

## The Asshole Barrier

Jerks are rare in the CrossFit world—but why, and how do you deal with the occasional creep?  
Affiliate owners and academics offer answers and strategies.

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Craig Silverman

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After finishing the WOD, the guy looked over at one of his fellow members at [CrossFit Virginia Beach](#) and said, "Is that all you're going to lift?"

For owner Thomi Gill, that was the last straw.

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### Read the Fine Print, Asshole

Less than a month earlier, this particular member had shown up at CrossFit VB. Soon, Gill noticed that other athletes seemed to tense up when he walked in the door. And when she tried to coach him, he wouldn't listen.

"He would always rebut my cueing with excuses or reasons why he thought the lift went wrong, instead of just listening," she says.

After he made that snide remark about another athlete's performance, Gill decided it was time for him to go.

"I told him I didn't believe he saw any value in being trained," she says. "You're here to be trained, and it was very interruptive to other clients because they'd wonder what was going on. I just told him I didn't think it was the place for him. He didn't really say much and never came back."

It wasn't the first time she'd spoken to him about his behavior. And if he didn't get the message, Gill was ready to play her trump card: the "asshole clause."

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*"The saying is that one bad apple ruins a bunch, and we didn't want one asshole in a class of 25 people to make the other 24 dread going there every day."*

*—Pat Sherwood*

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The waiver at CrossFit VB states, "CrossFit Virginia Beach strives to provide a positive and encouraging environment for our clients. Anyone that is disruptive or negatively influences this environment is subject to having their membership revoked. This is at the sole discretion of CrossFit Virginia Beach Management."

The word "asshole" isn't used, but Gill says she frequently tells clients that "it's basically an asshole clause." Former CrossFit VB co-owner Pat Sherwood, now a trainer with CrossFit HQ, says they drafted the clause before opening their box.



*—"I'm an asshole." — Denis Leary, 1993.*



*An "asshole clause" in your waiver can be used to keep confrontational, arrogant people out of your box. You may never use it, but it's nice to have just in case.*

"I've always been of the opinion that people can do 400-meter runs and deadlifts anywhere," he says. "For them to want to come into a gym and do it in that sort of environment, it would have to be one that they enjoy going to every day. They'd have to enjoy the people there and feel like they're truly cared for and respected. The saying is that one bad apple ruins a bunch, and we didn't want one asshole in a class of 25 people to make the other 24 dread going there every day."

Gill says most new members smile when she explains the clause. Nobody wants to be around assholes—especially not CrossFitters.

CrossFit Inc. doesn't have an official no-assholes policy. What's taken shape is more powerful than any written directive: a culture that, as Coach Greg Glassman put it in the *CrossFit Journal* video [Primal Fitness](#) (Aug. 25, 2009), naturally "co-select(s) for a bunch of admirable character traits."

In the video, Coach Glassman also told CrossFit media director Tony Budding that "assholes don't like to suffer and sacrifice today for some gain tomorrow." As a result, they don't last long in CrossFit, whether they're doing the workouts on their own and posting to the main site or training at a local box. Budding himself likes to say that CrossFit has an "asshole barrier."

## Bad Behavior Is Contagious

If an asshole barrier indeed exists, it bodes well for the present and future of CrossFit. Research shows that people with asshole-like traits do more than simply annoy co-workers, ruin a workout or hijack an online discussion thread. Assholes get in the way of excellence.

Bob Sutton, a professor of management science and engineering at Stanford University, is the author of *The No Asshole Rule*, a best-selling management book. His definition of an asshole is "somebody who leaves people feeling demeaned and de-energized."

That perfectly describes the impact of the particular asshole at CrossFit VB. Lisbeth Darsh, CrossFit's affiliate community manager and the owner of [CrossFit Watertown](#), says the CrossFit definition of an asshole should also include cheats who lie about their reps.

According to Darsh, an asshole is "a cheater and someone who doesn't want to be part of the group, who wants to do their own thing when the entire class is all moving in one direction. Like when everyone is doing the group warm-up and they think they're special enough to be off bench-pressing by themselves."

Adrian Bozman, an HQ trainer and coach at [San Francisco CrossFit](#), says that in his experience assholes are unwilling to be coached or learn anything new.

"Being willfully ignorant is probably the biggest (asshole) criteria on my list," he says. "Sometimes you come across people—and for me this happens more at an affiliate—where they walk in and aren't sure what they're doing there, and they are defensive about what they've done in past. If you try to discuss topics with them or try to inform them, they aren't having any of it. They're unwilling to listen to a different point of view."

Clearly, an asshole can take many forms. But one truth is that this particular breed of human has long been found inside gyms. Not surprisingly, Sutton's book, which is filled with examples of companies that won't tolerate asshole behavior, includes a quote from Gold's Gym owner Joe Gold.

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"To keep it simple you run your gym like you run your house," Gold said. "Keep it clean and in good running order. No jerks allowed. Members pay on time, and if they give you any crap, throw them out. There's peace where there's order."

One of the biggest problems with assholes is they're contagious, according to Sutton. They infect those around them, bringing down the level of performance and exacting a physical and intellectual toll on others.

