

Pukie at the Pool

The famed Arden Hills Swim Team adds CrossFit and may be rewriting the rules of swim training

Roy M. Wallack and Brian Nabeta



Swim 100 yards freestyle, then do ten push ups. Swim 75 yards, then do ten squats. Swim 50 yards, then do ten burpees. Swim 25 yards, then do ten squat leaps. And that's just the beginning. Repeat the entire cycle with three other strokes: the backstroke, the butterfly, and the breast stroke.

"I've seen more kids puking in the gutter this year," says Brian Nabeta, coach of the Arden Hills Swim Club, "more kids running to the bathroom. More kids asking for rest between sets. They are so wasted—but so much happier."

Pukie at the Pool ... (continued)

The Arden Hills Swim Club may conduct one of the strangest swimming workouts in the world, but the kids aren't complaining—especially after what happened to them at the Junior Nationals in Austin, Texas last December.

Seventeen year-old Katie Edwards dreamed of finishing in the top five. She did even better, winning the 100 and 200 breaststroke. Along the way, she obliterated her PRs. Her time in the 200 went from 2:19.30 to 2:11.22. And her time in the 100 went from 1:03.92 to 1:00.88.

"That took her from 'good' to someone who'd score a Top 8 in the NCAA," says coach Brian Nabeta. "And she wasn't the only one. We had kids ranked fifty-something who finished in the top sixteen. We had kids who had no chance at finals, yet got close. Out of 37 individual events, we had 33 lifetime bests.

"Other coaches were coming to me saying: 'Oh, my God, what are you doing?'"

The answer is a hybrid that no one's ever heard of before: CrossFit swimming.

A New Idea for a Storied Program

Arden Hills, located in Sacramento, occupies an exalted place in American swimming. Mark Spitz, until recently the greatest swimmer in history, trained there. So did Debbie Meyer, who won gold in the Olympic 200 and 400 freestyle relays in 1968, and Jeff Float, the 1984 gold medalist. But after that, Arden Hills dropped off the map.

Ten years ago, after assistant coaching at U.C. Berkeley, Nabeta arrived on the scene determined to return Arden Hills to its glory days. His first change was to reduce the volume mentality typical of most swimming programs. "You lose a lot of kids that way—and volume is boring," he said.

But his most effective change in the program occurred just last year, after one of his Masters swimmers persuaded him to try CrossFit.

"I became a believer in a month," says Nabeta.

"I thought I was in good shape—I swam, ran, and did weights. But in a few months of CrossFit, I went from 220 pounds to 190," he says. "I also found myself lifting more weight than I did as a Division I swimmer 20 years before. And at age 39, running far less than I did before, I set a PR in the mile run—a sub-5:30."



Last July, a week after the Olympic Trials, Nabeta went to a CrossFit Level 1 Cert. "On the drive home, my mind was on fire," he says. "I began jotting down ideas I could incorporate into our dry-land swim program for 14-to-17-year-olds."

Puking in the Gutters

The typical swim program consists of twice-a-day practices—one in the gym (dry-land) and one in the pool. Nabeta completely replaced his team's old 20-station dry-land circuit with CrossFit.

"There was no accountability in the circuit," he says. "They'd stop when the coaches get out of view. But CrossFit was exactly the opposite. I paired the kids up—and I'd never seen them push themselves like this.

"Now, I have kids who get pissed off when they lose to someone. One kid was so wound up that he tossed an F-bomb. I had never seen that kind of passion before in the gym. And the best part of it? We took that intensity out to the pool."



The Method to the CrossFit Swim Madness

By Coach Brian Nabeta

The big question was this: How can I get my athletes to move themselves through the water at their existing body weight in the shortest period of time with speed and power? I came to the conclusion that you must learn this ability on land before you can take it to the water. And the best thing I've run across yet is CrossFit.

