
THE CrossFit LIFE

Finding the Fire

After a disastrous injury playing Division 1 softball, Panita Thanatharn lost her passion for competition—until she found CrossFit.

Hilary Achauer reports.

By Hilary Achauer

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Gina Caywood

Panita Thanatharn had her eye on home plate. It was Feb. 9, 2003, and Thanatharn, a sophomore at California State University Long Beach (CSULB), had played baseball since she was 5, switching to softball in high school.



Matt Brown

Before her injury in 2003, Thanatharn was batting .526 for CSULB.

It was her second year playing for CSULB, and she was working harder than ever before. It was all paying off. She was having a great season. In the first seven games of the campaign, Thanatharn, an outfielder, was hitting .526.

"I was on fire," Thanatharn said.

Thanatharn's team was playing Loyola Marymount. She was on second base, and Thanatharn knew if she made it to home plate she could tie the game. Her teammate hit the ball into center field, and Thanatharn sped off around third base and toward home. Just as she slid into home, the catcher from the opposing team stepped in her way and Thanatharn slammed into her.

The impact was so brutal that a spectator later told Thanatharn she had heard the sound of breaking bones. Thanatharn severely fractured her tibia and fibula. Part of the broken bone stuck out of her left leg.

Thanatharn spent 10 days in the hospital. She had two surgeries right away, but that was only the beginning of what it would take to put her leg back together.

Thanatharn had five surgeries overall, and eight years later she still needs another surgery to fix her fibula, which never attached.

Thanatharn didn't play softball for two years. Once she was cleared to play, she suited up but remained a reserve player.

"I just didn't have the snap anymore," she said. "After my fifth year, I was going to be done, but when I talked about it with my coach, I realized I wasn't done. I petitioned for a rare sixth year, and they approved it. Since I was finished with my undergraduate work, I started grad school. I was a 24-year-old playing with 18-to-22-year-old kids. But I started every game that year," she said with a proud smile.

Thanatharn spent more time hanging out with the coaches than the other players, so soon she found herself interning with the softball coaches, and after she graduated she started coaching full time, first at University of Las Vegas and then back at her alma mater, CSULB.

Even though Thanatharn was still involved in softball, she missed the feeling of being part of a team.

A player introduced Thanatharn to CrossFit in October 2010, and she was immediately hooked.



Gina Coywood

Like many other college athletes, Thanatharn took to CrossFit immediately.



Gina Caywood

To compensate for mobility issues caused by her injury, Thanatharn uses a very wide squat stance.

"My friends said, 'When did you ever start working out again?' I hadn't worked out consistently for years. But I loved that whole team atmosphere that holds me accountable. I like the class time. If you're late, you're doing burpees. Same thing on my softball team; my kids can't be late."

Thanatharn still has some issues left over from the accident. She has nerve damage in her toes—the toes of her left foot are curled up, which means her feet are not the same size. She also has mobility problems. The range of motion is gone in her left leg, but she compensates by staggering her feet and taking a wide stance in her squat.

I didn't notice any of this when I visited CrossFit Long Beach and did a thruster ladder with Thanatharn. I was too distracted by the petite woman—she's 5 feet 2 inches tall and weighs about 120 lb.—easily putting 125 lb. over her head. Thanatharn currently squats 190 lb., and her goal is 220, a number she achieved in college. Not bad for someone who essentially had to have her left leg reconstructed.

Even though she's only been doing the sport for a short time, Thanatharn qualified for the competitive OC Throwdown, a competition in Orange County, Calif., in January 2012. It will be her first CrossFit competition, and she's excited to test herself.

"My goal is to just get better every day," Thanatharn said. "I need to work on double-unders—that really hurt me in the OC Throwdown qualifier."

One thing Thanatharn would crush in a competition is a softball throw. When I brought up the softball throw in the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games, she laughed.

"These athletes, they didn't have the mechanics. Oh, man, that's one thing I could compete with them on! When I saw that I was laughing."

Before she found CrossFit, Thanatharn hadn't worked out consistently in years. She remembered the competitive team atmosphere of university-level softball, and going to the gym by herself just didn't hold her interest. CrossFit provided both the challenge and the camaraderie from her college days, and through it she rediscovered her competitive fire. Gina Caywood, one of the owners of CrossFit Long Beach, said that what impresses her most about Thanatharn is her enthusiasm and support for her fellow athletes.

"She's a lot of fun and also very humble when she talks about herself," Caywood said. "But if you watch her cheer people on, you can see what an amazing person she is."

What about you? Have you overcome any injuries? What keeps you coming back to CrossFit? Share your thoughts in the comments.

