

The 80-Year-Old Guinea Pig

How Special Exercises and Scaled Workouts Got
a North Carolina Grandma Moving Again

Roy M. Wallack



"I wasn't sleeping. I couldn't get up out of my chair. I had trouble getting the door open and out of the car. I was starting to feel my age," said Leola Schell.

She's 80. As good an age as any to start CrossFit.

"I'd never heard of CrossFit. But my son had—and when he tried to talk me into coming, I thought it was ludicrous," says the long-retired Social Security Administration claims representative from Hickory, North Carolina. "So I humored him."

It was no laughing matter when Schell found out that she couldn't do one pushup. "In fact, I almost couldn't do anything at all, except for one squat down to an 18-inch bench," she said. "I wouldn't have believed you if you told me that soon I'd be doing tons of them—and going lower."

After a month and a half, Schell was doing four sets of 20 squats, three sets of ten pushups, hoisting herself up on a rope for 3 seconds, and performing other feats of strength and agility that had been long beyond her. She was also getting a full night of sound sleep and “popping up and down out of bed” like a jack-in-the-box. By three months, she was starting to do the regular WOD.

How'd she turn her fitness around so quickly? “I don't know,” she says. “He just tells me to do it. And I do it.”

“He” is Kent Stamey, the owner of CrossFit Hickory and a man who is CrossFit to the core. In fact, on his core—his stomach—is a 6-inch tall tattoo of CrossFit's Pukie the Clown mascot. And while the shaved-headed, mustachioed, heavily-pierced father of five kids (aged 14 to two—“It has something to do with the water in the trailer park,” he jokes) has never thrown-up during a workout, he did learn the hard way that the concept of “scaling” is essential. He believes that scaling is the secret to his success with Leola Schell and the way to go for new CrossFitters of any age and adiposity.

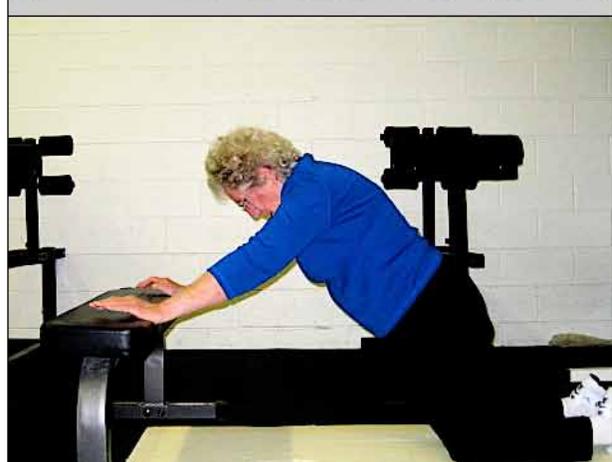
Scaling is the Norm

Today, Stamey's gym has 60 regular clients who range from super-rich to lower-middle class. All of them are attracted by a combination of CrossFit's head-turning fitness and the infectious enthusiasm of the head cheerleader, who encourages kids 13 and up to jump in the workouts with their parents. Funny and outgoing (I'll wear a kilt only while doing knees-to-elbows,” he jokes on a video), Stamey seems tailor-made for this business, which is why it's a surprise to find out that, until 20 months ago, he was the decade-long owner of a machine shop. That ended when his cousin, a Navy SEAL, told him about CrossFit.

“I suffered through the WODs for 1-1/2 or 2 months; I knew nothing about scaling it back,” he said. “I drank the Kool-Aid. In a year, I sold my shop, opened a gym and decided to affiliate.” He opened in March 2007, and says by that by June he was paying the bills and putting money in the bank.

Stamey believes a key to his success in attracting “everybody—old, fat, you name it”—comes from his initial CrossFit shock. “I didn't want anybody to have to go through the misery that I went through,” he says. “Then, at the first cert I attended, Coach Glassman reinforced that feeling with a key point: That if you hurt them, they won't come back.”

“Therefore, scaling becomes critical.”





STAMEY'S SPECIAL G-MA EXERCISES FOR THE ELDERLY

1. Floor crawl:

Getting on the floor and crawling around on hands and knees gets the blood flowing without troubling the client—and the trainer—with fears of falling.

