

Muscling Through It

Affiliate owner Dr. Dave Whitty tackled the Level 2 Certification three times—and finally passed it. Now he wants to help you prepare.

Dave Whitty, DC



Passing the Level 2 Certification is a lot like learning a muscle-up—you've tried without success, but now you're determined to succeed.

When you were learning the muscle-up, you read, studied videos on CrossFit.com, asked your trainer at the gym for tips, watched your fellow CrossFitters, and picked their brains. Then you practised and practised and practised. Your wrists were so raw that your spouse and co-workers were worried that you had a self-mutilation problem.



Level 2 class photos—like this one from June 28, 2008—are sparse for a reason: the certifications are hard as hell.

Bit by bit, you thought you were getting closer, but it just didn't happen. Everyone told you that you were so close. You just needed to get up a little higher, kip a little harder, or bang your head through more aggressively.

So what did you do? You kept working on it, and eventually you knocked it out of the park.

What does that have to do with the Level 2 Certification? Well, everything!

Most folks have heard how hard the test is and how the pass rate is very low on the first attempt. So why and how do you prepare? Well, all I can tell you is that I looked at Level 2 just like I did muscle-ups: just keep working at it.

Two Certs in Two Months is Too Much

After I returned home from my Level 1 Cert at CFHQ, I quickly began training a couple of guys and applied for affiliation. The application was quickly accepted and the business was rolling.

Incidentally, a business was not the original goal. I had actually planned only to learn how to do CrossFit properly and taste the Kool-Aid. As our numbers grew quickly, I felt the need to learn more. The Level 2 Certification seemed the logical next step, so I registered for a March 2008 cert in Virginia Beach, Virginia, not even two months after completing the Level 1 course.

Well, the Level 2 Cert was an eye-opener. Most of the participants were very experienced Level 2 and 3 trainers who were taking the new course and test that were introduced in January 2008. A couple were instructor trainers for the Level 1 certifications.

The course went really well in Virginia Beach. I learned a ton from the great coaching crew about progressions, cues, my own form and fixing common problems. Everything was going well. But when I got my debriefing, the reality of my performance was revealed.

I went in with a lot of confidence, having never failed at anything. I thought I was prepared. As a chiropractor, I look at movement all the time. I understand biomechanics and have been accustomed to assessing movement through video analysis of running and golf swings. I'd been a personal trainer while in university, taught swimming and skiing, and lectured to large and small groups including trainers. I thought I knew my stuff.

Well, I was surprised again. My body felt just like it did after my first workout with a CrossFit trainer. I learned the hard way what it would take to get to the next level.

Teaching CrossFit is not like teaching patients how to activate their gluteus medius while lying on their sides. Instead, CF teaches complex movements that will be performed at high intensity with large loads. It teaches large groups quickly, effectively and safely, making sure they're having fun through it all.

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The Level 2 instructors were tough and fair during the debriefing. My demos needed work, they said. I needed to get better at managing the group, have more fun, and improve my use of the progressions. I needed to see a whole lot more.

When they asked how long I'd been training people and I said, "two months," they explained that I had done much better than expected with such limited experience.

That was encouraging, but I was still pissed—not with the instructors but because they were right. My push press and push jerk sucked, and I missed a lot of poor form faults. I don't accept failure sitting on my ass, so I took their recommendation to go home, keep training people and come back after I'd seen 100 or 150 people put a bar overhead.

Back home we started our fundamentals classes, where all new folks learned the nine movements. I kept reading the *CrossFit Journal*, watching videos and training people.

Level 2, Part 2—Get Some More

In September 2008, I went to One World in Union City, California, to retake the Level 2 Cert. Rather than just retaking the test, I chose to take the whole course again

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because I knew from the first attempt that I had learned a lot. I scared one or two folks during the intros when I explained it was my second time taking the course. But at least one other person said he was repeating, too.

The course went really well, and on the practice day I did great. I knew the progressions, I was the 'big me' (as the instructors encourage you to be), and I kept the group moving. The test felt like it went well but was not as comfortable as the practice day. Apparently it showed. My score at the debriefing was one point short. I missed it by one damn point!



If you're intimidated by people with clipboards, get over it before heading to a Level 2.

Why? Well, I missed things. I didn't notice that a bar was not 100 percent overhead. I tried to fix one guy's knees during his squat, which threw off his lumbar curve, which I missed.

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So what was their suggestion? Watching experienced trainers and trying to see what they see, then observing how they fix those faults. The challenge for me was that there were no experienced trainers in my area, so they suggested that I go to a Level 1 Cert and watch the instructors. There was a Level 1 in Toronto, Ontario, the next month, so I went and watched, worked on my form and soaked up as much as I could.

