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Warning Signs

Ignorant people often blame their mistakes on a fitness program rather than their own misuse of that program. Maj. Dan Blackmon, U.S. Army, believes athletes need to get educated to take responsibility for their health, safety and fitness.

By Maj. Dan Blackmon Black and Gold CrossFit

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Courtesy of Maj. Dan Blackmon

One of the most common misconceptions among military/LEO folks is that CrossFit is dangerous.

I'm a major in the United States Army and a trainer at [Black and Gold CrossFit](#) at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, and I'm saying CrossFit isn't dangerous. What's dangerous is an unsupervised version of "CrossFit" performed by athletes who don't understand the movements, the programming and the methodology behind Coach Glassman's program.

Get Educated: Safety Is Your Responsibility

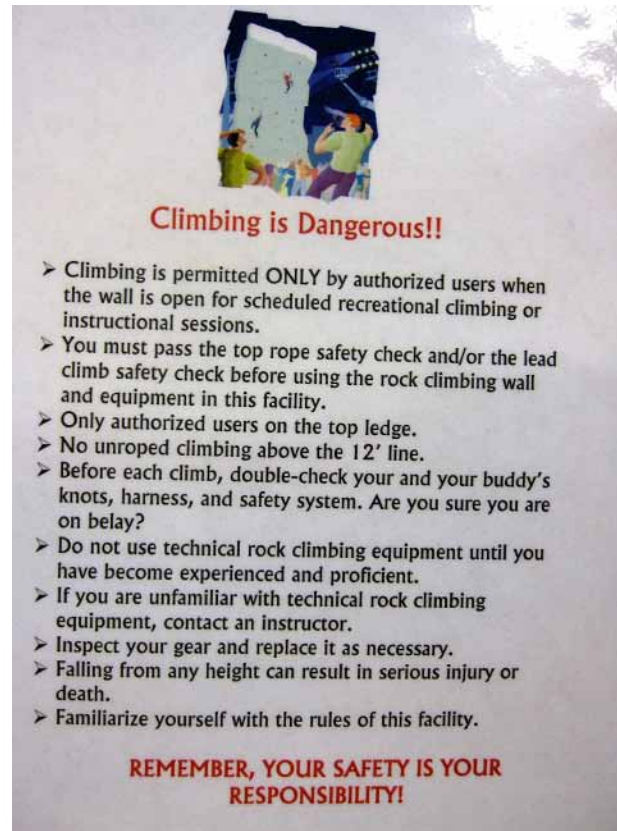
The reason CrossFit has become the whipping boy in some military circles is because it has a name and a brand, and ignorant people often make incorrect assertions based on the failures of knock-offs looking to capitalize on the success of the real deal. To the untrained eye, a broken Rolex is a broken Rolex, whether it was purchased from a jeweler or a vendor displaying his wares on a blanket in a subway station.

"Weight training" is an incredibly generic term that makes the standard back-and-bis routine difficult to label, even when it's misapplied and results in injuries. CrossFit, on the other hand, is a recognizable brand—and it's revolutionary, flying in the face of traditional military training methods. It's a prime candidate for skepticism, and when some bastardized version causes an injury, it's CrossFit—the actual CrossFit program—that takes the blame. That's unfortunate, because many members of the military believe CrossFit is an essential part of safe and effective training for combat fitness.

In an organization that has a manual for everything, we take the most fundamental skill—fitness—and leave it to the discretion of individuals who may or may not have the first clue about training.

Participation in any sport or training program has the potential for injury regardless of methods, instructions and any other safety precautions. That potential increases when people don't understand what they're doing. HQ trainer Pat Sherwood made that point abundantly clear a recent Level 1 Cert.

