
THE CrossFit LIFE

A Prescription for Living

Holly Gera works as the athletic director of a large Division III university, but she never considered herself an athlete—until she found CrossFit.

By Holly Gera

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All images: Courtesy of Holly Gera

The author before CrossFit.

I am an athletic director who was never an athlete. I have been happily employed at Montclair State University in New Jersey for the past 23 years, 16 of which I have worked as the athletic director.

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I work at my alma mater, where I didn't make the softball team as an undergraduate student. Now, I oversee more than 460 student athletes in 17 varsity sports programs. We have a long history of athletic success. I love my job, and despite the fact that I've never been an athlete myself, I love my association with student-athletes and coaches.

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I've been active to a varying extent throughout my life, but I never really participated in a regular workout program. I dabbled in aerobics when it was popular and have always walked regularly. I play golf, and I hike while on vacation. My casual activities worked pretty well for health and weight control until I hit my mid-40s, every woman's dreaded decade.

I started to gain weight, and my three or four walks a week were no longer enough to feel healthy and in shape. I started riding my bicycle more regularly as a way to change up my routine and introduce a new and hopefully effective exercise. Nonetheless, I continued to gain weight gradually, and I vacillated between ignoring the problem and trying to find a way to address it.

I was enjoying the addition of the bike to my routine and was hopeful for some good results until one beautiful sunny day in July 2010. While out for a ride, I hit some stones and I fell over the handlebars of my bike, breaking both my wrists. My fractured bones were visible immediately after the fall, and both required surgery. I now carry around some extra hardware and screws.

Question: What do you do with two broken wrists?

Answer: Not very much for a very long while!

The process of recuperation and months of physical therapy tested my patience and perseverance. I was virtually helpless. It was months before I was able to

resume basic functions like opening doors, feeding or showering myself, or driving. I gained even more weight and became fearful of falling.

Many more months later, I was confronted with the question of how to resume a workout regimen in my weakened state, which was made worse because of my severely compromised hand and wrist mobility. Additionally, I was dealing with the psychological effect of how tentative I had become and how shaky my confidence was.

In early June 2011, my partner, Sharon Feeney, began CrossFit at Guerilla Fitness CrossFit Morristown, our local affiliate. She was hooked from the first class and couldn't stop talking about how great the program and the coaches were. Sharon is an athlete who was once a competitive swimmer. She played multiple sports at a high level from an early age, something she kept up through college. Her affinity for CrossFit and the community was natural.



Gera was terrified when she first started CrossFit, her confidence shaken by a serious bike accident.



Gera after a year of CrossFit.

Given my desire to begin an exercise program, the thought of CrossFit was intriguing, but neither of us thought someone with two compromised wrists could participate in any meaningful way. Sharon spoke to the coaches about my situation, and they recommended “CrossFit Lite.” This class is anything but light; it is a modified program for people with physical challenges or injuries, a class for those who are older than the average CrossFitter, and for those who may need additional scaling options.

I started CrossFit Lite on July 8, 2011, one year to the week from my bicycle accident. I was absolutely terrified, nervous and skeptical. After watching my partner in some of her classes, I couldn’t imagine how I was going to participate in this program when I couldn’t even carry a gallon of water from the basement or push the lawn mower. And I was still so fearful of falling.

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But I can’t say enough about how welcomed I felt during that first class. The coaches and members were so encouraging. And slowly but surely I learned how to do the movements. I gained confidence in my abilities and ever so gradually added weight to the bar, began to jump instead of step up to boxes, and even stopped being so afraid. CrossFit nursed me back to health.

I was sore, but I learned that there is a difference between a good sore and injured sore. The coaches helped tremendously in making sure I was never in jeopardy of injuring my wrists. They were patient, supportive, creative and always pushed me to do more.

One of my coaches was fond of evoking Eleanor Roosevelt and told me to do something that scared me every day. That wasn’t a problem.

Reflections after one year

From that first class to now, a full year later, I have lost 43 lb. and discovered muscles in places I never knew existed—and somehow I have had fun doing it. I cannot believe what I am able to do.

In the last year, I ran my first mile since the late 1980s and rowed my first 3K in a workout. I back-squatted 80 lb. for the first time, and I can now do box jumps on a 16-inch box. I can do band-assisted pull-ups, modified push-ups, and all kinds of presses, snatches, thrusters and cleans that I never thought I would be able to do. In fact, I never even considered trying. I have done CrossFit in Texas, Illinois and California. I participate in regular CrossFit classes and feel comfortable scaling for my abilities.

CrossFit has enhanced my strengths, and it has allowed me the humility to keep working on my weaknesses. It has made me a better me, in every way.

One of the highlights of participating in CrossFit is the sense of community and camaraderie. I love the large group workouts, and our owner, Karianne Dickson, always offers holiday classes. It is amazing to have 60 or 70 members all working out together on Thanksgiving or on Christmas Eve morning or hitting Murph together on Memorial Day.

Beyond all the strength, endurance and physical conditioning is the confidence I feel today. Not only does CrossFit train my body, but it also trains my mind.

The coaches at Guerilla Fitness CrossFit Morristown are such a large part of this. It's hard to put into words the depth of wisdom that twenty- and thirtysomethings have to offer fiftysomethings, but they offer it indeed.

They inspire and motivate me every day. They model so well the kind of integrity, courage, tenacity, and kindness that CrossFit encourages. It's contagious and I think we all end up being better people outside the box because of what we learn inside.

I also notice a mental toughness that I didn't have before. I can push myself more than ever. On a recent vacation, I snorkeled, jumped in and out of a kayak, and took a doors-off helicopter ride. I now find myself more likely to attempt something challenging rather than assume that



It's never too late to become an athlete.

I'm not capable. CrossFit has enhanced my strengths, and it has allowed me the humility to keep working on my weaknesses. It has made me a better me in every way.

Just a year ago, the surgeon told me I would never do a push-up. I took great pleasure recently in showing him a photo of me doing a thruster. Someday I will do an unassisted pull-up, and I will actually do a burpee correctly.

While I don't know how many workouts I will be able to RX, I do know that CrossFit is a wonderful prescription for living. Maybe I am finally an athlete after all.

