

CrossFit Algebra

An innovative Texas teacher applies CrossFit methodology to her high-school class, with impressive results

Amie Taylor



In the 9th grade mathematics class I teach, the warm-up activity is called the “WOD.” We do a series of benchmark drills—math skills that we drill over and over—called Fran (the 9x9 multiplication table), Monica (the 12x12 multiplication table), Tam (10 equations, solve for x), and Grace (30 integer problems). Josh is our version of CFT, Laura our highest test grade. The best times and scores are posted on a white board; students often bring their friends by to show them. “Look, I made it on to the white board!” The kids each have a PR chart to track their benchmark times, so they see for themselves that they are learning, building better skills, and achieving success in a subject they all used to hate—and are now learning to love. Welcome to CrossFit algebra in Arlington, Texas—the first math class to apply the methodology of CrossFit.

My Journey to the Classroom

When I started CrossFit in 2006, I wasn't a teacher. I was a marketing executive and part-time spin-class instructor. I had never done any weight training. I knew, cardio-wise, that I could do just about anything. But I also knew I was weak, not as strong as I could be. When a friend showed me the CrossFit site, I knew that it was something that he had committed to and that it would be intense, fun, and positive. That was attractive to me, because at that time I needed something positive to focus my energy on.

At the time, I had a very demanding job, working for an absolutely horrible boss. My previous boss, who I adored and would move mountains for, had left, and our company had hired this guy I refer to as "Sobel." (If you've ever seen the HBO mini-series, "Band of Brothers," Commander Sobel is depicted as a petty tyrant.) Sobel spent every day tearing our team apart, and I was number one on his hit parade. He would tell me everyday that I was worthless and dumb, that my ideas and opinions didn't matter, etc. At first, I thought he was a nut, but after a while I started buying into all the junk he was saying. If you hear you are worthless every day, at every meeting, in private or in front of your co-workers, it doesn't take long to wear you down and make you believe it too. I went from being able to move mountains to someone who couldn't do anything right. My self-confidence was being crushed.

I will never forget Thanksgiving 2006. I was talking to my CrossFitting friend and asked him what I could do for weight-training, thinking I needed to do that for my own sanity. He said, "Amie, you need CrossFit. You can do it." It was the first positive thing I had heard attached to my name in months. The Monday after Thanksgiving, 29 November 2006, was the day I started CrossFit. Ironically, it was also the day Sobel got fired.

I am a devoted CrossFitter; I can't imagine my life without it. I read once, "You are in CrossFit who you are in real life." But how often do we take what we learn in CrossFit and actually apply it in our "real" lives? CrossFit makes you stronger by pushing you to your breaking point, only to show you that you can go farther and faster physically than you ever thought possible. But have you ever thought about how CrossFit makes you stronger mentally?

One of my best friends, a CrossFitter, introduced me to the site in the summer of 2006. A spin-class instructor and occasional runner; when I watched my first CrossFit video, "Nasty Girls," I was naive enough to look at it and say, "I can do that!" I had always been extremely athletic, but didn't play many team sports because I was so competitive. I thought the other girls on my teams weren't competitive enough; they wanted to play for "fun," and I wanted to win. I probably wasn't the most encouraging teammate! Nothing ever really filled my competitive bucket—until CrossFit.

I started CrossFit on November 29, 2006, and I will never forget that very first WOD—Overhead Squats, 5-5-5-5-5. I had no idea what I was doing, and watched the videos to learn. I popped into my globo gym, figuring I'd start with the Olympic bar and squat that. I managed three sets of five with just the bar. I'm sure I had terrible form, but I did what I thought was correct—and I couldn't walk right for four days. I hurt badly—but it was that good kind of CrossFit hurt.

My next three WODs were Murph, Filthy 50, and Fight Gone Bad. I know it took me over an hour to complete each one (FGB is a timed workout—it always takes 17 minutes!!), and I was hooked. I'd finally found something that I could compete at with thousands of other people as competitive as I was, and I dove full force into CrossFit.

As I progressed, I watched my times get better, my weights increase, and my life change forever (see sidebar, "My Journey to the Classroom"). I liked that CrossFit was making me stronger, both physically and mentally. I liked the way Coach set up the program to quickly expose weaknesses and force me to get better at them. And I liked that we all discover something in every WOD that makes us feel successful—a new skill, the first muscle-up, new PR. We feed off that success and want to keep pushing to see just how far we can go.

