
THE CrossFit LIFE

Above the Bar: A Weekend Pull-Up Summit

Lisa Ilka Abrams describes how 10 women came together to conquer the bar through positive affirmations, commitment to a defined goal and group support.

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December 2011



All images: Ventana CrossFit



Pull-ups? Yes you can!

Many women remember a time in elementary school when someone said, "Girls can't do pull-ups!" Maybe it was the schoolyard bully, or even a misguided P.E. teacher. We were led to believe that because we were female, some athletic feats were unattainable.

That idea was proved wrong on Sept. 30 and Oct. 1, 2011. Ten female athletes participated in an Rx STAR Pull-Up Summit, sponsored by Ventana CrossFit and facilitated by Aly Willier, founder and CEO of Rx STAR.

1 of 2

Willier was a well-known competitive snowboarder when she wiped out in Breckenridge, Colo., over 15 years ago. She broke 14 bones in her body, including her right hip, sacrum, L5 vertebra, and her left leg. Doctors told her she would be in a wheelchair for at least six months and that her days of being an athlete were over. Willier proved them all wrong—she was back on the slopes in three months.

Willier credits her recovery to her inner voice: she replaced negative language with positive affirmations. Willier went on to become a CrossFit athlete with a focus on supporting children's athletic foundations and training women. She shares the power of positive thought with other athletes through her program, Rx STAR. STAR stands for "simple tactics achieving results."

Willier's focus is on motivation through empowerment. Her workshop spotlights individual commitment to a defined goal supported by the entire group of athletes. It's about embracing simple tactics that bring results.

"It is not about embracing the suck!" Willier says. "It is about unleashing the seemingly impossible in a safe environment where every athlete reaches his or her potential."



Athletes drilling the kip before heading to the pull-up bars.

Our pull-up training began with a goal-setting dinner where each participant introduced herself. Some were seasoned trail runners or cyclists, and a few had only been working out for a few months, but we were all relatively new to CrossFit.

With the exception of our trainer, Jenna Spivey, the owner of Ventana CrossFit, none of us was able to do a kipping pull-up. We all used a band. One athlete had never accomplished even one band-assisted pull-up.

We identified our goals—everything from 1 unassisted kipping pull-up to 5 kipping pull-ups on a blue band. Then we wrote down our goals. We said them out loud. When one of us faltered, she repeated her goal with confidence. We committed to being accountable for one another. No one would fail.

We gathered at Ventana CrossFit on Saturday morning to begin the technical learning process. In two lines, we hopped across the gym, arms tight and high above our heads.

"Open and close! Show your armpits!" Willier coached. "Raise your arms to push-press width. Turn your shoulders in. Now out! And then 'huh!' Pull that bar down!" We jumped. We rotated our shoulders. And we grunted in unison.

"Huh!" we exhaled.

Lying on our backs, we found our "hollow," that point where the abdominal muscles contract when the arms and legs are raised off the ground and the back is firmly pressed to the floor.

Then it was time to go to the bars. Willier stood by our side and coached us through the step-by-step movements.

"Find your hollow," she said. "Point your toes down. Tighten your tush. Look up. Focus on something in front of you. Rotate your shoulders. Press your shoulder blades together. Now out. And in. Pull that bar. Huh!"

One by one, we gripped the bar. We corrected our form. We tried again and again. And we did it! In less than two hours, every athlete improved her form. Many exceeded their goals by flying up and over the bar entirely unassisted. Most importantly, each athlete left the training feeling a new sense of confidence.

This confidence is something we carry with us every day, no matter what our profession, in and out of the gym.

