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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## Training Silvers

Senior athletes require a special approach, but that doesn't mean they shouldn't CrossFit. Joey Powell offers tips on how to help your senior athletes achieve health and fitness.

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May 2010

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All images courtesy of Joey Powell/CrossFit Chaos

Working with seniors has taught me a lot, but most of all it's taught me that we must embrace the lessons they can share first and then patiently return the favor.

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After working with many “silvers,” I think it’s productive to view the senior athlete as you would a classic or antique car. The vehicle may have set speed records in its day, and it may indeed still be able to burn up the track, but that does not mean it should. A 1950s Corvette might hit 150 mph down I-17, but the first time that driver pulls over he should be arrested, and perhaps beaten, for abuse of a classic.

Classics are meant for cruising. Don’t believe me? Say you had a 1990 Corvette and a 1955 Corvette, and under threat of death you had to let your 17-year-old son take one car for the weekend. Which car would you give him? It sure as hell would not be the ‘55, would it?

With that, it is important to note that “intensity,” as we commonly experience it with CrossFit, is not to be strived for when training silvers. Rather, the trainer must be very thorough on the diagnostics before allowing anyone to put the “pedal to the metal.” If the traditional means of recognizing intensity (sweat, heavy breathing or writhing on the floor) do not appear, we should not go hunting for them.

So let’s apply some of the same logic for the care and restoration of a classic car to training a “silver CrossFitter.”

### **Out for a Sunday Drive**

The first thing one must know about training our older population is that fear is a large part of their decision-making process. Fear of a lack of mobility drove them to see you, and fear of a lack of mobility will drive them to question everything they will be asked to do. Fear will lead them to do movements incorrectly, and fear will lead them to question whether functional movements are even necessary.

The trainer must always ensure that he approaches the training like a Sunday drive: neither slow and boring nor rushed. Enjoy the scenery, but keep your eyes on the road. Objects in CrossFit gyms are generally not soft, so silvers tend to move around very carefully in the box. Rarely will you see them walking backward, and they will generally look where their feet are. This applies to movements as well, so expect them to instinctively look down at first on squats and deadlifts as if there is a chance the floor will fall through.

And therein lies the danger.



*“Silvers” such as Jane Paternoster are inspiring other seniors by showing that you don’t have to spend retirement sitting in an armchair.*

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Reduced reaction speed, hearing loss, slower decision-making processes and physical degradation will lead silvers be slightly behind the action. Sudden movement in their peripheral vision, load crashes and the miscellaneous violent actions in the gym can be unnerving at first, and they will stiffen and brace for impact. Metaphorically, they must be reminded to keep their eyes on the scenery while you keep them on the road.

Contrary to popular thinking, however, you will not be sheltering them. Rather, you must reintroduce them to this chaos in ways that won't endanger them physically, psychologically or emotionally but will stretch their current limits. For far too long they have been observing the world through a soda straw. By driving the same routes, moving slowly, developing ways to avoid challenge, and choosing limiting patterns of existence, they have closed themselves off from the action (and joy) of navigating through chaos. Reintroducing the chaos will bring greater awareness and confidence to their lives. To be honest, I have seen that chaos to be the one thing they appreciate the most, because they will learn to relax more in their daily lives as they remember how to multi-task.

### No Air Bags Available

Crashes will be devastating to the silver. A fellow CrossFit affiliate owner and physical therapist claims machine circuit training is a physical therapist's "best friend," meaning that older ladies constantly find their way to him even when they're doing what would be considered the "safest" of exercises on "safe" machines.

Older people have a much lower tolerance for repetitive movement in general and incorrect repetitive movement specifically. This may seem obvious, but no matter how active seniors are, chances are they are not going to be active in a broad, general and inclusive manner. If they are active, more often than not they will be engaging in a routine built over several years, and this routine has probably slowly dwindled in its scope of function and carry-over to daily tasks and demands.

Perhaps, then, a comparison of age groups is useful. Think of dropping different kinds of balls from shoulder height. Metaphorically speaking, younger people under 30 bounce. Thirtysomethings tend to "blop." Fortysomethings crack. The common characteristic of these age groups is that they will all generally be in one piece after a harsh



*Louie Simmons would be proud of Dr. Clay Maupin. Safety-bar squats to a box aren't just for powerlifters. They can actually work very well for seniors looking for a safe workout that still gets results.*



workload or demanding bout of training. It should be noted, however, that fiftysomethings break and those over 60 tend to shatter.

