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## On Top of the Western World

Dusty Wunderlich uses CrossFit training to scale Aconcagua—the highest mountain outside Asia.

By Dusty Wunderlich

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All photographs courtesy of Dusty Wunderlich

Aconcagua is a great peak to test one's high-altitude threshold, especially for those who have ambitions to climb higher. Located in Argentina, Aconcagua is the highest peak in the Western Hemisphere and measures 22,841 feet (6,962 meters), just shy of the magic 7,000-meter mark (22,966 feet). My attempt on Aconcagua would be my fourth time attempting a peak above 19,000 feet. Most of those experiences have occurred during my progression into CrossFit, and it's been fascinating to watch my ability to withstand high altitudes in relation to my CrossFit training.

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1 of 8

### High-Altitude CrossFit

Two years before I left for Aconcagua, I had just been introduced to CrossFit and was also making my first attempt at a high-altitude peak. You could say I was a rookie in both regards, and it showed in both areas. I was a college athlete and always kept myself in good physical condition—or so I thought. However, I was becoming increasingly bored with my fitness routines and was having a very difficult time trying to find a balance of fitness for all of my different endeavors.

I will never forget my first CrossFit WOD: Michael. As most before me have done, I looked at the WOD on the site with pure confidence, but Michael crushed me that afternoon and I was immediately hooked on CrossFit.

I was able to get in a couple of months of sporadic WODs at my local gym before I set out to northern India to climb my first high-altitude peak, Stok Kangri. Stok Kangri is located in the Ladakh region, which is the birthplace of Tibetan Buddhism and one of the most incredible places I have ever been. My excursion started with a flight from New Delhi to Leh, which was set back one day due to weather.

Leh sits in the middle of the Himalaya Range and has an elevation of 12,000 feet. I spent a day and two nights settling into this altitude and seemed to feel good for the climb. I was set to climb Stok Kangri (20,135 feet) on a four-day plan, which turned out to be too quick a climbing schedule. I definitely benefited from living at 6,500 feet in Lake Tahoe and could feel the benefits of my relatively new CrossFit training; however, it was not nearly enough to overcome my lack of mountaineering experience and the aggressive climbing schedule. I was able to will myself 300 feet from the summit before I retreated with pretty severe altitude sickness. This was definitely a healthy dose of humility I was lucky to receive early in my mountaineering and CrossFit journey.

Once I got back to the United States, I couldn't wait to start planning my next expedition and dive further into my CrossFit training. Luckily, by the time I got home the first CrossFit affiliate in South Lake Tahoe was opening: CrossFit Lake Tahoe. I now had an arena to enhance my CrossFit skills and training to ultimately help build my high-altitude tolerance. I spent the next six months training at Lake Tahoe CrossFit three to four times a week.



*The world's highest peaks require elite fitness of anyone who climbs them, and Dustin Wunderlich found that fitness with CrossFit.*

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Because of my lean build and relatively light weight, I found the gymnastics and cardio aspects of CrossFit came to me easily, but the strength endurance was very difficult for me. I was able to perform the WODs in quick times but was not able to RX many of them. My Olympic lifts were strong for my size but still not up to par for an elite athlete. Right before I left for my next high-altitude climb, I could deadlift 330 lb. and had a Fran time of around four minutes with 75 lb. I had made good improvements but still had a long way to go before I hit an elite level of fitness.

I was extremely nervous about how my body would handle altitude the second time around and was truly hoping my increased CrossFit training would help me handle it better. I was able to summit Kilimanjaro in six days with few issues, but I did experience a massive headache and considerable fatigue on summit day, which is typical of high altitude and a big summit day but still unsatisfactory performance in my opinion. Kilimanjaro was a great experience but an easy climb from a mountaineering viewpoint, so I made a vow to further increase my CrossFit training and mountaineering skills when I got home.

For the next six months after my summit of Kilimanjaro, I started to CrossFit six to seven days a week and began pushing myself beyond my comfort level. At the end of six months I had brought myself to RX every WOD I had faced, and I had considerably decreased my times while increasing my lifting capacity. During this time I was able to easily summit Mount Rainier on a winter ascent, and I climbed a technical mixed route on Mount Sill (14,153 feet) in the Sierra. I was now starting to become more and more confident with my fitness level and my ability to push the envelope on larger mountains.

