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By Any Means Necessary

San Francisco CrossFit is basically a parking lot, a canopy and two shipping containers. It's also San Francisco's best fitness facility, according to readers of *SF Weekly*.

Mike Warkentin



Behold the modern fitness center.

Its selectorized machines gleam under spotlights. Someone triumphantly breaks the 150-pound mark on the torso-rotation machine as another person gives the hip flexors a proper thrashing during a set of biceps curls. A spin class begins in an air-conditioned studio where Top 40 hits are pumped out of an expensive stereo.

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All that's missing is a plaque from *SF Weekly* proclaiming the facility San Francisco's Best Fitness Gym. That plaque, however, will not be forthcoming. The title actually belongs to San Francisco CrossFit, which was awarded the accolade on May 20, 2009, as part of the readers' poll portion of *SF Weekly's Best of 2009*.

"If they had a category for best place to train under a canopy in a parking lot, we would have definitely taken that title, too," jokes SFCF founder Kelly Starrett.

Reclaiming the Presidio

According to SanFranciscoCrossFit.com, the facility opened its doors in the Presidio in 2005, but that isn't really accurate. The facility doesn't have any doors.

The home of SFCF is an all-but-abandoned concrete wilderness behind a building that used to house a U.S. Army commissary. The building is now home to the Sports Basement, an outdoor outfitter Starrett used to manage before he was a doctor of physical therapy and *CrossFit Journal* video star. When he decided to open a CrossFit affiliate, he didn't want to pay the king's ransom it would require to rent space in San Francisco and instead approached his old boss about using part of the old loading dock behind the Sports Basement.

"We have a fenced-in area that's literally in the woods in the Presidio, and you can see the Golden Gate Bridge... We have a world-class location."

—Kelly Starrett

"It was unused and tucked back there and full of debris and three inches of mud and 400-pound refrigerator doors and just junk," Starrett says. "I approached the owner because we were good friends, and they're so gracious and they're really into supporting community and creating community projects. I said, 'I have this idea. What do you think about it?' And they said, 'Go for it.'"



At San Francisco CrossFit, objects others might called "debris" are actually used for functional training of elite athletes.

Starrett spent a few weeks shovelling mud, hauling trash and playing MacGyver to create equipment out of random objects. Soon the facility was ready to host its first Frans.

Starrett says: "We built our pull-up rack from an old military tire stand and put up a canopy and dropped in a shipping container... We have infinite parking. We have a fenced-in area that's literally in the woods in the Presidio, and you can see the Golden Gate Bridge. We're right across the street from Crissy Field. We have a world-class location."

Since 2005, SFCF has grown to service approximately 250 athletes, including about 150-200 CrossFitters, as well as some high-school athletes and a rowing team. SFCF's gear is now stored in not one but two giant shipping containers. Its roof is still a tarp.

"We don't say 'tarp,'" Starrett corrects. "We say 'canopy.' It's way more sophisticated."

That Junk Isn't Junk

Whether it's a tarp or a canopy is irrelevant. The fact remains that the rugged CrossFit affiliate managed to beat out a host of high-tech fitness facilities in the *SF Weekly* poll. At SFCF, the equipment isn't pretty. In fact, some of it looks positively post-apocalyptic—but it works.

"If we thought something was a public-safety issue, we would either buy it or have it professionally made," Starrett says. "But if there's something that we can make ourselves, then we try to make it ourselves."

He continues: "We have 10 dragging sleds that we threw some webbing on, and they're the racks from the old commercial commissary pallet racks. We flipped them over, tied some straps to them, and we can load them up with weights and get a ton of people doing a bunch of sled drags."



Odd objects, great results: CrossFit Games competitor Jamie Crichton drags a makeshift sled while carrying a "french fry."

"We have these gigantic steel pipes—we call them 'french fries'—that they used to prevent cars from backing up or prevent trucks from backing into the building. They were all cut off the ground, and we taped up the bottom, and now we have these 60-pound steel cylinders for odd-object training."

And the crowd-control barriers near the shipping containers? Those aren't just for keeping bodybuilders away.

"We saw these barriers around in the Presidio, and we appropriated a couple of them," Starrett explains. "They're not ours, but they live back near us, and those are the kinds of things where that's a spare squat rack for a short athlete. They can push press off of there and do dips... There's a lot of that sort of thing that's very CrossFit. You look around you and say, 'What is my need, and how can I meet that need?'"

"What is it about? It's about really good coaching and really good programming—and that's the difference."

—Kelly Starrett

Of course, SFCF has purchased equipment, but Starrett believes the *Road Warrior* training implements give the affiliate character. He also believes forsaking standard equipment forces you to examine your programming, break movements down and decide exactly what is required to train those movements.

"You win that experience when you make your own equipment and you're forced to improvise," he says. "And you're able to kind of win that experience that maybe would take you another 10 years of programming... Any time you can advance your understanding, your tinkering aspect of what it is you do, then you have a better understanding and you become a more effective coach."



Fay Collinson of the U.K. and Adrian (Boz) Bozman demonstrate a few uses of "french fries" that were formerly anchored in the parking lot behind the Sports Basement.



SFCF also has standard gear: trainer Diane Fu coaches Charlene Lagac on proper snatch technique.



Kelly Starrett and Boz: two reasons for SFCF's success.

Starrett, Adrian (Boz) Bozmann and the seven or so other trainers at SFCF knew they were doing good things out in the parking lot but were still surprised when *SF Weekly* called to say they'd won a category in the alternative mag's annual awards issue.

On June 29, *SF Weekly* published an article titled *"Ripped, Literally: As in the Muscles of Some Recruits to the Fad of Fitness Bootcamps."* In it, author Anna McCarthy detailed various injuries participants suffered in intense fitness programs, lumping CrossFit in with "bootcamps" and of course mentioning Pukie and Uncle Rhabdo.

Subsequently, *SF Weekly* published an updated version of the story with several corrections, but as of press time a lengthy debate is still ongoing on the [SF Weekly website](http://www.sfwiki.com). Many people think the coaches at SFCF are top notch and are vocally defending both CrossFit methods and the trainers at SFCF.

"This article enrages me," Catherine Gravelle wrote on the site. "I have been a member of San Francisco CrossFit for a year and a half now and I cannot say enough about it. The coaches are extremely high touch and take great care in making sure all the athletes have the best possible coaching. I am appalled at the way this article has spun what SFCF is."

CrossFit certainly isn't bootcamp, and readers of *SF Weekly* agree—hence the award for **San Francisco's Best Fitness Gym**.

"What is it about?" Starrett asks. "It's about really good coaching and really good programming—and that's the difference."

"This experiment has been replicated a thousand times across the United States and across the world, and I think we showed that you don't need a fancy gym. You need the quality core equipment and programming that is CrossFit. You may not even have walls, and yet this is good place to train in the city."



About the Author

*Mike Warkentin is the staff writer for the **CrossFit Journal**. He somehow recently managed to set PRs on Fran, deadlift, clean and jerk, and snatch in the same week.*