Never, Never Give Up

When HQ posted a new Level 2 Cert for Boston, Massachusetts, in December, there was no doubt about registering. I went in with confidence but also with trepidation. Even though I was training people six days a week, integrating the squat and deadlift into exercises for my patients, and really trying to be as ready as I could,

credit: Sheri Ostridge



Dave Whitty (kneeling) found there's no substitute for experience. If you want to be a Level 2 trainer, get in the box and start working with athletes.



Nicole Carroll, CrossFit HQ co-director of training.

Level 2 Tips from HQ

About 50 percent of the candidates at Level 2 Certs don't make the grade, and some classes have seen failure rates as high as 80 percent.

The reason?

"The No. 1 contributor is lack of experience in training people in CrossFit and its nine foundational movements," says Nicole Carroll, CrossFit HQ co-director of training.

On paper it might seem easy to run a small group through the squat, front squat, overhead squat, press, push press, push jerk, deadlift, sumo deadlift high pull and medicine ball clean. In reality, it takes an experienced eye and precise communication skills.



Form errors are not accepted at Level 2 certs, where demanding instructors put you under the microscope.

I'd already failed twice. Our members were unbelievably supportive even after my second failure. They didn't care about a designation. They were just thrilled that they were getting a better trainer.

The practice day in Boston went well, with some very positive and constructive feedback from the Level 2 instructors. I was impressed by one clear improvement in this version of the cert: the instructors were critiqued by other instructors. Seeing the trainers accept constructive criticism and suggestions from their colleagues helped us more comfortably accept the critiques and suggestions we were soon to hear.

The day of the test I awoke at 4 a.m., five hours before test time. In my mind, I ran through the nine foundational movements and how I wanted to teach each one of them. When test time rolled around, I felt ready. There were quite a few volunteer test subjects for us to instruct, and they changed for each rotation. That really made you focus on each person even more because you weren't familiar with their movement patterns.

When the debriefing happened, I was told that I'd aced it! I was psyched. The hard work on this task was complete.

"You need to have the depth of knowledge to be able to teach the movement," Carroll explains. "Then you need to see if people are doing it right or not and effectively commend or correct them. That's the technical aspect of the craft, but there are other elements that have everything to do with delivery.

"Do you talk loud enough? Do you clearly articulate what you want the athletes to do? Are they engaged? Do they feel respected and attended to? Are they having fun? These are intangible but very much a part of being a successful professional trainer. Then there are elements like managing a small group and demonstration. Demonstration is about having an awareness of your own movement and utilizing it as a tool to teach others."

If that sounds like a lot, it is.

"When you take all those elements and combine them, it's pretty rigorous. I think there's the potential to underestimate that," Carroll says.

According to Carroll, the best preparation tool available is the [Study Material](#). The document explains exactly how candidates will be evaluated and also outlines movement progressions and many of the faults you'll encounter when teaching the nine core movements.

But don't stop there.

"The best way to prepare is to train people," Carroll says. "It sounds so simple but isn't that easy. Don't underestimate the experience required to come into the test environment and do well. Run fundamentals classes and teach people the nine movements over and over again until you can do it in your sleep. Your confidence there will positively affect your delivery. Other resources are Level 1 Certs, [attending a Level 2 as a test subject](#), and training with other great trainers in your area."

— Mike Warkentin

The Good Doctor's Advice

These days, I'm doing multiple muscle-ups without coming off the rings. I'm a grizzled veteran of three Level 2 certs. And I have a few ideas that echo and amplify Nicole's thoughts about the best way to prepare:

- Coach folks as much as you can—especially newbies.
- Focus on the nine foundational movements, coaching them on a daily basis.
- Work on a game plan for each class, even if it's just in your head and you only do it five minutes before class.
- Know the progressions cold. Understand how they help teach the whole movement, and use them to fix common faults.
- Watch other experienced trainers training people. Try to see what they're seeing and how they fix things.
- Be the "big you." Don't sit back and let a class happen. Run it.
- Have fun at the cert. The instructors are there to make you a better trainer, pass or fail.
- If you aren't successful the first time, really listen to what they think you should work on and go do it.
- Volunteer to be a test subject at a Level 2 Cert.
- Go back to another Level 1 Cert and watch and learn.
- Above all else, believe in yourself. Then, like I did, just keep showing up until you get it.



credit: A.J. Valadka

With dedication and perseverance, you can get your Level 2 Certification—and your first muscle-up.

About The Author

Dr. David Whitty is a chiropractor and Level 2 CrossFit Trainer. He's also CrossFit Running and Endurance certified. He has been in private practice in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, at [Bodyworks](#), a multi-disciplinary clinic he operates, and at the Souris Hospital. He is the founder and co-owner of [CrossFit PEI](#).