Last August, before the season began, I sat down with my national-caliber group of kids, discussed what I wanted them to do, and began explaining the technical aspects of the squat, dead lift, push press, and snatch. (All exercises were used with a PVC pipe or med ball.) Of course, the swimmers immediately asked me what any of this had to do with swimming.

I told them that the body in the water was like a ship and that the ship had to have certain specifications to move through the water without a lot of drag—as well as have a powerful motor to drive it. I explained to them I was going to make them faster, stronger, and fitter, and that each movement that they could master on land would apply to certain functions in the pool.

This is nothing new in itself. All swim coaches look at the power and quickness it takes for a swimmer to push off of the starting block, and try to figure out what we can do on land to improve it. Once I got familiar with CrossFit, I had many new exercises in my arsenal.

For example, the fundamentals of the squat can be seen when a swimmer turns on the wall, sets his or her body, and pushes off. The thruster reinforces the necessity of core body alignment for the maximum force required to maintain speed through the water. I actually have a high-school senior working on a project to find out how many pounds of pressure a swimmer pushes in the water when he pushes off of the wall. To mimic this, we train on land with dumbbell thrusters, pushing anywhere from 16 to 30 pounds. To mimic the streamline above their head, we probably raise the weights higher than most people do a barbell thruster.

When swimmers are fundamentally sound at these movements coaches then need to move to their swimmers out to the pool.



Arden Hills kids cumulatively swim less now, breaking up their swimming with squats and pushups, but they swim much harder over longer distances.

“Not only did the in-the-water intensity pick up, but their thresholds are much further out,” says Nabeta. “CrossFit gives ‘em a comparison. So instead of dropping off at 50 yards, they max out at 75 or 80 yards. CrossFit taught them to push yourself beyond that uncomfortable grey line.”

Exactly how uncomfortable might that line be?

Page Sellers, 15, hasn’t puked yet, but loves CrossFit swimming nonetheless. “I really enjoy it—it really helps me,” she says. “It’s hard, but it works. It’s made me a lot stronger, so I get a lot more rhythm on my strokes. Without being well-rested, I cut three seconds off my 4IM (individual medley) time in the last meet—from 4:42 to 4:39.”

Nabeta thinks he’s on to something that could well revolutionize swim training. His program includes nine workouts per week, including five swims and four CrossFit days—three dry-land WODs on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and one in-water WOD.

Given the importance of leg power in swimming, Nabeta’s workouts include more leg exercises than standard CrossFit. A typical land workout might look like this: 20-lap run, 50 air squats, 16-lap run, 50 overhead squats, 12-lap

CrossFit Trainers who are also swim coaches should use the CrossFit main website as well as the CrossFit kid’s site to scale workouts and get ideas to add in to their swim workouts.

CrossFit has changed the way I think as a swim coach regarding threshold. Knowing that a swim race averages two minutes plus (most events in the Beijing Olympics were under 2 minutes and 30 seconds—shorter than many CrossFitters do Fran), prompted me to push my swimmers on land and figure out how to transfer that effort to pushing beyond their thresholds in the pool.

How I Chose the Workouts

Our land workouts come 75% from the CrossFit Kids site, scaled from the Big Dawgs down to the Pack, and 25% from the main web site. The swimmers love the challenge. I have found that CrossFit levels the playing field when it comes down to the question of who is really fit. At first, I had to explain what I was looking for and had to be the example myself, as the kids were still searching for “intensity.” That day, as luck would have it, the WOD on the CrossFit web site was Fran—the perfect workout to show the swimmers what I meant.

After the workout, while I was on the floor for several minutes trying to recover, one of my female swimmers said that she could give that type of effort. I thought that moment was the beginning of a new chapter in training in swimming.

I have a national-caliber swimmer who really trains great in the pool, but has some trouble in meets competing with average swimmers. In the past three weeks, one of those average swimmers has improved in the pool, while the national swimmer has stepped it up on land and in the water. Both of these athletes have pushed each other to new heights in training intensity. The concept of “intensity” challenged both on land as well as now in the water at every practice. It took CrossFit workouts to engage these swimmers in a way that they could see transferring that same effort to a challenge set in the pool.