This past summer, I was sitting in a "how to be a better teacher" training seminar, daydreaming about what WOD I was going to do that day and how fast could I get to my box. Then I had an epiphany. I knew how CrossFit made

CrossFit quite literally saved me. Each WOD I completed, I got back a piece of myself that Sobel had torn down. Slowly, WOD after WOD, month after month, seeing the progress I was making brought me back. I gained back the self-confidence that had been lost. My job didn't get any easier, and the next boss I had was worse than Sobel. The two years of transition I went through with the company were easily the worst in my life, and the one thing I looked forward to each day was the WOD.

Last year, I left the company to become a teacher. There is no doubt in my mind that I was put on this earth to teach. When I was little, I wanted to be a teacher, and now I get to live that out each day. Even better, I teach Algebra at the high school I graduated from, and the classroom I teach in was the same classroom that I took trigonometry in as a Senior. I had a 100 average in trig, and as I tell my students every year, they have a lot to live up to! I have high expectations for my students, and they far exceed them each year. I also hung up my Senior Class panoramic picture from 1993. My students remind me every day that was the year they were born, while they try to find me in the picture of more than 600 students. They ask if I'm "the girl with red hair on this row," or "the girl with the blue striped shirt," or my personal favorite, "are you this fat, ugly girl?"

Despite all the positive energy today, there are still moments of struggle with some of the aftermath of Sobel and his successor, although it's mostly behind me. CrossFit saved me during that time. The first WOD I did was OHS, and I could barely squat the bar. Today, I can OHS 115 pounds, working on 135 pounds.

I celebrated my one-year CF anniversary by doing all of the Hero WODs in one day—there were only six at the time, and I planned it to do one an hour until I got all six done. I started at the gym at 8 am and—no lie—ran into Sobel there. It was one year to the day since I had last seen him, when he was fired from our company. I walked out of the

me feel and why I loved it. So I wondered: is there a way to bring the methodology of CrossFit to my classroom and give my students a taste of the Kool-Aid?

Knocking out Fran Faster

I teach 9th grade algebra. Most people moan when they hear that, saying, "I couldn't ever do that!" High school today is tough—it's very different from when we went. There are so many pressures these kids face that were far less in our time: gangs, drugs, sex, etc. Sure, they were present then, but not like now. Adding to the kids' stress, 9th grade is a pivotal year for high schoolers. There are education experts all over the country who are studying 9th grade pass/fail rates, attendance, etc., and are making predictions on high school graduation rates

Teaching is different, too. When we were in school, the teacher talked and everyone listened. Now, kids are used to having an iPod going while they text and IM their friends and play Playstation, all at the same time. It's tough to find creative ways to keep students engaged in school every day, but if you want your students to be successful, you have to find ways to reach them. At the beginning of the school year, I decided to reach my students by turning my class into a "CrossFit Classroom."

My students are well below grade level. These are the kids who believe they "are not good at math." They started the school year hating math to its core. algebra is a particularly tough subject for math haters; it's an entirely new language to learn. It takes time to learn the language and to learn what you are being asked to do. Anything that can speed up these language skills is a godsend.

The first day of class this school year, I gave each student a PR chart, along with their first Fran (the 9x9 multiplication table; see chart below). They thought I was crazy! When they asked if they could use a calculator, I said I didn't mind—I just wanted them to try. The first attempt at Fran was, let's say, almost mutiny. My students didn't want to be challenged by something they felt they weren't good at. I told them their time really didn't matter. I wanted them to finish, and completing the chart was most important. After they completed that first Fran, many were disappointed with their times of nine minutes or more. They didn't feel success; instead, they felt "stupid" (their word, not mine). They wanted to know three things: "Why do we have to do this?" "How did that kid finish before me?" "Who is Fran anyway?" Moreover, the students who came in "last" wanted no part of Fran ever again. It wasn't pretty. I told them, "You have to trust me. You will get better. I promise." That was Round 1.

globo gym and haven't been back since. I went home and completed all six Heros, finishing with MURPH, my favorite. It was the worst MURPH time I've ever had, but by then, I was spent. And I wasn't worried about times that day; I just wanted to see if I could do all six in one day and finish. It was absolutely the greatest CrossFit day I had ever experienced: to go from not being able to lift the bar to doing all the Hero WODs.