During a tour of our extensive facility, Pat spotted something near our climbing wall. It's a pretty unassuming 8x11 piece of laminated paper with the words "Climbing is Dangerous" written in big, red, bold type at the top. Below



Courtesy of Pat Sherwood

Climbers are usually confronted with a list of rules before they can scale a wall. People entering a weight room are usually given a towel and directions to the torso-rotation machine.

the warning is a list of rules for the climbing wall. I've walked by this piece of paper hundreds if not thousands of times and really never gave it a second glance. Why would I? I don't climb, and everyone knows climbing is dangerous. It wasn't until Pat brought the sign up in his lecture on technique that I finally had my a-ha moment and took a closer look at the assorted warnings on the sign (see photo above):

Climbing is permitted only by authorized users when the wall is open for scheduled recreational climbing or instructional sessions.

You must pass the top rope safety check and/or the lead climb safety check before using the rock climbing wall and equipment in this facility.

Only authorized users on the top ledge.

No unroped climbing above the 12' line.

Before each climb, double-check your and your buddy's knots, harness and safety system. Are you sure you are on belay?

Do not use technical rock climbing equipment until you have become experienced and proficient.

If you are unfamiliar with technical rock climbing equipment, contact an instructor.

Inspect your gear and replace it as necessary.

Falling from any height can result in serious injury or death.

Familiarize yourself with the rules of this facility.

At the bottom in big red print: "Remember, your safety is your responsibility!"

Isn't it ironic that we, as an institution, would put this kind of message or warning on a rock-climbing wall but nothing on or near the weightlifting facilities?



Courtesy of Maj. Dan Blackmon

The military has a list of standard operating procedures for everything, and yet few resources are available to those looking to improve their fitness. As a result, many men and women in uniform don't know how to achieve true combat fitness.

The Dangers of Ignorance

Guess what, everyone? Climbing is dangerous! So is driving, playing soccer, playing basketball, combat, going to the shooting range, rappelling, jumping out of airplanes, putting on a tourniquet ... You know what all those things have in common? Soldiers do them every day.

They have another thing in common: there are rules, standard operating procedures, coaches, classes, etc. in place to teach soldiers how to do these activities or at least warn them of the dangers of doing them incorrectly. Believe it or not, during my deployments more soldiers were deemed combat ineffective in Iraq and Afghanistan for basketball injuries than combat-related injuries. We used to joke that if Al Qaida really wanted to get us out of the Middle East, they would just organize a huge street basketball tournament and let us incapacitate ourselves. It got so bad at one point we actually had to ban hoops just to keep our numbers up.

As a leader, I would hate to see the same thing happen to CrossFit and functional fitness. Therefore, it's extremely important to teach people how to train correctly. As the sign said, "Remember, your safety is your responsibility."

The sign basically says, "Hey! Before you climb, make sure you know how to do these things." On the other hand, we don't have such a warning anywhere near any of our weight rooms. We allow people to come in and achieve some version of fitness in whatever way they want. In an organization that has a manual for everything, we take the most fundamental skill—fitness—and leave it to the discretion of individuals who may or may not have the first clue about training.

The issue we have here at West Point ... is that a lot of people claim to do CrossFit but only a handful of them are actually doing it right.

Courtesy of Maj. Dan Blackmon



Black and Gold CrossFit at West Point gives soldiers a chance to train using functional movements that will keep them alive on the battlefield.

Think about what folks ask their bodies to do in CrossFit workouts, and yet some people dive in headfirst, completely ignoring the recommendations and warnings on CrossFit.com if they've even bothered to research the new program they're about to employ. For anyone who has attended a Level 1 Cert, you assuredly remember that one of the tenets of functional movement is that it is safe. Any movement we do can be done at any weight, and good technique will prevent injury when we fail. If I maintain the points of performance on any lift or movement, the weight will not matter. Once one of those points breaks, bad things can happen. If someone has no idea what he's doing, bad things are more likely to happen due to ignorance—and the movement and the method take the blame.

