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CrossFit Trainer Education and Certification: New Programs and a New Structure

Nicole Carroll, Director of Certification and Training, explains the evolution of CrossFit's trainer credentials.

By Nicole Carroll

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Staff/CrossFit Journal

CrossFit's growth has been organic and infectious: There were no marketing strategies and no projections for the now more than 10,000 affiliates and 90,000 trainers. It started with one trainer, then one more and then a few more. The only "strategy" was to have fun, get into ridiculous shape and help anyone else do the same. Our numbers grew rapidly, and suddenly there were a lot of us.

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The Level 1 Trainer Courses were, and still are, the primary gateway to the CrossFit community. The Level 1s are the place to learn more about the timeless underpinnings of the CrossFit methodology, and they are the essential experience to becoming a CrossFit trainer and CrossFit affiliate. Successful completion of the Level 1 grants attendees a basic understanding of the fundamentals necessary to train others responsibly. CrossFit Founder Greg Glassman would always close the Level 1 with an appeal to take what you have learned and go out and help others: "Grab a broomstick and go train your neighbor." This is the spirit that has enabled the fitness revolution called CrossFit.

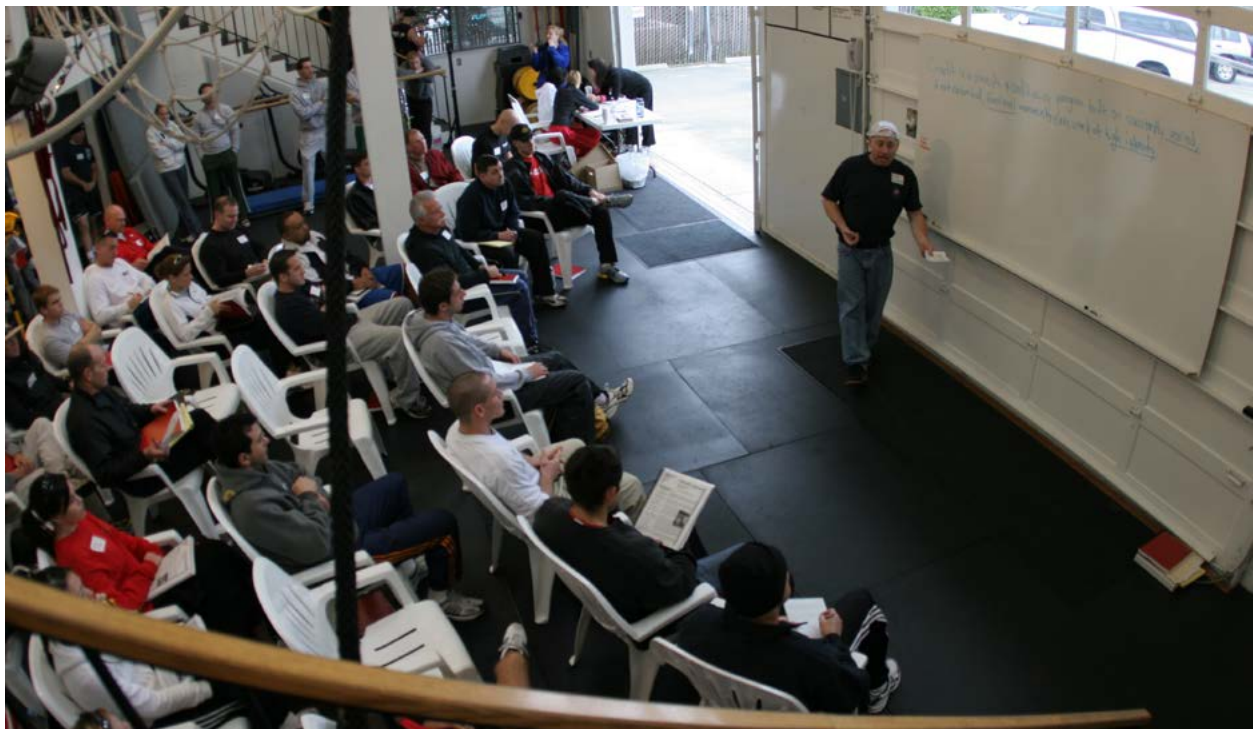
Early on, we recognized the demand from the community for more—particularly from trainers wanting to apply the principle of *virtuosity* to their craft. An educated trainer possesses a solid knowledge of movement mechanics, programming, nutrition and the surrounding disciplines relevant to physical well-being and performance. A more advanced trainer applies this knowledge to program design, discerns sound from unsound movement mechanics, and displays the ability to correct the unsound to maximize safety, efficiency and efficacy.