2. Push-ups:

Stamey employs a three-step progression to build chest strength:

Step 1:

Stand up, lean, and push away from the wall.

Step 2:

Using a table or a bench, hold your body at an angle and push up.

Step 3:

Do knee pushups. Get up to 5 sets of 10 and then go to regular pushups.

3. Modified rope climb:

G-Ma grabs the rope in standing position, then squats as she walks her hands down to lower herself to where her butt touches the floor. Then she does the same motion in reverse, pulling herself up without assistance from the legs. "She's not pulling full body weight this way, but still pulling herself up," says Stamey.

Scaling means that most of the members of CrossFit Hickory, like Schell, do not do the prescribed WOD; out of 60 clients, only 15 do it all, with a handful on the cusp.

"I feel everybody out individually," says Stamey. "A few new people can handle the prescribed workout, but at first I set up most of them with lighter weights—instead of 95-pound thrusters, they'll do 65-pound thrusters. They all do the regular prescribed reps, so they get the feeling of doing an entire workout."

That doesn't mean Stamey goes easy on them. "I try to hurt them just enough so that they know they got a good workout," he says. "Yeah, if they are cocky and badass, I'll throw 'em all the way into it. Because if I scale back too much with fit people, they'll think it's a pussy workout."

"CrossFit humbles everyone—and, in fact, has to humble them to work." Only two or three have quit because it was too hard; none have left the gym because it's too easy.

Example: A lady about 35 years old came into CrossFit Hickory for the first time in mid-December. Stamey had her do three rounds of ten 10-pound wall balls, ten 17-pound kettlebell swings, and ten 17-pound ball slams.

"When she was done, she said, 'I feel like I can do some more.' I said, 'No, that's enough.' I smiled when she came in the next day and said, 'I'm so sore.' Now, she doesn't question me. Today, I had her do a half-Cindy—3 pull-ups, 5 pushups, and 7 squats 10 times."

Ready for G-Ma

At age 80, Schell—who Stamey calls "G-Ma," short for Grandmother—required him to take scaling to a new level. Fortunately, despite her initial skepticism, G-Ma was not a hard sell, given that she had a long-established routine of long morning walks and had seen first-hand the rapid fitness improvements of close family members who'd trained at CrossFit Hickory: her son Ben, 45, his two daughters and her granddaughters, volleyball players in high school and college, plus G-Ma's daughter, a visiting college professor from Seattle.

Stamey had started the professor, a recent car-accident victim who suffered from short-term memory loss, with rowing in order to safely build all-body flexibility, strength, and coordination. "Rowing teaches you a lot about technique and timing that can help you in the other exercises," Stamey says. "I think it's almost like a hitter taking batting practice."

4. Virtual shovels:

Take a 45-lb bar (for men I'll add 25-lb plates to the bar). Grab it like a shovel and put it in a wheel barrow, as if you're dumping shovels full of dirt into it. "I saw this on CrossFit video," says Stamey. "G-Ma likes this because she does a lot of gardening."

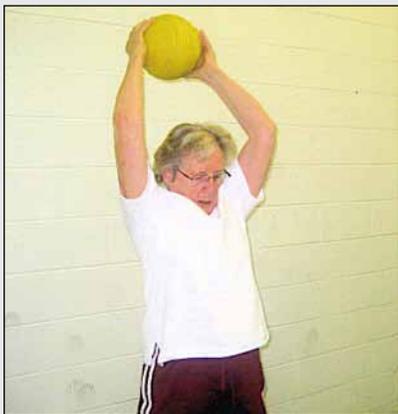
5. Ball chase:

Squat down to grab an 8-pound D Ball (the heavy yellow non-bouncing ball that you do a ball slam with), slam it 10 times, then pick it up, put it over your head, step in your intended direction, and throw it. "I came up with this one by watching little kids who came with their parents to the gym throwing the ball back and forth," says Stamey. "G-Ma throws it about 15 feet." Then she has to run over and grab it as fast as possible and do it again. Do 10 sets of 10.