Let's take a fairly simple benchmark workout, Diane, and have a look at it. It's 21, 15 and 9 reps of 225-lb. deadlifts and handstand push-ups. For many of us, doing a 225-lb. deadlift once is fairly easy. We focus on the fundamentals, maintaining our lumbar curve, keeping our weight back on our heels and so on through all the other points of performance.

Now take the strong but inexperienced athlete (insert "average soldier" here) and ask him to do the same thing. Chances are he's going to make some small mistakes, but nothing that will hurt him. He will successfully move the weight up and down, and it may be a little ugly, but it will be "functional." We are still outside the realm of dangerous at this point and just hovering around stupid.

Where we get dangerous is when he gives himself the "3-2-1... Go!" with little preparation and no understanding of the WOD and its demands. That bad technique is going to get worse. By Rep 10, we will see all the points of performance deteriorate, and the athlete will be in real danger of getting hurt. For argument's sake, let's just say the athlete's spine withstands the pressure and doesn't shoot the L2 vertebrae across the room. The very next thing he does is heave his failing muscles upside down in expectation that they'll lower his head to the floor under control and press him back up.

As a trainer at West Point, I am extremely lucky to have the athletes I do. This is exactly why I know how dangerous the HSPU can be. As part of their athletic curriculum, every cadet takes a class called "Military Movement." Our Department of Physical Education teaches handstands and how to do them properly, yet I still have cadets who flip themselves up against a wall and immediately crumble into a pile. Luckily, the other thing they are taught is how to tuck and roll, so as of right now we have no injuries. But it's still possible for an untrained, unspotted or uncoached athlete to crack his skull open or break his neck. It's also possible for a trained, athletic person to hurt himself. That's life—but the probability of injury goes way down with proper training and instruction.

CrossFit is not dangerous, but a half-assed version of something you think is CrossFit, devoid of common sense and appropriate scaling, could be incapacitating.

Real CrossFit: Safe and Effective

The issue we have here at West Point, and I'm sure other military posts face similar challenges, is that a lot of people claim to do CrossFit but only a handful of them are actually doing it right.

For many months here, we had a group that did a workout every Friday. They called it "CrossFit Friday." It was a phenomenal smoke session. I did a couple of the workouts when I was new to CrossFit and enjoyed them, but what I did not realize at the time was that they were not CrossFit at all. The sessions were consistently 30-plus-minute chippers that included all sorts of movements that missed functionality. They were not measurable, observable or repeatable. Most importantly, at times it was borderline unsafe. Luckily no one was ever injured during these sessions, but as I look back on them, I realize it may have been by sheer luck. The real truth is that if someone had been hurt by something that was CrossFit in name only, I would never have been able to convince anyone that CrossFit is a great way to train our future leaders and warriors.

These training sessions also convinced a large population that such workouts define CrossFit. I had a hard time convincing people to sign up for an everyday workout like that, and who could blame them? No way would I continue CrossFit if every single day featured some ridiculous Filthy Fifty type of workout.

CrossFitters know that endless chippers only place the athlete in one energy pathway, which is not the way to achieve fitness. But traditional military folks love the oxidative pathway. If we can't run 5 miles all the time, we just feel inadequate. Breaking through that mindset is our biggest obstacle. Telling a young man that he does not have to do a 45-minute chipper or 10K every day to be in shape is difficult, but it's damn-near impossible to convince a 40- or 45-year-old career military man that you can be in the best shape of your life and very rarely do anything related to long, slow distance running.

The Benefits of Certification

A couple of months ago, I was posed with a question. I was in the process of getting a Level 1 Certification brought to West Point so we could increase the number of coaches and expand our current program. The cost of doing this was going to be fairly significant, and every dollar is scrutinized in today's economic environment. The question was,



Courtesy of Maj. Dan Blackmon

***"Here is the plain and simple truth about CrossFit and how it relates to military athletes: their lives depend on their fitness."
—Maj. Dan Blackmon***

"Dan, why are we spending money to teach these kids how to work out? What is so special about CrossFit? Isn't it just glorified circuit training?"

