
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

The CrossFit-Oly Hybrid

Looking to emphasize O-Lifts in your CrossFit training?
Bob Takano explains how to do it and what you can expect.

By Bob Takano

August 2011



All images: Staff/CrossFit Journal

For the last two years, I've been coaching weightlifters and conducting a strength-and-conditioning program within CrossFit boxes. I've also been instructing in Coach Mike Burgener's CrossFit Oly seminars for about the same length of time. Consequently, I've run into a number of individuals who are interested in continuing with their CrossFit training while improving their performance in weightlifting (I realize the popular term is "Olympic lifting").

1 of 5



Matt Chan is a top CrossFit competitor who can hold his own on an Oly platform.

The two realms have very disparate goals that often seem directed at cross purposes. The obvious question, then, is how to combine the two in order to achieve the best possible outcome?

Because the physiological demands are so different, it must be understood that combining Olympic lifts with CrossFit training will not provide the very highest levels in either. There must be a compromise. The final outcome, however, will be the result of the goals set by the individual.

Overview

CrossFit is intentionally very nebulous in its ultimate goals for the physical state of the trainee. Furthermore, the issue is subject to modification by the specific condition of the trainee upon entering the program. Each box can also provide slightly different emphases for the training. Consequently, it is almost impossible to define the parameters that will be achieved by a pure CrossFitter as ultimate goals. It is only safe to say that a long-term, seasoned CrossFitter will be an accomplished generalist in the realm of physical fitness.

Olympic lifting is both a set of sport-specific skills and a training modality co-opted by the CrossFit community. As a sport, it has very specific goals and parameters by which success is measured. Therefore, when posing the question of how to combine the training for both activities, the answer must be defined largely by the ultimate goal of the trainee in question. To this end, I am assuming that most people contemplating this combination are seeking to improve CrossFit performance while acquiring heightened proficiency in the performance of the Olympic lifts.

**In my experience,
CrossFitters who have turned
to Olympic lifting were
exceptionally fit in terms of
anaerobic endurance.**

How CrossFit Training Affects Olympic Lifters

In my experience, CrossFitters who have turned to Olympic lifting (and subsequently moved away from CrossFit) were exceptionally fit in terms of anaerobic endurance. Subsequently they were able to perform well in the initial hypertrophy phases of training while taking minimal rest between sets. They could train effectively on a six-days-per-week basis with little drop-off in muscular performance, though the same could not be said of neural performance.

Eventually, the two activities come into conflict as the athlete only has a finite amount of energy to expend each day, and the CrossFit workouts drain energy that might be employed for Olympic-lifting training. Furthermore, CrossFit keeps body weight lower than is optimal for top-level weightlifting performance. Another factor to be considered is that CrossFit workouts will in all probability keep most athletes' body weights at a point that is less than ideal for obtaining great results in the clean and jerk.

How Olympic-Lifting Training Affects CrossFitters

Again, there is an ergonomic conflict. Anyone training regularly as a weightlifter will not have the energy to perform at optimal levels in the CrossFit regime.



Josh Everett, one of the original CrossFit stars, is a great weightlifter who made the CrossFit Games podium twice.

Weightlifting training will also necessitate a significant increase in the muscle mass of the thighs and hips, thus impacting the proficiency for performing pulls-ups, muscle-ups and kipping.

Improved proficiency in the performance of the snatch and clean and jerk will also enable the athlete to become more effective in performing the lifts during the early portion of a CrossFit WOD but might result in a more rapid deterioration of the technique during the latter portions of the training. This is due to the recruitment pattern that is developed during Olympic training. It will cause the Type IIb and IIa fibers to fire and fatigue, creating a performance pattern that is not conducive to performing the movements with the same technique over a high number of repetitions.

Factors to Consider in a Hybrid Program

To gain the greatest benefit from adding a significant weightlifting component to CrossFitting, the overriding factor should be dealing with neural fatigue because there is a high degree of neural activity going on during the Olympic lifts compared to the movements in a typical WOD. Moreover, the nerves fatigue more rapidly than some of the other components of the CrossFit menu.

The second factor to consider is making significant strength gains beyond the effects of the CrossFit workout.

Finally, the planning of training intensities and volume in the weightlifting portion must be modified for optimal benefits, and the number of days of training per week must also be factored into the planning.

