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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## APFT A-OK

Two U.S. Army platoons use CrossFit while a third uses traditional PT. When physical testing rolls around, one group sees impressive improvements.

By Sgt. 1st Class Rafael C. Lopez II

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All images courtesy of Sgt. 1st Class Rafael C. Lopez II

I am a sergeant first class in the United States Army and platoon sergeant in an Aviation Task Force that consists of 30 UH-60 Blackhawk, AH-64 Apache and CH-47 Chinook helicopters. We are stationed out of Hunter Army Airfield in Savannah, Ga., but are currently deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. I would like to give you some of our history with CrossFit and some tabulated data from what we have done.

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## A New Way to Train

We received a new battalion commander prior to our deployment. Since the first day he took command, he preached to us about combat-focused physical-fitness training (PT). He came to us with kettlebells, burpees and box jumps, and we were convinced he had lost his mind. I mean we believed that his thought process was in the right spot because our normal physical-fitness regimen only taught us how to pass the Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) but would be useless to us in combat. But the hard pill for us to swallow was this: "How is swinging a weight around, jumping up on boxes and performing short but fast runs going to help us on an APFT?"

We were sure that this "combat-focused PT" was going to doom our soldiers. As I stated earlier, we understood our commander's philosophy clearly, and it made perfect sense for preparing a soldier for combat, but as a platoon sergeant in charge of 30-plus soldiers' careers, I did not want to abandon traditional PT styles in fear that I would soon have an enormous amount of soldiers failing the APFT.

I have always spent time in the gym, not as a muscle-hungry beast but more as someone just trying to increase my strength and be fit—at least according to how I used to judge a level of fitness. I used to take every top supplement on the market and read all the top muscle magazines, and I browsed multiple "fitness" websites to find the next new mono-joint exercise to try out in the gym.

This deployment started just like every other I have been on: get to the gym, scope out the equipment, and figure out the best time to go. I linked up with another platoon sergeant and another soldier in the company. "This is it! I have my gym group! I am ready to go!" I thought.

A couple of months into the deployment, they closed the gym down for about a week to rearrange the set-up to allow for better maneuverability around the equipment. I was devastated. What was I going to do? The gym was my staple for six days out of the week. Then I received an e-mail from our sergeant major pertaining to CrossFit. A DVD followed shortly with clips downloaded from the exercise section of CrossFit.com.



*CrossFit's minimal equipment requirements have made the program a great fit for deployed soldiers.*

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***No one ever said a medicine ball has to be round.***

I was instantly intrigued by what I saw and decided I would give it a try. I talked with the other platoon sergeant who was a gym buddy, and we decided we would give it a go. We started with leg day (three rounds of 100 feet of lunges, 50 air squats and 25 back extensions), and we were instantly hooked. For the next week, our legs reminded us of the brutal beating we had put on them.

This turned into a passion for us, and we were anxiously checking the CrossFit website to see what new ways we could “beat the crap” out of ourselves. With each workout we both agreed that we had never been that sore by just lifting weights in the gym. Soon, we started using our sub-par engineering skills to build devices of torture. In a short time we had our own pull-up and dip stations, and we even built a makeshift GHD machine from wood, tape and foam.

### **Fit Enough to Fight?**

About two weeks after we began our new CrossFit lifestyle, we had an APFT in the company. The results were horrid. Since we deployed to about 7,000 more feet in altitude, soldiers might as well have been running with straws in their mouths. They could neither breathe nor perform. As a result, about 75 percent of the company failed the APFT. When this happened, it was an instant red-flag emergency that we had to do something.

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*Creative soldiers solved their equipment problems ...  
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We knew our No. 1 issue was going to be equipment, so we started looking closely at the types of exercises that were on the Crossfit website and then got busy with more building. We retrieved some old tires from the battalion motor pool for tire flips and for sledghehammer work. Then we got as many pieces of plywood as we could get our hands on to build plyo jumps.

Then we had to worry about weight. We only owned two kettlebells, and there was no way we were going to support 50 soldiers with that. We compensated for our weight crunch by rounding up numerous ammo cans and filling them with sand and rocks to get various weights. We even took our duffle bags and crammed them with sand and rock for more weight. I don't know what we are going to use to get our personal equipment home now, but we'll deal with that later.

We talked with the local nationals to attempt to get basketballs to use as medicine balls. In a couple of days we had four rugby balls, so our medicine balls are a little oblong, but if you are ever up for a hardcore football game, we have just the ball for you. And then came the power of the Internet, where we went on a shopping frenzy: medicine balls, jump ropes, rings and anything else we could get away with buying and having shipped overseas. With a good rotation of exercises between the platoons, we have managed to obtain enough equipment to support all the soldiers with what is needed for our WODs.