### **Climb 22,841 Feet for Time**

In my last week of training before I hopped on my long flight to Argentina, I had just arrived at the gym for one of my last WODs and was reluctantly going to attempt Nancy, which is not a favorite of mine. At 5'9" and 150 lb., completing 75 repetitions of 95-lb. overhead squats puts quite a toll on my frame. Nevertheless, I saw this WOD like all WODs of the last year: as mental and physical preparation for facing high altitude. I dove into Nancy without a thought, and it was actually a WOD I thought back to when I labored through parts of my expedition.



*Rugged terrain is challenging at any altitude, but it's a truly formidable test of fitness at altitudes approaching 20,000 feet.*



***At altitude, the author found his body was craving sweets and carbs rather than the Zone/Paleo fare he had packed.***

Two days later, on the day before I left the country, I took on my last WOD, Chelsea. After 30 minutes on the minute of five pull-ups, 10 push-ups and 15 squats, I decided to push on to 40 rounds to test myself one last time. I felt truly ready to face the upcoming physical and mental challenges in my life thanks to CrossFit. I finally felt I had successfully reached a new level of fitness before my biggest challenge yet in the mountains. I was extremely pleased with my progress and was leaving for Argentina with a 3:30 Fran time, 395-lb. deadlift, 4:15 Diane and 815-lb. CrossFit Total. My body and mind felt in the best form of my life, and for the first time I was extremely confident to head into high altitude.

Our expedition started with a leisurely pace to base camp, Camp Argentina, at 14,500 feet. Our group took three days to make the 25-mile approach to base camp, and everyone was acclimating well. I was taking notice of our entire team—mainly their form of training and fitness. In my opinion, which was confirmed by others on the mountain, we probably had the fittest crew on Aconcagua at the time. Our team was also very experienced, and we had a combination of one Everest summit, over 20 Denali summits and nearly 10 Aconcagua summits.

Our group comprised mostly endurance athletes who spent a tremendous amount of time running, swimming and cycling. Two of the guys in our group were full-time guides who spent more than 200 days a year in the mountains, so their training came from mountain life. It was great to watch the performance of all the athletes and discuss fitness training for high-altitude peaks. One other individual in our group used CrossFit training regularly at an affiliate in Indianapolis, and it was great to have a fellow CrossFitter on the team. At 57, he was one of the strongest guys I have seen on a mountain.

Once at base camp, we spent a few days resting to let our bodies properly acclimate to the new altitude. Like most expeditions, this left us with quite a bit of time on our hands. The two full-time guides in the group brought a couple of pairs of rock-climbing shoes, which gave us the opportunity to go bouldering in an incredible area. It was a great experience to pull off a few pure anaerobic bouldering moves at 14,500 feet. When we had the opportunity to get on a few overhanging problems that required very aggressive moves, I was amazed by the strength and ability I had to pull off difficult moves at this altitude. It was entertaining to watch someone fall off the boulder or finish the route gasping for air like they just rowed 2,000 meters. Joel Kaufmann and John Race, the two full-time guides, were quite complimentary of my bouldering strength. I attributed it mostly to my gymnastics training on the rings, and they smiled and said that really strong climbers commonly train on rings.

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The weather began to move in as we started to move up, which made for a much different environment. We spent the mornings and early afternoons carrying 40-50 lb. loads to higher altitudes for a cache or to set-up new camps. The carries would usually leave me pretty tired, and my heart rate increased considerably from the new altitude, but I was always amazed by how quickly my body would recover and how quickly my heart rate would decrease.

At high altitude, I typically suffer from severe headaches and lack of energy multiple times along the expedition, but this was not happening. I attribute my recovery entirely to my increased training schedule. Since returning from Kilimanjaro, I had increased my training days from three to four a week to six and sometimes seven days a week. At first this was quite hard on my body, and I was sore almost every day, but over time my body adapted and was able to comfortably handle training six to seven days a week.

During our down time I had numerous discussions with John Race, owner of Northwest Mountain School, about his thoughts on fitness and nutrition on high-altitude peaks. Race is one of the most successful and safest guides on the planet, with over 60 expeditions worldwide under his belt. His experience and knowledge about mountain athletes are priceless. We discussed CrossFit at great length, and Race believes the program is among the best he has seen for high-altitude training.