Not long after that, GSX opened in Fort Worth, and I found my slice of CrossFit heaven. CrossFit is no fun by yourself, and it's a thousand times harder to do WODs in a globo gym on your own. I now realize that as much as I thought I was pushing myself for the year and half I did CrossFit on my own, I was nowhere close to what I could do. I've made more progress in the few months I've been at GSX than I could have made in years on my own. It's part of being a team, and I have a pretty good team of people I depend on at GSX to push me through every WOD. I perform better because people have pushed me harder than I ever thought I could go. I've also been blessed to meet some amazing coaches who have taught me more than I would have ever learned on my own.

The cool thing about my own personal CrossFit story is this: my students can all relate to Sobel. They've been there, done that. My school is considered "low-income," and many of the kids have experienced a Sobel in their lives, some much worse than anyone I've ever known. They and I know what it feels like to be called "stupid" and "worthless" by someone who means it. It's demoralizing. So I want my class to be a place where they feel success. And it is. And they do.

By no means do I take credit for what is happening in my classroom. But I understand it because it happened to me. It's CrossFit magic

—Amie Taylor

A couple of weeks went by, and we were knee-deep in algebra, with no further mention of Fran. It was time to try again. I will admit that they were less than enthusiastic. I told them, "Your time will be better, just watch. Again, finishing is more important than having a good time. 3,2,1 go..." Round 2.

The students came in with times of six minutes or so, improving by three minutes or more. One student went from a time of 9:57 to 4:32. For the first time they could see for themselves that they were indeed getting better at math. We didn't practice "multiplication drills" specifically for them to get better at Fran, either. (We specialize in not specializing!) They were learning that if they get better in one area of algebra, it helps them in others.

Today, as I write this in mid-November, we have completed 12 weeks of the school year, and I'm happy to report that my kids are genuinely excited about math! On Round 3, most knocked out Fran in two to three minutes or less!

The Saga of Speal and Dutch

Recently, I set up another benchmark called "Tam." It's 10 equations, solve for "x." The first time we did it one student was absolutely flying, on pace to finish in about a minute. It was so exciting! I was watching her go, silently encouraging her to hurry because I wanted to see if she could finish in under 60 seconds. The tension built as the clock ticked; the other students were cheering...

The girl yelled, "time!" and I looked at my watch. "It's 58 seconds," I said. With that, another student stopped his work and yelled, "Oh my God! Do you realize what you just did! You made history!" He was more excited for her than she was! Now she has a new nickname—I call her "Speal" because her name is on every benchmark on the white board, and she shattered Tam in sub-one.

The best part of the "58 second record" wasn't the record itself; it was everyone else's reaction to it. The students were whooping and hollering, just like the end of every Fran video you see online. As soon as I saw this reaction, I recognized it as pure CrossFit, and it dawned on me what we are accomplishing in class beyond learning algebra. We all have our teams at our boxes that cheer us on, and we cheer for them—it's being a part of something bigger than yourself.

**So...want to take a crack at Algebra Fran?
Complete the table below. 1:07 is the time to beat.**

x	2	7	1	4	8	6	5	3	9
8									
7									
4									
3									
9									
6									
1									
2									
5									

I see that happening in my classes. The kids in each class have bonded as a team. They notice when the others are absent, aren't willing to let each other fail, and share when others are successful. They've learned to be accountable to one another and are seeing they can go so much farther than they ever thought possible. The students also want to know how can they get a benchmark named after them! I explained they have to earn a benchmark named after them. And every day, they are earning it.

Speal epitomizes what the CrossFit methodology has done for my students. Before school began this year, her sister, one of my co-workers, told me, "She hates math. She's never been good at it, has failed the standardized tests, and is really nervous about coming to high school and taking algebra." Speal actually came by to meet me, and I told her that there was nothing to fear. But on the first day of school I did a brief survey of "who hates math," and I think her hand went up the highest.

But over the past 12 weeks, I watched Speal transform from math hater to math warrior. No longer the shy, withdrawn person who was once afraid to answer questions in class, she's now so fast that I usually have to slow her down when she gets so far ahead of the others. She also is the first to get up and go to another student's desk to explain the math to them so that they "get it." She has really cultivated a team atmosphere in our class. When she speaks, the entire class stops to listen. When she helps another student, others quiet down so they can hear her explain it.

Speal is brimming with the confidence that she can do anything, take on any challenge. Her confidence has carried over into her science class (Intro to Physics and Chemistry), World Geography, English, and her electives, and she is passing all with A's and B's. Her sister has told me more than once, "We just don't know what has happened! She has always hated math, and has never understood it, until this year." They think it's a miracle; I think it's CrossFit.