A Training Plan

It appears the most enthusiastic, successful CrossFitters train almost every day. Thus, the plan must be based on this practice as a constant. The weightlifting workouts should then be initially planned on a three-days-per-week basis. If we base the training on a Monday-through-Friday schedule, there should be five CrossFit trainings, with three weightlifting trainings taking place on Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

For those interested in a break day midweek, the CrossFit workouts can be conducted on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday. The Olympic-lifting workouts could be undertaken on Monday, Thursday and Saturday.

The three weightlifting workouts should take place prior to the CrossFit workouts while the nervous system is relatively fresh. Each weightlifting workout should consist of at least one explosive movement (snatch, clean and jerk, power snatch, power clean), one squatting movement and one overhead movement. A strength-building exercise relevant to weightlifting may be added periodically.

Each weightlifting workout should consist of at least one explosive movement, one squatting movement and one overhead movement.

The three weightlifting workouts would then be followed by a CrossFit WOD. Tuesdays and Thursdays would be composed solely of CrossFit training.

The weightlifting workouts would be made up of 5 or 6 sets of 2-4 repetitions of an explosive movement as described previously. The intensities should be largely in the 75-85 percent range (power snatches and power cleans should be performed in the 60-70 percent range). These should be followed by back or front squats through 5-6 sets of 2-4 repetitions, again primarily in the same percentage range. The third exercise can be a pulling movement, or an overhead movement, performed for 4 sets of 3-5 repetitions in the 80-95 percent range.



Specialization is needed to be a top lifter, but CrossFitters can certainly become competent weightlifters.

The selection of the exercises and placement within the weekly schedule should be affected by the nature of the CrossFit training. For instance, a CrossFit WOD focusing on handstand push-ups might provide a reason to minimize or eliminate altogether any pressing movements during the following day's weightlifting training.

If the athlete is feeling well restored on the intervening Tuesdays and Thursdays, the option of including an extra session of one or two weightlifting exercises is always a possibility.

Expected Outcomes

Provided that the athlete has more or less mastered the technique of the snatch and clean and jerk, and that athletic health is sound, weightlifting progress can be expected until the limit of the individual's talent is reached under these circumstances. Of course, just to provide perspective, greater success would have been achieved if the athlete had specialized in weightlifting.

The age, physical history and athletic talent will have an overriding effect on the degree of weightlifting progress that can be achieved. At one extreme will be an individual with little weightlifting talent who is beginning this program at an advanced age after a sedentary lifestyle. At the other extreme is a young, talented and experienced athlete with an extensive training history that has established the proper biochemical pathways. The outcomes will be quite different.

Future Alterations

It would not be surprising to find that after following this type of regimen for a period of several weeks or longer, an athlete might decide to alter the approach. Some might find the Olympic lifts difficult to master, especially without adequate coaching, and not pursue snatches and cleans and jerks any further than their normal inclusion in CrossFit WODs dictates. Others may find these lifts to be as addictive as many others have discovered them to be, and they might begin to emphasize weightlifting training over CrossFitting.

Almost all the weightlifters I am currently coaching were introduced to the sport through their involvement with the lifts in a CrossFit gym. Some of them have peers who learned the lifts at the same time in the same way but continue to perform primarily CrossFit workouts.

My experience primarily as a weightlifting coach and secondarily as a strength-and-conditioning coach while working in CrossFit boxes has provided me with a unique perspective on the CrossFit-weightlifting crossover. While CrossFit is proving to be a gateway to weightlifting for many athletes, not everyone will make the jump. Others are content to simply use the snatch and clean and jerk as another tool in their training arsenals. No problem there.

Physical training is all about reaching the goals that are most important to you, the individual athlete. The best results and degrees of success will always come about as a consequence of desire and decision.



Bob Takano

About the Author

*Bob Takano has developed and coached some of the best weightlifters in the U.S. for the past 39 years. A 2007 inductee into the U.S.A. Weightlifting Hall of Fame, he has coached four national champions, seven national record holders and 28 top 10 nationally ranked lifters. Fifteen of the volleyball players he's coached have earned Division 1 volleyball scholarships. His articles have been published by the NSCA and the International Olympic Committee and helped to establish standards for the coaching of the Olympic lifts. He is a former member of the editorial board of the **NSCA Journal**, and an instructor for the UCLA Extension program. He is currently the chairperson of the NSCA Weightlifting Special Interest Group. He works with Coach Mike Burgener in the CrossFit Oly Seminar program. Website: www.takanoathletics.com.*