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Ashtanga Yoga vs. CrossFit

Kristen Gilbert, a 13-year practitioner of Ashtanga yoga, tries CrossFit for six months and says the two practices complement each other in testing body and mind.

By Kristen Gilbert

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Gordon Ross

On the surface, Ashtanga yoga and CrossFit look like opposites.

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Yoga involves incense, OM's, peace and vegetarianism whereas CrossFit cultivates explosive power and aggression in utilitarian-style affiliate gyms. But when delving below the surface, these practices are not only startlingly similar but also complement each other.

Recent *CrossFit Journal* posts have introduced the concept that yoga, breath control and psychological techniques can enhance overall performance. Being that Ashtanga yoga is viewed in the yoga community as the most vigorous branch of yoga, it is an ideal fit for CrossFitters who embrace intensity and physical aggression.

Superhero Training

Both Ashtanga yoga and CrossFit are subcultures of larger factions of physical training—yoga and fitness training, respectively—occupied by the hardest-core Type A personalities. Essentially, people who like extremes and pushing the limits of their comfort zones will be drawn to either of



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Ashtanga yoga is an intense practice filled with very challenging poses.

these practices. The most intense yogis will almost always be Ashtanga practitioners; the Type A personality is drawn to the high-focus demands, near-continuous movement, ever-expanding difficulty and emphasis on upper-body strengthening and core conditioning. CrossFit's focus on short bursts of high-intensity activity, submitting to the coach's will by performing the prescribed WOD to the best of your ability, and continually tracking your progress with detailed logs also appeals to the Type A personality.

I consider both practices to be forms of superhero training because the practitioner is encouraged to continually reach new heights of physical and mental ability that extend beyond the cultural norm.

Ashtanga uses a comprehensive set form that addresses the entire body in one session—unlike CrossFit's constant variety—and links postures together with a flowing, core-centric movement called a vinyasa. Vinyasas are similar to the pass-through done on gymnastic parallel bars in CrossFit but are performed on the floor in Ashtanga. The result is a powerful, flowing and vigorous practice connected by breath and movement, with ample sweat and staggering physical challenges. This style of yoga eventually demands extreme back bends, getting your leg behind your head, and all manner of arm balances, including handstand presses.

Because Ashtanga yoga is the root practice of power and vinyasa styles of yoga, no particular poses are exclusive to this practice. The fixed sets of postures, the vinyasas linking each posture together and the way in which they are practiced characterize Ashtanga.

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Hip mobility: not an issue.

Ashtanga has four fixed series of postures. The first is called “primary series” or yoga chikitsa (yoga therapy). Its main focus lies with addressing hamstring tightness through many symmetrical and asymmetrical forward bends, addressing hip tightness as well as pelvic imbalances. For most CrossFitters, the hamstrings can easily become the tightest part of their bodies. This is another realm in which Ashtanga and CrossFit complement each other.

Instead of a classroom format where the teacher is leading all students through their chosen set of postures, Ashtanga ultimately leads the practitioner to memorize the series of poses and perform them in a quiet room at his or her own pace, surrounded by other practitioners doing their practice. The teacher moves around the room and gives individual adjustments and advice to each student, similar to the way a CrossFit WOD is structured. Because of this style of delivery, students progress at their own pace, modulate their own speed according to their breath and move through the series as their bodies attune to it. You must be able to perform each posture successfully before moving on to the next—and usually more difficult—posture.

Urdhva dhanurasana (wheel pose) is a foundational back bend in Ashtanga, with both hands and both feet on the ground and your midsection in the air. Once shoulders and hip flexors are open enough to create a smooth arch with the entire body, the practitioner is asked to begin learning to stand from this back bend. When the practitioner can do this independently, he or she moves into the deepening series of back bends in the intermediate series, culminating with kapotasana, an intense back bend done with the knees and elbows on the floor and the hips raised to the ceiling.

CrossFit meets Ashtanga in the realm of gymnastic flexibility, agility and conditioning but layers on constantly changing demands, high reps of functional movements with heavy weights, rope climbing, waist-high box jumps and any other manner of craziness the coach wishes to inflict on his athletes. To be competent at either practice requires near-superhero-like physical ability, but it doesn't stop there.

Stress Processing

Being that both Ashtanga yoga and CrossFit are highly demanding, the effects of these practices on your mental and emotional state are far-reaching and beneficial.

When you set goals and are able to achieve feats you previously thought were not possible, you begin to perceive yourself as increasingly capable. One of my yoga teachers always said, "Yoga is when the impossible becomes possible." By this token, CrossFit is yoga. The ability to continually expand one's boundaries—be they physical or mental—is highly addictive and beneficial to self-esteem and perceived capability.

Both systems train to deal with the unknown.

Ashtanga helps train the mind to stay centered during times of trial by physical challenges while maintaining attention and breathing. The real-life application of this is training is to maintain your center and refrain from a knee-jerk reaction. CrossFit trains the mind by taking you to your absolute limit and presenting physical challenges that at first seem impossible. By doing this repeatedly, you begin to realize you aren't actually going to die and you're much more capable than you give yourself credit for.

