

Is “Punishment” a Dirty Word?

Your gym teacher may have had you running laps after class, but you won't find much punishment in CrossFit. John Welbourn and Mike Burgener talk about “motivational consequences” and how they can focus an athlete.

Mike Warkentin



Will Ramos

Basketball practice, circa 1987.

You rimmed out on a foul shot, and the coach has you running laps while the rest of the team scrimmages. He's just seen *Full Metal Jacket* and is modeling his coaching style on Gunnery Sergeant Hartman. He berates you every time you pass by, as if you missed the shot on purpose, and he's threatening you with more laps.

The beatings will continue until morale improves.

The scene is as comical as it is archaic. But many of us have had the pleasure of meeting an authoritarian in a track suit who uses a nubby piece of chalk to draw a direct line between punishment and performance. That line certainly exists for a few select players who will almost demand the rod after telling a coach where to shove the carrot. Many more athletes simply don't respond to punishment.

What your gym teacher might have called punishment can indeed be found in CrossFit from time to time. In CrossFit Endurance WODs you'll find the occasional “foul,” such as an isometric squat for two minutes if one running interval is slower than its predecessor. Similarly, “penalties” sometimes appear in CrossFit Football workouts. Olympic Lifting Certs are characterized by bouts of burpees.

Some coaches think they're drill instructors.

Nevertheless, coaches such as John Welbourn and Mike Burgener don't view the additional work they infrequently assign as punishment, and they certainly don't use it to beat athletes into submission.

Motivation: Is It in You?

A former NFL lineman who created CrossFit Football and now coaches at CrossFit Balboa, Welbourn didn't have much use for punishment as a player, which explains why it only rarely finds its way into his football program. Welbourn always felt it was his responsibility to stay focused and motivated while in college at UC Berkeley or in the trenches with the Philadelphia Eagles and Kansas City Chiefs. He expects the same thing from his athletes.

"I've played for coaches who were huge punishment guys... and I don't necessarily buy into that because I've always been intrinsically motivated," he says. "I'm able to get my own motor going. I don't need someone to scream at me to do it."

He continues: "No one ever needed to threaten me or get after me to go out and work out and train. I just figured it was part of the job. You go out, you do it and you come home. You go out and you bust your ass every day. I think that's the way these things should work. If you have to get up in somebody's face and scream and belittle them, then you probably shouldn't be there—and neither should they."

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—Mike Burgener



Focus means you're prepared to yell "Yay, burpees!" at any time, even with quads burning at the bottom of a front squat.



John Welbourn believes athletes need to look inside themselves for motivation.

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As a coach, Welbourn chooses to rely on his athletes to demand a high level of performance.

"I wouldn't say I'm that much of a cheerleader," he explains. "If you're there and you showed up, you want to do a good job. I can't understand why you'd show up and not want to do a good job."

"I don't know if I'd be a great high-school football coach. I probably wouldn't be very great at motivating people with punishment or fear. They're there. They want to do their best, so coach them up. And if they don't want to do it, find someone else who will. I take the total NFL approach, where if someone doesn't want to do something, there's five people standing behind him that do."

Yay, Burpees!

CrossFitters as a whole are pretty motivated. Few lazy people will tangle with a CrossFit WOD, and firebreathers don't require a whole lot of encouragement. Nevertheless, Burgener takes a slightly different approach to coaching because he sees Welbourn as the exception and not the rule.

"John Welbourn is a different dude," Burgener says. "That guy's a professional. He's made a lot of money in his lifetime as a professional. He had to intrinsically motivate himself to do that kind of stuff, and he did. So a guy coming in and yelling at him, he could care less... He's intrinsically motivated. High-school kids, most athletes, are not intrinsically motivated. They're extrinsically motivated."

Burgener, of course, is famous for the burpees that make their way into his Olympic Lifting Certs. Some might call them punishment, but they would be wrong.

"In 32 years as a public school teacher, I've learned not to say 'punishment,'" Burgener says. "What I say is 'motivational consequences.' And motivational consequences really depend on the particular situation."

Burgener sees weightlifting as a team environment, and he uses burpees to ensure that the group isn't led astray by a few individuals.

"If you're working out as a team and a kid is dicking around and not doing the things he needs to be doing, not focusing and concentrating, then I'll give the whole group burpees," he explains. "That's a motivational consequence, and I'll have the kid that's messing around not do the burpees... That kid would feel very embarrassed and consequently he would come back and be more focused."

With CrossFitters, Burgener takes a similar approach even though there's certainly limited "dicking around" in certification groups. While high-school kids might be led astray by disinterest or any number of adolescent distractions, CrossFitters usually lose focus due to fatigue and the challenges of learning a very complicated movement.



Mike Burgener says he uses burpees to focus athletes, not punish them.

"I tell the CrossFitters that are taking the cert that I'm going to teach the class the same as I taught my high-school classes before I retired," Burgener says. "One of the things about dealing with high-school kids is making sure that when you're dotting the I's and crossing the T's and getting down to the minutia and details, they've got to really pay attention and focus. (At a cert), they're tired, they're sore, they're down in that overhead squat position with that PVC pipe, they're getting their butts kicked with the PVC pipe, and consequently their minds want to start wandering.

"Anytime I say the word 'burpees,' they have to yell out 'yay, burpees!' When I say 'burpee' and I try to trick them and I get half the class saying 'burpees,' or they're slow to react, then I know that I'm losing them, losing their focus. So I'll stop and they have to demonstrate that they know how to do burpees."

The coach says he rarely has to integrate motivational consequences to keep the group dialed in, and the burpees themselves have actually developed into an oddly enjoyable part of the cert.

"It's amazing what transformation takes place when you have that threat, that motivational consequence of doing burpees," he says. "Very, very rarely do I have to do very many burpees. Part of it is in fun, anyways."

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To Each Their Own

Whether you call it "punishment" or "motivational consequences," it takes a clever coach to get the best performance from his athletes. Keeping a group focused can be a tricky task, and each athlete within the group requires a special approach. Some will need to have their hands held, while those of the John Welbourne variety will need a few terse technical instructions and little else. Still others may indeed need a good round of burpees followed by a few laps and a tongue-lashing.

"There's some athletes that you just need to kick in the ass," Burgener says.



About the Author

*Mike Warkentin is the staff writer for the **CrossFit Journal**. He is pictured at the right doing burpees after submitting a manuscript with several typos. Mike is preparing for his Level 2 Cert in September. And the pressure is really on, now that his evil editor has added this note.*

Talk about motivation!