Of course, I immediately went on the soap box with the constantly varied, functional movements performed at a high intensity lecture we're all so fond of. I got on a whiteboard and started drawing the work-capacity chart. I discussed the 10 general physical skills and how they relate to a soldier in combat. Essentially, I gave the CliffsNotes version of the What Is Fitness lecture I had heard Pat Sherwood give a year and a half ago.

A few days later, we got the money and I patted myself on the back for a job well done. What I didn't realize at the time was that although I may have moved the proverbial weight of the CrossFit ideals a fairly good amount of distance, I surely did not do it very quickly. I was effective but not efficient in getting my message across.

So what is CrossFit and why should we pay to send our soldiers to certifications?

Well, a CrossFit Level 1 Certification is not always going to make Todd Widmans, Adrian Bozmans, Pat Sherwoods, E.C. Synkowskis and Chuck Carswells. What it will do is give soldiers a good baseline on which to build their knowledge. I've heard it said that the Level 1 is a mile wide and a couple of inches deep. Some would have an issue with that assessment, but I embrace it. The Level 1 is the base of your knowledge pyramid. It has to be wide because only from there can you build. In a very short period of time, you will learn how to lift safely, how to get fit, and how to train others. CrossFit certs provide a solid list of information that helps people learn how to train the human body safely and effectively. I could not break CrossFit down into a PowerPoint presentation, but I do know that there are some simple rules you should follow because I have taken the time to get some education.

Here is the plain and simple truth about CrossFit and how it relates to military athletes: their lives depend on their fitness. As a leader in the Army, I know this firsthand, and subsequently my career depends on fitness. The Army knows this, too. The proof is that every day we have a dedicated time to conduct physical training.

Unfortunately, Rome wasn't built in a day, and we are not going to change the "Army way" of training overnight. The training we are doing right now in mass quantities is wrong, ineffective, improperly resourced and not conducted by the right people. Sometimes misguided attempts at functional training actually represent a step away from where we need to go. We need to take the time to properly train our athletes and coaches. CrossFit can provide that training, and it is important that we continue to leverage that.

As a leader in the military I take it as my responsibility to educate and train myself in the best way that is out there. I've decided that's CrossFit. Our other trainers and cadets here have taken up that flag as well, and we are hoping to seed the rest of the U.S. Army with that knowledge. We have to take these lessons and teach them to others.

In short, we have to put up a sign:

You are responsible for your own safety, and you are responsible for how you train your body.

Do not misinterpret the goals and methods of the CrossFit program.

Go to a Level 1 Cert to learn from elite trainers.

If you don't know how to perform a movement safely, ask a CrossFit trainer.

Familiarize yourself with CrossFit movement standards. They exist for your safety and will also help you achieve the best results.

Do not attempt WODs you are unprepared for. Ask your trainer about scaling for maximum results.

Educate yourself by visiting CrossFit.com and reading the *CrossFit Journal*.

Share that knowledge with others.

Pursue virtuosity in every movement.

If we do not spread this message throughout the military, then we will have injuries due to straight ignorance, a bad name given to a truly effective fitness program, and an entire generation of soldiers doing half squats, skull crushers and biceps curls to get ready for combat.



Courtesy of Maj. Dan Blackmon

About the Author

Maj. Dan Blackmon received his Level 1 CrossFit certification in August 2008. He has actively trained cadets and leaders at West Point since that time and was one of the founders of Black and Gold CrossFit. Prior to West Point, Dan had two tours of combat and considered himself to be in pretty good shape. After doing CrossFit for a short time, his perspective on physical training for combat changed forever.

He recently attended a Level 2 Cert and missed it by a couple of points but plans to give it another shot ASAP. Dan grew up with a sports background and played Division 1 golf at West Point, and he still carries a scratch handicap. He believes CrossFit has made him a better golfer, soldier, leader, husband and father.