Another student I call Dutch sits next to Speal. He's loud, talks a lot, and failed badly as one of my students last year. He never came to class, and never turned in an assignment; his average the first six weeks was a 14. Until he repeats my class and passes, he is still considered a freshman.

Fast-forward to CrossFit Dutch. He's been in class every day. The first six weeks, his grade was an 83.

Dutch went from a kid who didn't believe in himself to someone who now tells everyone in class, "Shh! Be quiet, let me answer." He has also become the competitor when we tackle a new benchmark. I always give the speech about "your time is not important, finishing is." Dutch cut me off last time and said, "Bull! Your time does too matter!" He is on a quest to become a sophomore, and if he passes every single class this semester, he will have enough credits to do so. He's currently is on pace to do so, because he likes the feel of success.

One of the very best days of the school year so far was the day the grades came out for the first six weeks. I printed Dutch's grades out, and sent him with a pass to his assistant principal and a few other key staff so that he could show off his report card. It was a big deal to him. He carried it around in his pocket for weeks afterward. Other teachers shake their head and wonder what's gotten into him. I know—it's CrossFit.

The Bigger Picture

You know how it's easy to spot a CrossFitter amongst a crowd of people? Aside from the obvious fact that they are in CrossFit shape, it's how CrossFitters carry themselves with confidence, knowing they can accomplish just about anything (and in record time!). I see that happening in my students!

They walked into class scared on the first day of school (high school, no less), but now they carry themselves with pride and confidence. That confidence has carried over into their other classes, where they believe they are smart and can do any school work given them. Their grades are pretty good across the board and their attendance in class has improved. They are not afraid to try something and fail at it. They seem to understand they do not have all the answers, but if they make an attempt and fail, they will learn what will make them successful for the next try. And, they believe—really believe—that they are good at math—and they are learning to love it.

My students told me at the beginning of the year that they were math haters. I assured them that, with time, they would change their minds. They didn't believe me at first, but now they have a desire to get better and better at algebra. It's all because they have the CrossFit mentality. They are refusing to settle for second place. Like any good CrossFitter, they know they are better than second. They have learned that who they are in algebra class is who they are in real life. Anything less, and they cheat themselves.

If my students came to class every day and all they heard was me telling them was that they were doing a good job, or had to wait six weeks to get grades to know if they were doing well, they would quit coming to class. That's why CrossFit works for them in algebra: they get a taste of what it means to be truly successful and run with it. It's great to watch kids walk into my class, head down, not feeling so great about whatever has happened that day—and by the end of class walk out with their heads held high, feeling good about something they just did.

They have bonded as teams, and they know what it means to be pushed in a positive way by their peers. The very best part is that I'm not the leader in any class. Leaders are not necessarily the ones standing up doing the talking or the ones with titles; leaders are the people in any group who, when they talk, everyone listens.

There are student leaders in each class who have excelled on every benchmark I've given them and taken it upon themselves to ensure that the others in class are successful, too. They are not appointed leaders, but have emerged as leaders because of their success in class. They don't want anyone to get left behind. In 12 weeks, that's what CrossFit has done for them.

The Challenge

All of that, of course, begs the question: If you are in CrossFit, who you are in real life? What are you doing in your "real life" that looks like CrossFit? In your real life, where's your white board to track the progress of your team? How do you know if you are making progress in your job? What would happen if you applied the CrossFit methodology to your office?

People have a desire to feel success, and once they get a taste of it they feed off it. We all know it as "drinking the Kool-Aid." You know what the Kool-Aid tastes like; now it's your turn to pass the cup and share it. Hang a white board in your office and create measurable goals your co-workers can track. Then sit back and watch what happens. Success snowballs on itself. Once a person gets a taste, they want more and more. Someone else notices and wants in on the action. Think about what your office could accomplish if your team was competing to get on the "white board" and cheered for others on the team when they hit a new PR. CrossFit is bigger than your Fran time, burpees, kipping pull-ups and tire flips—it's a way of life. If you settle for anything less than CrossFit in your box or outside of it, you are losing out. 3, 2, 1, go...



About The Author

Amie Taylor, a member of the GSX gym in Forth Worth, is a CrossFitter who teaches 9th grade algebra in Arlington. "The joy in teaching is watching these kids succeed far beyond what they ever thought possible. And, having the summers off to do nothing but CrossFit is a bonus."