Both Ashtanga and CrossFit cultivate full absorption in what you're doing, which happens naturally when you're pushing your limits. This quality of focused attention is the main requirement for any transformative practice.



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This movement will probably not show up at the CrossFit Games, but you never know.

When a potentially adverse situation in life arises, CrossFit training cultivates the ability to react quickly and appropriately—not emotionally—with a steady mind. This style of training does so by putting people in a stress-simulation situation every day and firing all systems on full throttle. In a slightly different way from yoga, this allows you to “practice” being stressed and hone your skills in dealing with that stress. This translates to daily life, and CrossFit junkies are some of the most down-to-earth people I’ve met. Most CrossFit athletes exemplify a fascinating combination of intense focus coupled with social openness. Both Ashtanga and CrossFit cultivate full absorption in what you’re doing, which happens naturally when you’re pushing your limits. This quality of focused attention is the main requirement for any transformative practice.

Community

Both systems encourage a like-minded community surrounding their practice, mainly because both are practiced in a classroom format, and to be successful at either system you have to attend regularly. Humans crave community to feel happy and fulfilled. Ironically, I’ve found people at CrossFit more open and welcoming than Ashtanga yogis.

“There are two qualities that will bind a community: laughter and suffering. Both happen here,” said David Marshall of Crossfit Muskoka in the Huntsville, Ont., area.

Concurrent with communities that form, various group challenges tend to arise to further bind the community. Yoga studios tout vegetarianism, hold tandem cleanses and 30-day challenges; CrossFit boxes tend to host Paleo

challenges and 30-day skills challenges. In addition, both communities give back to the larger population through fundraising: yogis have been known to bust out 24-hour yoga-thons to raise money for UNICEF or such organizations, and CrossFitters for a Cure was a recent effort to raise money for the Alzheimer Society. And of course CrossFit has a long history of supporting wounded warriors, women with breast cancer and other worthy causes. Both yogis and CrossFitters are concerned not only with physical and mental self-improvement, but also with improving their communities at large.

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Personal Benefits

Practicing yoga develops an intimate relationship with the breath, one that serves me well during a WOD. When the intensity dial is cranked up to 11 and I can remember to connect my breath to movement, the WOD is always easier and my time improves. Also, the steadiness of mind cultivated during yoga practice has been of immeasurable benefit transcending hardship, especially during CrossFit, when it feels like I’m going to die.

CrossFit has enhanced my pre-existing yogic fitness with the high-intensity piece. Jen Broxterman from CrossFit London in Canada points out that it’s a different story for your body when you’re strengthening at high speeds while your cardiovascular systems are maxed out (hypoxia), as opposed to yoga, where you build strength while moving slowly. Yoga also failed to address the benefits of cultivating explosive power in the body. Thanks to the well-rounded CrossFit system, on a recent trip to British Columbia, I was able to participate in a myriad of sports and outdoor activities successfully and without soreness. When only practicing yoga and riding my bike, I would have experienced debilitating delayed onset muscle soreness (DOMS) from doing the same activities.

“There are two qualities that will bind a community: laughter and suffering. Both happen here.”

—David Marshall

While there is much overlap between the two systems, the differences between Ashtanga yoga and CrossFit complement each other as well. Yoga counterbalances the tightening effects of CrossFit, and CrossFit has vastly increased my strength and explosive power. Through practicing yoga daily for 13 years, my back bends have expanded, my hips have opened, and my core has strengthened, allowing me to be comfortable executing increasingly complicated arm balances and enhancing subtle internal physical ways to understand and move my body. By paying wholehearted attention to these internal and external processes, my mind has become stronger and quieter. This mental focus has been highly valuable when I'm in the midst of the WOD because it allows me to observe but not honor the voice that tells me to stop. Then I can return to letting my breath propel me through reps that I previously thought I could not finish.

In addition, the mind-body integration I've cultivated through yoga, as well as responsiveness and adaptability, has served me well during CrossFit. From a physical perspective, my open hips allow me to fully explore the bottom of a squat and have in fact needed to tighten up slightly to increase the power available to me from my glutes and quads. Having open shoulders has also been to my benefit with the snatch and in learning kipping pull-ups. Ironically, pre-existing hyper-mobility has caused injuries that I am working through healing with the stabilizing and strengthening elements of CrossFit.

In my body, it feels as though the combined effects of Ashtanga yoga and CrossFit enhance the physical, mental and emotional aspects of my existence in innumerable ways. I have immense gratitude for both practices and will enjoy continuing to do my own research in both realms.



About the Author

Kristen Gilbert has been studying Ashtanga and other types of yoga for more than 13 years and teaching for 11 years. Her CrossFit obsession began less than a year ago after having a longstanding intellectual debate with a friend on CrossFit vs. Ashtanga.

The only way to resolve it was to partake in each other's systems. She is also a private health-food chef and a full-time student pursuing a master's of science degree in occupational therapy.



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