Convincing an athlete to push themselves beyond their threshold is a tough sell but CrossFit made it happen.

One of the coaches on my staff puts it in these terms to my group of national swimmers:

run, 50 air squats, 8-lap run, 50 wall balls. In the water, his Arden Hills swimmers do versions of the swim/push-up, swim/squat, swim/burpee routine recounted at the beginning of this story.

Bottom line: Since implementing his CrossFit program at the end of August, the kids work out less on land and in the water. They used to swim 4- to 5000 yards a practice. That's down to 3,000 yards, with the extra time devoted to work on technique—yet they get better results.

"This is really two sports in one," says Nabeta. "I want to bring it to other coaches."

He may not have to—because other coaches around the country have noticed. Since Katie's success at Nationals, they are coming to him.

"Today, I got a call from a coach in Washington," he says. "I've been getting forwarded emails."

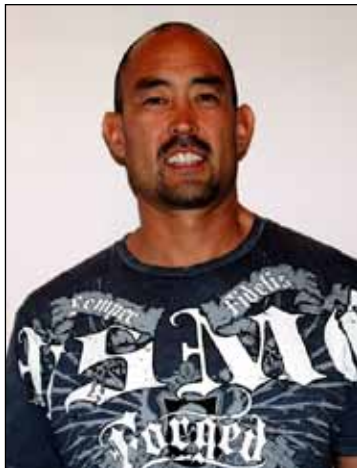
It's not too early to say that Arden Hills is back. Who knows? There might be another Mark Spitz doing squats on the pool deck right now.



About the Authors

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

Brian Nabeta is the head coach and aquatics director of the Arden Hills Swim Team, coaching swimmers from ages 5 to 18. He has CrossFit Level 1 and CrossFit Kids certifications. Brian recently opened a CrossFit Affiliate, [Arden Hills Swimming CrossFit](#). Reach him at coachbkn@comcast.net.



"Training takes place daily. We as coaches urge you, prod you, encourage you, and sometimes yell at you. Why? Because we want to see you get better—at more than just swimming."

Gaining the Ability and Desire to Cross the Line

The main WOD one Monday was typical: Sustained effort over a period of time that tests you physically, mentally and emotionally. You succeed at these when you learn how to do them...AND...when you recognize the time to cross "that threshold."

What is the threshold, exactly? It's the moment in time when you decide to either persist with all your might—or to give in, back off, and "settle." You "settle" when you take the easier path, one which delays discomfort and pushes passion to the rear. You think that you will cross the threshold NEXT time. More often than not, you won't. You will settle for the easier route, the one that doesn't hurt so much, but will also be the one that delays when you will reach your goals.

You see, that threshold represents a divide: On the other side of that divide is a chance at knowledge of what it takes to be great at anything. Your coaches test you everyday, to see if you are willing to take that chance to cross the threshold where consistent success lives.

Greatness, here, is a relative term. In terms of this group of swimmers in the Arden Hills National Group, greatness is determined not only by how fast you go, but the willingness to see how fast you can go and how much you will do to find out.

So, the question to ask yourself daily is, "Will I cross that threshold, and how often will I commit myself to doing so?"

In the past, Coach Chris, one of co-workers, has seen my swimmers just go through the motions on our dryland workouts. He recognized that swimmers in the past also just go through the motions on the aerobic training portion of our pool workouts. But in the past eight months, Chris told me that he's seen a transformation occur. Used together, CrossFit and swimming have created faster, stronger, and more powerful swimmers. The days of swimmers endlessly looking at a black line at the bottom of the pool hour after hour, year after year, as they swim at a moderate sustained aerobic effort are over. Intensity, in the gym and in the pool, rules. This is a whole new paradigm.