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**The camaraderie, support and drive I received during my training enabled me to stand on top of the Western Hemisphere and feel strong at high altitude for the first time.**

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***Pushing through Filthy Fifty gave Dusty Wunderlich the mental strength to overcome some of the most extreme conditions on the planet.***

Before he came across CrossFit, he would tell his clients to continue doing the cardio training they were doing but add in manual labor. He would advise them to go shovel snow, dig a ditch or build a fence because so much of expedition living is manual labor or, in CrossFit terms, “functional fitness.” Throughout the expedition we would be digging tent platforms, moving big rocks to anchor down tents and hauling heavy loads. I was always thinking about the functional movements we were performing, and I had no doubt that my work capacity and my body’s ability to adapt to less oxygen were a combination of metabolic conditioning and strength training in the CrossFit setting.

The other vital aspect I was beginning to notice while I was on the expedition was the benefit of the mental toughness I had gained during my CrossFit training. In my early climbs I would always get very concerned about any headache, nausea or fatigue I felt. This is definitely something you want to take seriously and monitor, but it was mainly paranoia in my case before. This time around when I would feel the onset of such symptoms, I would smile and think back to Fight Gone Bad or the Filthy Fifty and how I felt much worse. That usually gave me the confidence to push forward.



***Few people will get a view like this without a training program that provides them with elite levels of fitness.***

Another benefit was the cold environment I had trained in at Lake Tahoe. I split my time between CrossFit Lake Tahoe and South Tahoe CrossFit. South Tahoe CrossFit has a 5,000-square-foot facility that can be difficult to heat in the middle of a Sierra winter, so most of the WODs we performed would be in the 40s, and if we ran it would be in the 20s or 30s. This was great for my lungs. I noticed that the cold, dry mountain air was not affecting my lungs, and my training also gave me a mental edge each day when it was time to get up and step out into the freezing temperatures.

The one aspect of the expedition that I still have out to jury is nutrition. I definitely went into the climb much too lean, which didn't hurt me for this expedition but would have on a longer ascent. I found it quite difficult to put enough calories through my body, and at night I would put down as much food as possible but would be starving two hours later. To give an example of the calories burned at high altitude, the doctor in our group stated that on summit day we probably used 8,000 calories and maybe took in 1,000. You are working on major deficiencies in high altitude, and nutrition plays a vital role.

However, the body reacts differently to foods at high altitude, and one major issue is the digestion of fat. The body has a hard time digesting fat at altitude, which is an issue for a CrossFitter used to major loads of fat in his or her diet. I was loaded down with Zone Bars and Paleo Kits but found that my body did not want this food at higher altitude. I was craving sugar and carbohydrates, which I imagine was due to the caloric deficiencies. One will notice that many experienced mountaineers live on a diet mainly of candy bars and sweets at high altitude. Nutrition at altitude is a big question mark for me at this point, but I look forward to experimenting with this on future climbs and seek the advice of experts on this subject matter.

***Editor's note:*** For one CrossFitter's ideas about nutrition and climbing, read Rob Miller's CrossFit Journal article [Zone on the Rocks: Fueling Performance](#).

On Day 12 we moved to high camp, Cholera Camp (19,600 feet), and began to prepare for our summit bid the next day. We had a two-day weather window to make our assault on Aconcagua. The next day's forecast included 20-30 mph winds, which was just on the borderline. Aconcagua is known for severe winds that can cause frostbite very easily at high altitude.

It had been three days since we had a rest day, but my body felt in top form even though I was sleeping at altitudes nearly above what I had ever climbed. I had my typical restless night of sleep before a summit attempt but still felt strong when we woke at 4:30 a.m. We spent the first two hours ascending a moderate snow slope. The wind was strong and the temperatures were low, but the team was moving at a great pace. At our first break I had now broken my altitude record and felt as strong as I had ever felt on a mountain. We continued on as the sun started to expose the entire range around us.

It was about this time we moved onto the Canaletta traverse, which is not hit by direct sunlight in the morning and was exposed to bitter winds. As we were going across the traverse, my mind started to think about my training and how it applied to mountaineering. Many people on the mountain have a Globo Gym mentality and want to use any gadget, device or fad trainer to help them get to the summit. People will use hypoxia tents to prepare their bodies or take Diamox to increase respiration and help acclimate. Diamox and hypoxia tents have their place and purpose but are usually abused by those who want to cut corners. I think my mentality is that of CrossFit: no gadgets and no bullshit. I was proud to be climbing without the aid of gadgets or pharmaceuticals. I would rather take my defeat with grace and know that the mountain beat me fair and square than use any aid to get me to a summit.