This is an important concept that sets the stage for the rest of this primer. It must be said that silvers cannot be rushed into condition. The harm-to-help ratio is too sensitive for egos—either the silver's or the trainer's—to play a role in determining progression. It would be best to look at all training with the older population as rehabilitative in nature, not as strength and conditioning. The difference with CrossFit is that we are actually going to use sound strength, conditioning and nutrition protocols for rehabilitation.

### **Back in the Day Is a World Away**

As we age, the average person becomes efficient in two ways. He becomes repetitive and self-limits activities. Take time early on to use simple agility drills to see where the person is at.

Can she get to the floor and back to standing without much drama? Can he walk through a hopscotch? Can she jump rope at all? Can he walk a straight line without looking down? Could he or she do any of these things immediately after rowing 350 meters?

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Often, several sessions of work on basic agility drills coupled with moderate rowing or walking will produce rapid results that will prepare the silver for more traditional CrossFit programming.

Background and athletic history, though important, are often poor indicators of current ability or work capacity. Digging deep into a silver's past may shine a light on what kind of work ethic you can expect, but rarely can that

information give you much insight into current abilities. Often, the harder a person has worked in the past (occupational or in fitness or sport), the worse a position he will be in because of his own false interpretation of his current state of health, wellness and conditioning. Perhaps he was an athlete, construction worker or even a physical trainer, but there can be close to zero connection to that past life if he has been out of the game for years. Often, it is the specificity of past activities that has actually kept silvers from a good state of fitness.

Broad, general and inclusive is the way to go. With the younger crowd in CrossFit, basic levels of coordination, agility, accuracy and balance (the neuromuscular domains) are often high enough that we use the foundational movements themselves and the WODs to enhance them. Silvers have probably deteriorated in these domains, and though the foundational movements are important and should be used, specific early work on the neuromuscular domains will allow them to progress quicker. This also gives them options other than locking up and closing their eyes when they must react. Therefore, don't be afraid to focus on the neuromuscular domains of fitness (coordination, accuracy, agility and balance) very heavily at first to raise baseline conditioning before working on the other six domains.

Like the CrossFit Kids, silvers do not only require scaling. Silvers need different programming—vastly different, at first—that allows them to safely handle the chaotic nature of more advanced WODs and the CrossFit gym environment later on. The trainer must help the silver develop confidence in her abilities to negotiate the world around her. Agility ladders, balance obstacles, ground-level mazes and low-level climbing obstacles help teach the silver to relax under stress so she learns to act instead of react, thus helping push fear to the background.

### **Aftermarket Parts on Your Classic?**

More and more seniors have joint replacements. More often than not, they are a result of bad movement over the years. Knees wear out from pushing the knee forward too much when going down stairs, running, sitting, etc. Hips are replaced because of lumbar stiffness that led to an unnatural gait. Bone density might have been lacking before a bad fall. Replacement joints may be the wrong size or aligned slightly off the mark, which will lead to clumsy movement and joint irritation. Take these considerations into account when asking someone with aftermarket parts to assume a posture or stance.

For example, the trainer's insistence that a silver reach what she believes to be full extension of the spine during a deadlift might be endangering the athlete more than what appears to be some rounding of the spine. What appears to be spinal flexion might be limitation due to known or unknown spinal fusion. Instead, see if the athlete can stabilize that position correctly through abdominal pressure and move the weight with the hips properly. If so, this is where you will start.

What you may be missing in this example are the adhesions built up on the front side of the rib cage and shortened hamstrings. The deadlift itself will quite possibly bring about the increased range of motion needed to assume a safer position in the near future.

### Ignore the Paint Job: Check Under the Hood

The diet may seem impeccable, the body may look 20 years younger than it is, and the mind may be vibrant, but the current state of inflammation can make for an accident waiting to happen if you don't dig a little deeper. Just teaching the silver to air squat correctly might set off a chain of events that will make progress very difficult for months to come and degrade his already limited quality of life. Metaphorically speaking, what is the condition of the belts, hoses and lubricants?

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Inflammation will probably become an issue. Research a client's diet and medication. You may need to get permission to chat with physicians and therapists. Ask the silver how long it takes cuts to heal and about joint pain. The breath of pre-diabetic and diabetic silvers might smell fruity or sweet. You don't need to be an expert in order to help, but even a little ignorance can really hurt.