"I don't have G-Ma run much normally—she'd rather row. If there's a run, she'll row. Sometimes, the rowing will get her in the mood for running."

6. Sledge hammer swings:

"G-Ma likes this because she will use a sledgehammer while gardening," Stamey says. As part of a CrossFit workout, she'll take an 8-pound sledgehammer and beat a big truck tire. "I'll have her do three rounds of a 500-meter row, 10-to-15 pushups, 10-15 squats, and 30 sledgehammer swings, 15 on each side."



Then, seeing that her equilibrium was fine and her only problem was remembering the counting, he phased her into scaled-back workouts featuring push-ups, box step-ups, and an intense Tabata-style rowing workout of 20 seconds on and 10 seconds off. Before she returned to Seattle, she came up to him and asked to join the regular workout.

"When Ben saw how I was able to scale it for his sister, he brought up his mother and asked if I'd be interested in taking her on," said Stamey.

Hearing that G-Ma was unable to sleep and was having increasing difficulty walking up stairs and getting up out of chairs and car seats, Stamey started her with 500 meters of smooth, easy rowing for 5 minutes to warm-up joints and get loose. Then he tried something new for him and her: Crawling. Specifically, crawling under and over weight benches.

"I watched the video on the CrossFit website where Jim Baker talked about the elderly's biggest fears being falling and not getting up," says Stamey. "I remember thinking that it seemed smart to get old people comfortable with crawling because it's so functional. After all, if they fall, they have to crawl and get up. If there's a house fire, they have to crawl out."

At first, G-Ma was a bit taken aback. "Crawling—are you serious?" she said. "But I gave her my rationale and she didn't fight me," says Stamey. He grabbed three benches and built a CrossFit workout around crawling. G-Ma would have to crawl under one bench, do 10 ball slams, climb over another bench, do 10 kettlebell swings, then crawl under a third bench, followed by 10 squats.

After three months of CrossFit, including recently moving on to scaled-down WODs, Stamey keeps G-Ma crawling. "I like the getting-down and getting-up, the whole keeping-your-balance thing," he explains. She also does a lot of step-ups on a 12-inch box, and likes it, he adds, given that it directly addresses her trouble in going up and down stairs.

Now attending the gym four days a week, G-Ma's doing full workouts. On Dec. 23, she did the "12 Days of Christmas" WOD of burpees, pull-ups, and knees-to-elbows. She has graduated from a ring row to pull-ups with a band.

Besides the crawling, Stamey has concocted a number of unique G-Ma-specific exercises that he plans to use someday on other elderly and newbie CrossFitters, including modified rope climbs, virtual shovels, a ball chase, and sledgehammer swings (see sidebar for details on these).

"G-Ma is my guinea pig—and I'm the mad scientist," he says. "The other day, we got her doing back extensions. We stood there beside her, and helped her get up. I'm learning as I go along"

Of course, helping matters is the fact that G-Ma never complains or gives up. That's no surprise to her family and those who know her.

Leola Schell had six kids—and a husband who died when they were very young. "I didn't remarry. I just worked all the time," she says proudly, "and I got them all through college—including a doctor, one with a doctorate, two with Masters degrees, and two with Bachelors." She took Social Security disability and retirement claims from people for 30 years until her retirement at age 62.

Schell stayed relatively fit over the years by moving. "I'd walk, walk, walk all the time, a mile-and-a-half a day," she says. "When I'd go to the store and see old people who can hardly move, it'd seem like such a shame." Today, she gets up at 5 a.m., does her walk, does some gardening and shopping, and heads to CrossFit Hickory four times a week.

Three months ago, Schell couldn't pull herself off the floor by pulling hand-over-hand up a rope. Now, that's a breeze, and for good measure she can hang on the rope for three seconds. "Now, I sleep at night," she says. "I can pop up and down out of bed in an instant. I'm getting stronger every day."

There's a resounding confidence in her voice, a confidence Stamey has seen many times before in his gym.

"G-Ma came in at first just to please her son," he says. "Then she drank the Kool-Aid."



About The Author

Roy M. Wallack is the Senior Editor of the CrossFit Journal

