

Improvising, Adapting and Overcoming

In early 2008 a team from CrossFit HQ offered a Level 1 Certification to members of the Warrior Transition Battalion. Here's what trainer Maj. Andrew Thompson learned from some of CrossFit's most inspiring athletes.

Maj. Andrew Thompson, USMC



The video series was remarkable.

It showed wounded warriors back in action. They were seen competing against their buddies once again, this time in a CrossFit workout at a special Level 1 Cert.



*Never focus on what an athlete can't do.
It's what they can do that matters.*

"It gives me chills," one person commented on CrossFit.com.

"I'm crying like a child with a skinned knee," said another.

A third commenter summed it all up with one simple phrase: *"Humbling and awe-inspiring."*

I agree with all of them. In February 2008 it was my privilege to serve as a member of the CrossFit HQ team that traveled to San Antonio, Texas, to work with members of the Warrior Transition Battalion from Brooke Army Medical Center. We learned important lessons about the human and technical aspects of working with athletes with catastrophic injuries.

Here are a few of the most important:

Be quick to listen and slow to advise

It will take time to establish trust and a rapport with each athlete. It's highly likely that each individual has seen multiple doctors, specialists, nurses and occupational therapists. They will be skeptical of additional "help." A trainer will have to earn a warrior's respect. Don't push athletes who aren't ready or willing to gain or re-establish real-world work capacity.

Begin with a comprehensive assessment

Good trainers do this as a matter of course, but combat-wounded populations warrant a unique pre-training assessment. It's practical for a trainer to determine time since injury, number of surgeries to date, surgeries to be performed in the future, burns, skin grafts, etc. Be mindful of other factors. These could include everything from the side effects from medication to residual guilt stemming from thoughts of fallen comrades.

It's highly likely that each individual has seen multiple doctors, specialists, nurses and occupational therapists.

They will be skeptical of additional "help." A trainer will have to earn a warrior's respect.

Strive to achieve real-world work capacity

Once equipped with an understanding of each athlete's situation, you must keep the need for essential skills in mind. Create scenarios that facilitate getting in and out of a wheelchair or moving in and out of a vehicle. Target physical skills that enhance co-ordination, agility and balance. Foster confidence that will help people in stair-cases and crowds in both daylight and darkness. Drills in self-defense and rapid egress are potential focal points.

Be creative, resourceful, and flexible with programming efforts

No one-size-fits-all workout formula exists. Each injury is unique in scope, scale and magnitude. Some athletes will have multiple injuries. In group settings, it's highly probable that a prescribed workout will have one or more modifications for each participant.

Keep it simple

Start with a basic movement (air squat, press or deadlift, for example) and add a time domain. Be prepared for a longer adaptation timeframes. Set challenging but realistic training goals.



Each injury presents a unique challenge, but a creative trainer can modify any WOD for any participant.

WODs For Warriors

Here are two examples of simple yet potent workouts used with the heroes from the Warrior Transition Battalion. Each was carefully designed using what we learned from working with injured athletes. Prior to each workout, participants had already been exposed to squat, press and deadlift fundamentals.

WOD 1: The Jaw Breaker (courtesy of Kyle Maynard)

Move, Pull and Push: 5 rounds for time

Move (ambulatory athletes)

Move 50 meters as quickly as possible (walk, jog or sprint) through a door, down a curb, across a street and return.

Move (wheelchair athletes)

Roll 200 meters as quickly as possible. Obstacles may be placed in the route to increase the challenge.

Pull

Climb gymnastics rings 3 times from an angled supine position by grabbing one gymnastics ring and climbing the nylon webbing hand-over-hand to a standing position, then reverse the movement. One ascent plus one descent equals one "climb." Use legs to scale as required.

Push

Perform 10 perfect push ups. Work to achieve full depth with chin, chest and pelvis touching the ground. Work to achieve full extension with elbows locked out at the top.

Modify weights and movements as needed.

WOD 2: Pull and Push

10 medicine ball deadlifts

10 medicine ball presses (any type of overhead press is acceptable)

Perform as many rounds as possible in 7 minutes, modifying weights and movements as needed.

Attempt to work in small groups

Group settings facilitate accountability, competition and encouragement. Games and challenges provide a welcome respite from the realities of lengthy recovery periods. Bring an experienced trainer to assist you.

Focus on what each athlete can do

Be aware of limitations but don't belabor them. Encourage each athlete personally to transcend the physical elements. Exploit opportunities for growth. In the words of army Lieut. Brian Ipock, "There's always something you *can* do."

Approach the journey slowly, steadily and progressively

Be patient. With any athlete, mechanics, consistency and eventual intensity are signposts on the path to results. Be prepared to regress if athletes must return for additional surgical procedures or hospitalization.

As a community, CrossFit emphasizes that the physical needs of athletes differ only in degree, not kind. Universal scalability of basic workouts and modified movements are acceptable parts of an athlete's journey. Working with combat-wounded populations is no different, although additional time, care and attention must be devoted to those with catastrophic injuries.



Maj. Thompson (left) teaches the medicine ball clean at a special Level 1 Certification in February 2008 in San Antonio, Texas.

**“When these guys get injured,
they don't cease to function.
Instead, their functional
movements may change....
Keep it up, guys. You're
CrossFitters now, and we
laugh in the face of adversity.”**

CrossFit.com comment on
The Warrior Spirit video series

Video Links

- [The Warrior Spirit, Part 1: Infinite Scalability](#)
- [The Warrior Spirit, Part 2: Rehab With Revenge](#)
- [The Warrior Spirit, Part 3: The Workout](#)
- [The Warrior Spirit, Part 4: A Warrior's Advantage](#)
- [Address to the Warrior Transition Battalion](#)
- [The Jawbreaker \(with Kyle Maynard\)](#)

"This really exemplifies why CrossFit is so awesome," another person commented on the CrossFit website when the video series appeared. "Functional movement is functional movement. When these guys get injured, they don't cease to function. Instead, their functional movements may change... Keep it up, guys. You're CrossFitters now, and we laugh in the face of adversity."

The last word has to go to army Sgt. Tim Norton, who distinguished himself during the special certification. His outstanding attitude, high level of personal motivation and desire to "rehabilitate with revenge" were infectious. I'll always remember what he said in the video:

"I'm not sitting on the sideline. You don't have to love it or like it. You just have to do it. You've just got to keep pushing yourself."



About the author

Maj. Andrew Thompson, USMC, lives in Virginia with his wife and two young children. He thanks the exceptional staff in San Antonio: Patrick Cummings, Kyle Maynard, Jolie Gentry, Kurtis Bowler, Chuck Carswell, Tony Budding, Jon Gilson, Rick Martinez, Lieut. Brian Ipock and Coach Greg Glassman. Most of all, he thanks the tremendous Americans assigned to the Warrior Transition Battalion and the Center for the Intrepid.



Courtesy of T.J. Cooper