With this in mind, purposely start with limited ranges and weights to bring about slow changes with range of motion. Use compound movements that allow one joint to have a chance to compensate for another. This allows

the knee joint to act as a crutch with the hip joint in a squat or deadlift, and it allows the elbow joint to act as a crutch with the shoulder joint in presses and pulls. This way they can protect degraded connective tissue instantly and automatically by allowing the other joint to dampen power and inertia.

Having a silver squat to a high box or deadlift from the rack or boxes will allow you to use cues to train for quality movement without incorporating an increased range of motion the athlete may not be ready for. A slow, steady progression to lower boxes and rack heights will allow silvers to maintain correct tensioning and loading postures until they are again second nature, regardless of environmental or range-of-motion demands.



***Josephine Olsen is able to lift weight overhead, but some silvers can't. Check for mobility issues first before assuming a silver can do anything.***

### **If the Parts Are Not the Issue, Check the Frame**

As we age, specific work must be done to keep the tissues flexible. Around 50 years old, we generally see a definitive closing of the body. The mobility of the spine degrades. The shoulders round forward. The rib cage loses elasticity. The hip flexors and hamstrings shorten. Though full range of motion may still be possible, full extension of joints into mechanically sound positions for efficiency may be uncomfortable or just difficult.

Myriad health issues come with this closing of the body, affecting the torso in particular. High blood pressure, digestive issues and even degradation of organ function can occur.

All of this wreaks havoc on the quality of movement. The poor joint movement increases the degradation of mobility, thus creating a cycle leading to poor joint movement and further degradation of mobility.

Correcting postural issues early on will lead to much faster development, but traditional passive stretching may not be the best course of action. Often, the connective tissue is being stretched, not the muscle belly. For a silver whose ligaments have lost thickness, stretching in the joints may produce increased range of motion, but when a load (body weight or resistance) is added, serious injury is around the corner. There is a reason it's expensive to insure a yoga studio.

Proprioceptive neuromuscular facilitation (PNF), foam rolling and other myofascial release methods—on the hip flexors, rib cage, lats, chest and shoulders—can help to release the chronic tension found in those areas. Doing so will free up the joints to maintain a more productive and healthy posture.

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### **Keep It Functional—and Relevant**

Just because a silver can do something doesn't mean he should—yet. This goes for all of us at some level. For silvers, athletic prowess will take a back seat to overall improvement in tasks they must do or should do. If the trainer can quickly assess what tasks are taking a back seat due to a lack of ability, he will make a far greater impact on quality-of-life issues. Getting down into the lower cupboards or face-to-face with small grandchildren will be more important than a 115-lb. power clean or running a 7-minute mile.

It is easy to focus on what a silver can do, rather than what she can't. After all, we tend to feed off success. Unfortunately, doing only what she can do has probably led to degradation we traditionally view as the byproduct of aging. The trainer and the silver must steel themselves to regularly focus on the uncomfortable and face down fears.

Burpees may regularly be in order for silvers who don't like getting up and down. Dragging exercises may be in order for the silvers who don't like to strain for long periods of time. Agility exercises where the feet cannot be seen easily may be in order for silvers fixated on the ground.



***“Relative intensity” is important for silvers, but Ron Smith shows that the working hard is ageless.***



*You can adapt just about any activity to give a silver a great workout that will improve his or her quality of life.*

### **Always Be Prepared**

Have a silver with heart disease, asthma, diabetes, acid reflux, Crohn's or incontinence?

These silvers may find themselves in a bad way, especially until they understand how their medications, diet, and eating and sleeping patterns interact with their training. How you handle these situations will dramatically influence how they will handle them. Remain clinical. The trainer is there to help, so unnecessary reactions and facial expressions only make things worse. Walk through possible scenarios and physiological reactions with the silver before teaching a movement or introducing new intensity so they can draw upon experience from other aspects of their lives.

Asking a 65-year-old female with incontinence to jump rope may prove embarrassing to her. As well, having a 70-year-old male with high blood pressure pull a weight sled might be great with arm straps, but hooking those straps to a weightlifting belt around the abdomen could prove dangerous if he had a large lunch at his weekly Kiwanis meeting.

Often, the very things that ail the silver lead the trainer directly into the protocols that will help heal them. Shortness of breath in a silver will lead the trainer to design WODs that lightly strain cardiovascular endurance with repetitive efforts that force the silver to avoid panic and develop breathing strategies while under load. Suddenly, long walks across varying terrain with a spouse will be possible again.

