were friends from the gym—thanks guys!—but many were complete strangers. And it was not “help” like someone picking up your dropped hat. It was people like the shirtless young Mudder in shorts who squatted with his back against a 12-foot wall and let me step on his bare thigh, then his bare shoulder—with my shoes caked in wet mud—so I could reach high enough

so a Marine volunteer could grab my hand and pull me up to the top of the wall. When I lost my footing on an uphill mud crawl, an unseen stranger from behind grabbed my foot and gave me the push I needed. At the 12-foot cargo net, dozens of people lay on the ground and used their body weight to pull the slack out so other Mudders would have an easier time climbing up and over it.

It took me about five hours to finish the course—with about an hour spent waiting in line at obstacles where a bottleneck formed—but I'm proud to say I'm one of the 76 percent of the 10,000 Mudders who finished the event that weekend. Because it was not timed, you are allowed to skip obstacles. I only skipped one: the greased monkey bars.

All the CFA athletes finished the race, which is a sign of how solid the CrossFit training was, Tymon said.

“There was a 24 percent attrition rate, but everyone who

Mudder ... (continued)

trained (with CrossFit Advanced) hit the starting line and finished. We skewed that whole bell curve!" Tymon said.

I've never even done a 5K before, so can't compare it to other events. But Tymon, who's competed in various shorter mud runs, 10 marathons and 15 triathlons—the longest was a half Ironman—said the Tough Mudder doesn't compare to other races.

"It's my first and only team event, and I thoroughly enjoyed it," Tymon said. "We've built a little family here, a community, and to go out together to do something like this was a lot of fun."

The event raised \$137,676 for the Wounded Warrior Project, and thanks to friends and family, more than \$700 of that was in my name.

The highlight for me, besides spending time with my great teammates, came after I rolled down a muddy slope under barbed wire. Caked in mud from head to toe, I opened my arms wide and offered free hugs to the laughing spectators. One man stepped forward, and I gave him a big muddy bear hug while people around us cheered.

The mud you can wash off, and the bruises will fade, but I hope that Tough Mudder feeling lingers on.

And no matter what's written on the CrossFit whiteboard—whether it's a classic like Fran, a Hero WOD or something like an 11.2-mile mud run up a ski mountain with obstacles, I know now that I can do it.



Kim Bjorheim

About the Author

Meg Green is a cubicle-dwelling journalist, a belly-dance performer and teacher, a classically trained flutist, a Tough Mudder, and a CrossFitter at [CrossFit Advanced](#).