"Essentially, research shows that when people are around rude people or negative emotion, it leads them to get physically sick, to have trouble solving problems," Sutton says. "Even witnessing rudeness can make people all tense and constrict their intellectual abilities."



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***CrossFit seems to have an "asshole barrier," but the occasional jackass can still wander into the gym. If you've created the right culture, the problem should take care of itself very quickly.***



A study published this summer came to a similar conclusion. According to a report in the *South Florida Business Journal*, "Simply observing discourteous behavior erodes fellow employees' ability to think creatively, solve problems, be good team players and even goes so far as to make them harbor deep, dark and destructive thoughts."

"The negative consequences of rudeness on the job are not limited to the person who happens to be the victim," said researcher Amir Erez, a University of Florida management professor. "If five other people are watching, the effects are going to spill over into the rest of the organization."

Inside a box, an asshole can cause fellow athletes to tense up and lose focus or otherwise negatively impact their performance and attitude. Affiliates that tolerate assholes can lose members and develop an atmosphere that prevents people from reaching their potential.

Sutton emphasizes that the nature of the activity and the close quarters within a box make it essential that affiliates maintain an asshole-free environment.

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"An asshole can poison the environment, and the fact that people will not have any place to escape is why it's especially bad," Sutton says. "It is a place where psychological safety is especially important."

He says one key to maintaining an asshole-free culture is to make sure top performers and managers don't treat less-experienced athletes like second-class citizens.

"A good test of a human being is how they treat people with less status or social standing than they (have)," Sutton says. "It sounds like (Gill of CrossFit VB) was applying that notion in telling that guy to go."

## An Future Free of A-holes?

As CrossFit continues to grow around the world, it's increasingly important that CrossFitters—and especially the leaders of the community—are willing to call someone out on being an asshole and explain why such behavior isn't acceptable.

Sherwood says one of the things that impressed him about CrossFit is the attitude, or lack thereof, of top athletes and people from HQ.

"The more firebreathers I was around, the humbler they were," he says. "That lack of ego and sense of family is one of my favorite things about CrossFit."

His comment highlights another unique and perhaps contradictory aspect of CrossFit culture. It's competitive and often aggressive, yet it's also meant to be open and welcoming. Many affiliates look like torture dungeons (except they substitute the rack position for an actual medieval rack). As a result, some people walk in, look around and get their asshole on.

"It's not a normal-looking gym compared to what most people are used to," Sherwood says. "There are no cushy-looking machines. There may be some blood on the floor and death metal playing on the stereo. It's more like walking into prison than a gym, so some people might have a tendency to puff out their chest a bit more."

The competitive nature of CrossFit also extends to how CrossFitters see and present themselves to other athletes, and to the public at large. Some people might wonder if it isn't just a little bit asshole-ish to wear a T-shirt declaring, "Your workout is our warm-up" or "Your workout sucks." CrossFitters take pride in these slogans because they believe them to be true—not to mention funny—but an outsider could be turned off or get the wrong impression. To an outsider, "asshole" might seem to be a good word to describe the person wearing the T-shirt.

In other words, maybe CrossFit has an "asshole barrier" in the sense that it attracts the right kind of asshole—the kind of person who's willing to work hard and be a part of the community, but who can sometimes act a little bit smug and superior when away from the tribe. Either way, the growth being experienced by CrossFit means it's a challenge to maintain and reinforce the existing CrossFit culture and attract and retain the right kind of people.

"I will say that as CrossFit gets larger and more widespread, it would be foolish to say to the community that we don't have assholes among our ranks," says Bozman. "Is it a significant number? No, of course not."

The question then becomes one of asshole management. In her experience, Darsh says it's best to let the athletes police themselves. Trainers and affiliates should step in if that process falls short.

"I spent six years in the Air Force as an officer, and often best way for an issue to be taken care of was to let the troops take care of it," she says. "They hold each other accountable. If members can't handle it, then a trainer or owner will step in. A large part of being a trainer is knowing when to hug someone and when to kick them in the ass."

She also says that the community and affiliates have to be rigorous about weeding out assholes before they take root.

"You always have to be in command of where your affiliate or community is going and what the atmosphere is inside a box," she says. "If you have the type of place that tolerates and encourages an asshole mentality, then you will get more of those folks. You have to decide what's the vision of your box and if it includes those people or not."

CrossFit VB's approach is to express its values clearly in the waiver. Sherwood says doing so helps diffuse potential situations by sending a strong message to new members about how they're expected to act.

"When I explained it to them, I could see some people physically relax," he says.

Gill says members take pride in the no-asshole clause. In three years, she's only had to ask two people to leave.

"CrossFit is a competitive environment ... It's sometimes difficult for outside people to come in without having a chip on their shoulder," she says. "But the waiver says, 'Look, we're not assholes and we don't want assholes here, so leave your ego somewhere else, train hard and have fun.'"



Liam Maloney

### About the Author

Craig Silverman is an author and journalist in Montreal, Canada. His first book, *Regret the Error: How Media Mistakes Pollute the Press and Imperil Free Speech*, won the Arthur Rowse Award for Press Criticism from the National Press Club in Washington. He is an associate editor for PBS MediaShift, a columnist for *Columbia Journalism Review*, and a regular contributor to the *Globe and Mail*. He trains at [CrossFit Plateau](#).