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On Elegance

Pat Sherwood addresses the concept of clever simplicity in fitness and in life.

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CrossFit places great importance on the concept of elegance.

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In my pre-CrossFit life, I only associated the word elegant with “fancy.” I was half right. Fancy is shorthand for the first two definitions:

1. Tasteful in dress, style or design.
2. Dignified and graceful in appearance, behavior, etc.

Yet there’s another definition with which I was unfamiliar:

3. Cleverly simple; ingenious. As in an elegant solution to a problem.

I’m now in love with the third definition.

Fitness Is ...

Coach Greg Glassman is a math guy, and, as it turns out, math guys like elegance. Two mathematicians can solve the same problem, but the one to arrive at the shortest—and thereby most elegant—solution will be celebrated. Think of Einstein’s equation: $E = mc^2$. With just five symbols, Einstein summarized an entire scientific paradigm shift.

Once you’re aware of the third definition of elegance, you’ll see it over and over again in CrossFit.

Let’s start with Coach’s equation for fitness:

Perform constantly varied functional movements at high intensity.

How incredible is that equation?

In just a few words, Coach described what no one ever had: how to get people fit. It’s beautifully concise while still accurate, and it makes it clear that there are just three knobs to crank when trying to attain elite fitness: variation, movement and intensity. It doesn’t get any simpler than that, and yet the few words belie the importance of the information. No one had ever thought of this before and then managed to summarize it so succinctly.

Coach’s definition of fitness is similarly elegant:

Fitness is work capacity across broad time and modal domains.

Anyone who has researched CrossFit’s definition of fitness, listened to Coach on videos, or attended a Level 1 Certificate Course knows the depth of this seemingly simple definition is profound, revolutionary and unparalleled in the entire history of the fitness industry.



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Just because it’s simple does not mean it’s easy.



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For the first time, fitness has been defined in a way that is quantifiable. Subjective definitions filled with loose terminology like “feeling good” or “the act of being fit” have been replaced with the objective measurements of force, distance and time. With tools as simple as a scale, a tape measure and a stopwatch, one can assess performance with great precision. Conducting such measurements over broad time and modal domains yields the first scientific assessment of fitness.

Eat meats and vegetables, nuts and seeds, some fruit, little starch, and no added sugar.

What about nutrition? Bypassing all complexity, the truth is that eating well, for both athletic performance and longevity, is shockingly simple:

Eat meats and vegetables, nuts and seeds, some fruit, little starch, and no sugar. Keep intake to levels that will support exercise but not body fat.

Countless books are written on the subject every year, each containing hundreds of pages of information, recommendations and guidance that may or may not be effective. CrossFit’s prescription contains everything we have found necessary to include in two beautiful sentences.

Magic in the Movements

Elegance is perhaps best on display in CrossFit’s workouts, which tend toward couplets and triplets and precise prescriptions designed to maximize intensity. Let’s take a look at the workout of the day, or more simply, the WOD. Here’s a classic:

Diane

21-15-9 reps of:

225-lb. deadlifts

Handstand push-ups



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There’s magic in the movements—and elegance.

The 21-15-9 rep scheme shows up in many classic CrossFit workouts. It has a certain beauty and functionality. If you can charge through 21 reps when fresh, then you just might be able to get through 15 on the second round, and 9 in the final round. The rep scheme allows athletes to maintain their intensity even as they fatigue.

Of course, if you're not Froning, Spealler or Thorisdottir, you may have to break up the reps into sets. Luckily, 21 can become 7-7-7 or 10-6-5. The 15 is ready for dissection into 8-7, 6-5-4, 5-5-5, or 3-3-3-3-3. The round of 9 can be 5-4 or 3-3-3.

Would you get fit if Diane were programmed as below?

19-5-17-3-1 reps of:

225-lb. deadlifts

Handstand push-ups

The workouts are the same in terms of total number of reps, movements and loading, and the second workout contains the same amount of work as the classic prescription.

So what's the problem?

The second workout looks like someone threw up on the page. It's not beautiful and it doesn't flow. There's nothing cleverly simple about it.

**Elegance is what happens when
the clutter is removed and the
essential ideas remain.**

It's often been said that the magic is in the movements, and let's continue to look at Diane. There are only two movements: the deadlift and the handstand push-up. Combined correctly, they can wreck a man or woman.

The deadlift is a weightlifting pull from the ground. While it's a whole-body movement, the major emphasis is on the midline and posterior chain. The handstand push-up places its demands largely on the upper-body musculature of the shoulders and arms, with the midline again playing a stabilization role.

Even an element of inversion is thrown into the mix, requiring a degree of gymnastics capacity as well as flexibility, coordination, accuracy, agility and balance. Had a shoulder press been chosen instead of the handstand push-up, Diane would still be a great workout, but it would be distinctly different. Even though both are pressing movements involving similar musculature, the gymnastics element is a far superior choice in this specific instance.

The deadlift is relatively simple, but it's balanced by the complexity of the handstand push-up. While the former movement often favors a larger person and the latter a smaller one, their pairing requires competence in both areas and removes any advantages acquired by great skill in only one movement or the other.



Colleen Baz

"Elegance is perhaps best on display in CrossFit's workouts, which tend toward couplets and triplets and precise prescriptions designed to maximize intensity." —Pat Sherwood



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Elegance is key to the pursuit of virtuosity.

The removal of specialization and the demand for broad competence are key for general physical preparedness and creating a balanced athlete, and many of CrossFit's most famous workouts—the Girls—contain an obvious grace and refinement in design. Couplets and triplets, they appear simple and even easy, but a first attempt will assure the athlete understands the prescriptions are precisely elegant.

Crucible

Elegance, by definition, is cleverly simple. It's often the obvious answer everyone missed or the clever nuance that makes all the difference. Elegance is what happens when the clutter is removed and the essential ideas remain, and it is part and parcel of virtuosity. It is performing the common uncommonly well, and it is the mark of genius.

Next time you need to solve a problem, explain a concept, define a term or program a workout, don't seek an unnecessarily complicated solution when an elegant one would suffice. Pursue elegance in everything.

Blaise Pascal, another mathematician, once wrote a long, drawn-out letter to a friend, then apologized in the postscript that he didn't have time to write a short one.

Brevity takes time.

So does elegance.



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About the Author

Pat Sherwood is a CrossFit Media Project Manager as well as a flowmaster. He's done just under 200 seminars all around the globe for CrossFit HQ and competed in the 2009 CrossFit Games. He hates HSPU and loves ice cream.