Blood-pressure issues will lead the trainer to design WODs with light weightlifting efforts that force the silver to stabilize the midline. The light loading coupled with Valsalva efforts for spinal stabilization will teach the silver to handle ever-increasing pressures in very small increments. Now doing landscaping chores or hobbies will be possible again.

The trainer must help the silver confront issues head-on, not run from them. The trick is to do it with patience and due diligence.

### **There Are No Accidents**

Just like traffic law, somebody is always at fault. The trainer would be wise to adopt this attitude toward working with silvers.



Perhaps a silver is active when he comes to you, and you want to be sure his expectations are met in regards to rigor. However, if the silver is too sore to train because of a demanding training session three days earlier, and if he cannot train due to other obligations for another few days, he will be frustrated. The best way to handle this is to keep the first several sessions “diagnostic” and make sure he knows it. By observing a broad range of low-intensity movements, the trainer has a chance to protect the active silver from himself, especially if the challenges are neuromuscular in nature.

Keeping the training focused on the neuromuscular attributes buys the trainer time and space for the silver to see improvement, and the silver will have enough energy to remain active outside the gym. Further, even if training sessions are spaced apart by several days or even weeks, the silver will be focused on the frustrating aspects of the neuromuscular tasks, not how “hard” he isn’t working. If he has lost some ability, this will be a chance to re-learn how to learn, which is a great quality to have at any age. If this ability is still present, the silver can focus on greater complexity. Either way, this approach allows for greater rigor to be introduced over time.

### Adding New Features

This is often the most rewarding aspect for many trainers and silvers alike. By following the CrossFit protocols, the trainer will be filling in the holes in the silver’s athletic development (even if the silver never has or will consider herself an athlete). Those holes may not only be profound, but they may also be the underlying cause of other holes or dents in development. The silver who fixes those profound and long-standing holes may find that myriad other issues may also improve, leading the silver to do things she could not do before at any age.

Here lies the most powerful tool in the trainer’s toolbox: the microscope. The trainer must keep a close eye out for the root cause of poor movement and correct it early on. Remember, the price of poor movement adds up quickly for the silver.

For instance, do the silver’s knees slide forward on her box squat? If so, the underlying cause may be hamstring tension or even a lack of kinesthetic awareness, which is common. However, it might actually be ankle pronation, which leads to the knees becoming the focus of her attention. What you may not know is the small twinges during the movement can turn into aching pain later. This

is more important to her than the trainer’s wish that she sit back to the box and not down to it.

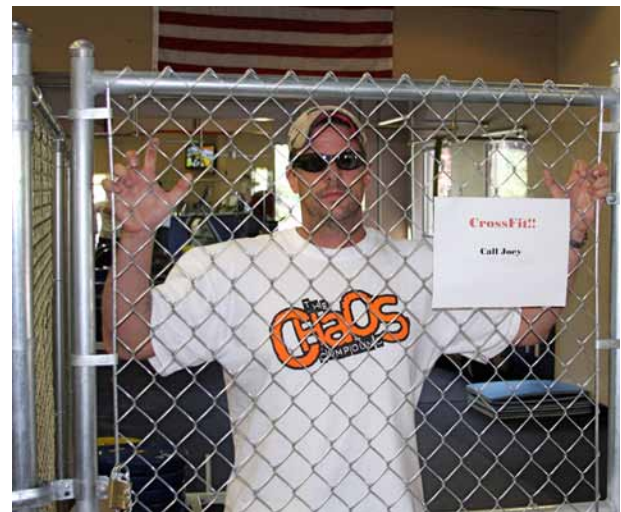
External rotation of the femur during the eccentric portion of the squat turns the weight to the outside of the feet. Now she feels stable and pain-free, allowing her to focus on moving her hips correctly, not the small twinge on the inside of the right knee.

What just happened? The silver developed hip-knee coordination, which leads to power development. One month later, that power development leads to small box jumps and large step-ups. Two months after that the silver may be rewarded with thickening of connective tissue and increased bone density. Then, one day she’s able to jog pain-free instead of substituting rowing or walking during a WOD. Three months later, she can run a 5K race and win her age division. This is a best-case scenario, of course, but it’s certainly possible.

### On the Road to Fitness

Just like finding a neglected classic car cached in a barn, working with a senior takes time, careful preparation and dedication. Put in the effort, and you’ll be rewarded with a classic that runs like new—and sometimes better.

Click [here](#) for a video of silvers working out at [CrossFit Chaos](#) (then Freedom CrossFit).



### About the Author

*Joey Powell is the owner of CrossFit Chaos, located in Prescott Valley, Ariz.*