The Canaletta traverse was all that they said it would be: cold. We labored across the traverse with every square inch of our body covered so we did not risk frostbite. It proved to be quite difficult to breath at high altitude with your face and nose covered without fogging up your goggles. At one point a strong climber had to stop because he was hyperventilating. As I was struggling to breathe through all the gear, I started to think back to a WOD I performed throughout the last two months of my training. I would do five rounds of five squat cleans and front squats for time, which does not sound that difficult—except I would do it without breathing through my mouth so my body received less oxygen.

We ended the Canaletta traverse in great time and were now only 900 feet from the top of the Western Hemisphere. Our team efficiently climbed the steep slope, passing others who were bent over or collapsed on the side. On Sunday, Jan. 31, our entire team stood on top of Aconcagua. Our summit attempt took us only seven hours and 15 minutes. I'm not going to exaggerate and say it was easy. The summit day was still the most physically demanding event of my life, but I enjoyed every minute thanks to the transformation of my mind and body through CrossFit.



***On summit day, Wunderlich relied on CrossFit training to get him through the final 3,000 feet required to stand atop the Western Hemisphere.***

### Shocking the Body

After being back home and reflecting on my experience, I have a few new ideas about getting prepared for my next high-altitude expedition. People who CrossFit and Zone strictly are elite athletes who have conditioned their bodies for peak performance and health, but it is a fact that living at high altitude is going to affect even an elite athlete's immune system. For this reason, there are times on an expedition when you will feel symptoms of altitude or illness that are not normal in a day-to-day controlled environment.

I will put more effort and thought into shocking my body in training to help program my body and mind for the trials of the mountain. For example, I want to get up at 2 a.m. (a normal summit-day start) and perform Murph. Or I will take in a fifth of the calories I normally would and perform Fran. I also will push myself to go train when my body is tired or sick. I know this sounds extreme, but that is what CrossFitters are, and I believe for some this is the next level of CrossFit. Is it any different than a firefighter doing Fran in full turnout gear?

Developing the body and mind through functional fitness to follow our passions or perform our jobs at the highest level is the greatest satisfaction one can receive. The next question is how can we continue to adapt training to the environments we will face in the field. I'm positive that soldiers, firefighters and police officers have had these same thoughts, which I believe will lead to the next generation of CrossFit WODs and the evolution of our philosophy.

Aconcagua was an amazing experience, and being a part of the CrossFit community in preparation made the experience even richer. The camaraderie, support and drive I received during my training enabled me to stand on top of the Western Hemisphere and feel strong at high altitude for the first time. I look forward to continuing my CrossFit training and programming around my mountaineering pursuits. I am currently looking at an expedition to Cho Oyu, the sixth highest peak in the world and a great training platform for Everest. I will continue to monitor my training and nutrition carefully as I strive to climb higher.

CrossFit has not only changed my body but also my mind. The philanthropic spirit of CrossFit motivated me to look for more purpose in my pursuits, and as a result my close friend and I started a non-profit last year (Genung Wunderlich Opportunity Foundation), and Aconcagua

was my first climb to raise funds for humanitarian projects. We are also in the process of putting together a Reno/Tahoe [Fittest of the Sierras](#) competition with the nine local affiliates, and all proceeds will go to a scholarship fund for firefighters, police officers and military personnel in the area.

I do not believe that without this community I would be in my current mindset, so I have great humility when I send my deepest regards to those who have influenced me in the CrossFit community. It would be a great honor for CrossFit community to follow the progress of the Genung Wunderlich Opportunity Foundation and give any feedback or thoughts on our direction.



### About the Author

*Dusty Wunderlich is an investment banker for ARVCO Financial Ventures and co-founder and chairman of the Genung Wunderlich Opportunity Foundation (GWOF). Dusty grew up with a sports background and played Division 1 golf at Missouri State University, and he still carries a scratch handicap. He also spent his childhood in the mountains, honing his skills as a mountaineer in hopes that he could one day climb the big mountains of the world. CrossFit has allowed Dusty to expand his horizons and take on new and different challenges that were unattainable before.*

*He also has a passion for travel and has had the opportunity to climb peaks and conduct business on six continents. He believes his CrossFit training has transformed not only his body but also his mind. Dusty continues to set new goals to push his physical and mental limits while attaching a worthy cause to his efforts. You can follow Dusty's latest physical pursuits and philanthropic endeavors on the [GWOF Web site](#) or the [GWOF blog](#).*