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Talk Is Cheap

Mike Warkentin asks what happens when hard-charging CrossFitters run into gym socialites looking for a conversation.

By Mike Warkentin

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Mike Warkentin/CrossFit Journal

CrossFit is changing gym culture—that's obvious.

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"OMG! He was like, 'Totally!' and I was like, 'Whatever!'"

With new affiliates springing up everywhere, entire islands of CrossFit exist where people can fling chalk around like it's flour on the set of *Jackass* and hear not one trainer complain. These boxes are loud, rugged and Spartan—the antithesis of the modern fitness facility.

As garage beautiful as a fully outfitted box can be, many CrossFitters don't have access to one and are forced to pursue their version of fitness in traditional gyms where most of the equipment has a built-in chair. These athletes are a lot like covert operatives doing devious shit deep behind enemy lines, and the possibility of capture and punishment or expulsion is often very real.

Nevertheless, as people discover our program, fewer power cages are used for biceps curls and more and more facilities are filled with loud crashes instead of the sounds of plate stacks sliding on oiled rails.

And there's less talking—thankfully.

Get His Number, Girlfriend

You've seen it 1,000 times: people carrying on a conversation while they're lifting weights or spinning themselves dizzy on that god-awful torso-rotation machine.

"You gonna call him?"

"I dunno. I was really drunk. Was he hot?"

"Like that matters to you."

"Right. Whew—that was a good set."

"Feel the burn, woman."

Or how about the people chatting on the elliptical machine? They've bought property in the single digits of the Borg Scale, and they're usually more concerned with the picture on the machine's on-board TV than the intensity of the workout.

"Does this football field look too green to you? Jesus, who adjusted the color here? How am I supposed to watch this?"

In defense of these people, at least they're at the gym. Something is better than nothing, and I'd rather see Johnny Quads do a few sets of half squats than eat an entire bag of chips with no hands.

Still, if you can hold a conversation during a workout, you're probably not doing a whole hell of a lot, unless you're in cardiac rehab, which is an entirely different story. If you're a healthy human seeking fitness gains, I doubt you'll earn them while discussing the current political climate or the finer points of installing a satellite dish.

But this is traditional fitness culture, and the gym is often every bit the pick-up bar and coffee shop. Spandex bunnies flirt with muscle dudes, friends rehash the big game, and casual acquaintances strike up mundane conversations about the weather and those clowns in Congress.

Sometimes, these Chatty Cathys and Mouthy Martys run into focused CrossFitters—and things generally don't go well.

Shut Up and Lift

I had turned the pins around in the power rack so I could face the brick wall instead of the mirror and the outside world. The hat was pulled low. No eye contact. I stared only at the floor between sets. I had the Slayer cranked as high as it would go, hoping it was both audible and offensive to the other people in the gym. I sincerely believed I had defined "unapproachable" for all and sundry—at least until I finished my fight with the iron. When I'm done, I'm more than happy to talk about CrossFit, squats and deadlifts.

I was at the bottom of a deep front squat when I saw the shadow from the corner of my eye. It had biceps. I ignored it.



Mike Warkentin/CrossFit Journal

"How you doin'?"

Courtesy of Nadia Shatila / CrossFit Belltown



Nadia Shatila gives a one-fingered course in post-WOD communication.

On the next rep, the shadow got a bit larger and I heard a muffled voice underneath *God Hates Us All*. I ignored that too.

More muffled words, louder and closer now.

"Fuck off!" I screamed internally.

On the next rep, right at the deepest, most eye-watering part, the shadow got larger, and the voice got louder still. Someone was yelling at me from about a foot away. I could sense the heat of the flaming goth skulls on his shirt.

Furious, I viciously dumped the weight, ripped off the headphones and said, "What?"

"Dude, how many sets you got left?"

A Lift is Worth 1,000 Words

I used to think certain people in the gym were assholes. They didn't talk much, and they glared a lot. They had no time for anything and seemed completely self-centered. They walked past you without looking up or nodding on

their way to a bar in the corner. Eventually, after weeding out a few truly weird psychopaths and legitimate jackasses, I realized most of these people were quiet because they had an agenda: getting stronger or faster or bigger. That agenda did not include small talk with me.

They didn't chit-chat, they didn't smile, and they didn't mess around. They came in, killed it and left. Some of them turned out to be great people before and after the workout. During the workout it was best to leave them alone—or join them for an intense, quiet session where you'd probably crush a record like a paper cup.

Nowadays, more people are doing CrossFit, and the challenging workouts and the quest for PRs make them just as intense as the guy angrily squatting five plates per side ass-to-grass in combat boots, tattered camo shorts and a T-shirt that says "I don't give a rat's ass." Many of these people are incredibly friendly, but when it's time to work, it's time to work. This, however, does not mix with common gym culture.

Friendly, curious people are bound to engage you in the gym, especially when you're doing something "strange" like squatting below parallel or breathing hard. But being asked a question between thrusters 40 and 41 of Fran is not cool. Having someone slap hands with a buddy over the sleeve of your barbell before you snatch it is unbearable and dangerous. And anyone who taps you on the shoulder during the last 100 of a 2K row deserves to be shot with a ball of rotting garbage.

But these are not bad people. Most of them are not even stupid. It's cavalier in the CrossFit community to abuse Globo Gym patrons, but they're just unfamiliar with what we're doing, and you can't fault them for their ignorance, even if it drives you insane with rage. Many of us did quite a few biceps curls back in the day, and like I said, at least they're at the gym—and they might even want to join you.

"Yes, you can. Now stop talking while I finish this."

But gym culture is most certainly changing. For an increasing number of athletes, there's working time, and there's talking time. If you're talking, you aren't working. And vice versa. If you're catching up on the weekend, you aren't catching anyone on the whiteboard. And if someone else is working, you should hold onto your banter until he or she is done. Talk later. Focus now. These are rules worth remembering even in a CrossFit affiliate.

Simply put, it's hard to be nice in the middle of a workout that's treating you like a rented mule, and if you have the energy to chat, you're probably not working or focusing hard enough. Indeed, how do you find the time to compose yourself and politely explain that you're head-to-head with something that's going to take everything you have?

"Sir, I'll be happy to tell you about my weekend later. It's not personal. I'm about to tangle with the heaviest squat of my life, and I need a bit of focus. Feel free to watch and cheer me on. But don't expect much polite interaction right now. Mr. 400 Pounds is about all I can deal with at present. Thank you."

That speech would take far too much time and effort when both are in short supply, so sometimes questions go unanswered and poor relations ensue. Other times a glare or a raised middle finger takes the place of civility, and a firebreather just looks rude, elitist and obnoxious instead of focused. That, of course, can turn people off from a program that might actually turn them on to real fitness.

In the interests of maintaining both intensity of workouts and polite relations, perhaps it would be best—and so very CrossFit—to just print a T-shirt or two to take care of business for you in the short term:

"Talk to me after my workout."

"Cheer me on or shut up until I'm done."

"Get lost: I'm lifting."

"Less talk, more squats."

"I'll talk to you when I can breathe again."



Sandra Benz

About the Author

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