My fellow platoon sergeant and I did our own programming for the soldiers and ourselves. We beat ourselves up on Monday through Friday and then licked our wounds on Saturday and Sunday. As for the troops, we only had them do CrossFit on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Soon after the initiation, we might as well have started receiving death threats from the soldiers. They were hurting and we loved it. Nevertheless, the greatest reward came down the road when they saw another company doing traditional PT and collectively stated, "Man, I hope we never do that useless crap again." We had them hooked, and they could not get enough of it.

I recently purchased two bingo hoppers and wrote exercises on all the balls in one hopper and numbers of reps on the balls in the other. When the soldiers had the look of worry on their faces, I told them not to worry because they play bingo in nursing homes. Unfortunately, this did not ease their minds any.

### Measurable Results

The battalion commander was ecstatic to learn that we had finally embraced his philosophy with open arms and were charging full steam ahead with it. He would constantly send us updates about CrossFit and shoot us new ideas to try out. In February, we heard there was going to be a CrossFit Level 1 Cert in country, and our eyes instantly widened in hopes that we would be able to attend. Unfortunately, we were only allotted one slot for the cert and the other would be an alternate for the cert. Unfortunately for my brother in arms, the cert landed at a time that he would not be available, and I was able to attend.

The cert was amazing. It was full of information presented by a great staff of trainers, and I had an overall great time. If my love for CrossFit was not large enough to begin with, the cert inflated it even more. I went back to my camp and just engorged myself with as much CrossFit knowledge as I could get my eyes on.

If you are unfamiliar with the APFT, soldiers are required to perform a certain amount of push-ups and sit-ups in a two-minute period based on their age. The final event they must do is a 2-mile run for time. Again, your score is based of your time for your age group. As I stated earlier, the company took the APFT in March and the results were not good to say the least. Two of the three platoons have been doing CrossFit since that time, while one platoon continued to do traditional PT.

Two months later the company took another APFT, and the results were great. Most scores shot through the roof. The group that performed CrossFit consisted of 46 soldiers. The platoon that continued with traditional methods consisted of 34 soldiers. There were some variances in both groups of better and worse scores per individual, but overall the results spoke for themselves. Just to reiterate, these numbers are based on the same style of test given in the same environment.



*Luckily, old tires were not hard to come by, and soon the soldiers were flipping and hammering them for time.*





***Just about any object can provide a workout if you're creative in your programming.***

We'll call the group that performed two months of CrossFit Group A, and we'll call the group that performed traditional PT Group B. Group A had a total increase of 149 push-ups, with an average increase of 3.24 pushups per individual. There was an increase of 190 sit-ups for Group A, with an average increase of 4.13 sit-ups per individual. Group A also had a total time decrease of 45 minutes and 53 seconds on the 2-mile run for the group, with an average decrease of 54 seconds per individual.

As you can see, CrossFit made a substantial difference for this group within only two months. Group B had different results.

There was an increase of 122 push-ups for the group, which averaged out to an additional 3.59 push-ups per individual. There was a decrease of 26 sit-ups for the group, which averaged out to -0.76 sit-ups per individual. And there was a cumulative decrease in the 2-mile run time of 3 minutes and 30 seconds for the group, which averaged to only 11 seconds per individual.

I cannot express enough how pleased I am with these results. They demonstrate the significant benefit to core strength and cardiovascular endurance that CrossFit provides and traditional PT cannot.

### **More Improvements to Come**

Our future with CrossFit is still ongoing. I would be more than happy to give you an update when we take another APFT so you can see the stats after more time with CrossFit. I will be starting an additional PT session with soldiers who are still having problems with their 2-mile run. I have searched through CrossFit Endurance to get some ideas of what we can do with these soldiers, so five days out of the week we will work on drills that I have found on the website.

We are also planning to make teams and do our own CrossFit Games here in Afghanistan. The bingo hopper will be used to create the majority of the workouts, but we will also devise our own WOD and end it with starting an IV on a casualty for time.



***Even equipment for austere training needs a bit of character.***

I appreciate all of the work that has been put into the CrossFit program, and it speaks for itself through numbers. I myself, at 33, am in the best shape of my life, and between CrossFit and the Zone Diet, I have lost 38 lb. and 8 percent body fat in just a few months.

So to all the other units out there, if you do not already implement CrossFit for your physical-fitness training sessions, it is definitely something to look into.



### **About the Author**

*Rafael C. Lopez is a platoon sergeant in an Aviation Unit Maintenance Task Force in the United States Army. SFC Lopez has dedicated his time to developing combat-effective soldiers through CrossFit by implementing it in his physical-fitness training after his Level 1 certification course. He aspires to continue studying CrossFit and obtain his Level 2 certification, and he wishes to open his own CrossFit gym.*