A great trainer, or coach, builds upon this skill set and approaches each client with a genuine desire to get the best results. A coach, in the relentless pursuit of excellence, tailors an approach to meet individual goals, needs and motivations. A coach inspires clients to be better than they would be by themselves.

With this in mind, we are proud to announce a new structure to our continuum of education and qualifications: the Level 2, Level 3 and Level 4. To understand the value of and rationale for the new programs, a review of their evolution is useful.

Origins

Longtime CrossFitters may recall the early iterations of a Level 2 and Level 3: They began in 2004. Level 1s were the only organized opportunity to connect with other CrossFit trainers and the greater community. Because of this, trainers continued to come back to repeat the Level 1 multiple times. Working within this model, we offered returning Level 1 trainers the opportunity to act as helpers for the seminar staff. This early model was simple: Learn the basics at your first Level 1, return and assist the core coaching staff to strengthen your



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In the old days, trainers came back to the Level 1 multiple times to attain higher levels.

coaching and cueing skill at your second Level 1, and become a “Level 2” trainer. We also offered a “Level 3” title to anyone who repeated “Level 2” by returning and assisting multiple times. These trainers were evaluated each time until they met the criteria to earn a “Level 3.”

Given our resources, the needs of our staff, the demand for trainers and our infancy as a company (less than 50 affiliates at the time!), this was an adequate system. Of course, it was neither a perfect nor enduring solution. We quickly realized the core staff at the Level 1s were torn between instructing Level 1 attendees and developing and evaluating Level 2 or Level 3 trainers. We also realized both groups deserved more, and so we evolved.

A second offering for trainer development was released in January 2008. We offered a separate two-day Level 2 Seminar with small groups and a one-to-seven teacher-to-student ratio. On the first day, attendees worked with instructors to refine their skill at coaching and cueing functional movement. On the second day, attendees put their skills to the test in a performance-based exam. They took turns coaching others in small groups through a series of movements and were evaluated by CrossFit

HQ staff. These performance evaluations were completed that day, and participants received a score and actionable feedback immediately after the course. (Some of you must surely remember those back-room debriefs fondly!)

While administering the Level 2 between 2008 and 2010, we found the desire of attendees to perform well on the exam overshadowed our intent to construct an atmosphere of intensive learning in which training skills could be honed on the first day. Attendees obsessed over memorizing the approach they thought we wanted to see vs. learning and developing essential skills to become a better trainer. The 40 percent pass rate certainly did not help alleviate this tension.

In response, we took the Level 2 out of circulation in 2010 and replaced it with the Coach’s Prep Course (CPC). The CPC expanded the Level 2 curriculum but did not include a test. We wanted to provide an experience for individuals who were invested in their education and development toward becoming better trainers. The CPC focuses on the six pillars of good training: teaching, seeing, correcting, presence/attitude, group management and demonstration. We also spend considerable time discussing programming



Shaun Cleary/CrossFit Journal

The Level 1s, while different now, are still intentionally stamped after the first Level 1s delivered by Coach Glassman.

and running effective classes. The small-group structure of the CPC maximizes the time for participant interaction, real-time practice and personalized feedback. The idea was to eventually offer a separate performance-based exam for which the Level 1 and CPC would be the best preparation.

This performance-based exam was to become the eagerly awaited “new Level 2.” Our goals were to restructure it and conduct a comprehensive overhaul to ensure quality, consistency and thoroughness. Like the existing Level 1 exam, a complete psychometric analysis was performed to remove bias, establish cut points, and provide objective measures of confidence and fairness. As we would come to learn, the details and scrutiny that go into advanced testing and examination criteria are substantial.

Almost two years into the making of the “new Level 2,” we had learned a tremendous amount about how to provide the best to our participants and trainers. We used that knowledge to determine a path that reflected our goals as a fitness company and address the ever-changing needs of our community with regard to training and education.

What was then to be the “new Level 2” has now evolved into two additional offerings:

- The Certified CrossFit Trainer credential, which is a comprehensive written exam. Attaining this also affords CrossFit trainers a Level 3 (CF-L3) designation.
- The Certified CrossFit Coach credential, the Level 4 (CF-L4), which is a performance-based exam.

Now that you have some perspective on how we got here, the following sections describe the new set of education and testing offerings.

Certificate Courses

Level 1: Level 1 Certificate Course Accredited

Title Abbreviation: CF-L1

During the original three-day intensive Level 1, participants were given a thorough exposure to CrossFit in lectures on CrossFit’s conceptual framework and definitions and its methodology. They were provided with in-depth descriptions of the foundational movements, as well as practical application competing in *multiple* benchmark workouts (also known as an old-school beatdown).

The Levels 1s, while different now, are still very much intentionally stamped after the first Level 1. The format, venue and extent of beatdown may have changed, but the DNA of concept and methodology remain the



Brian Sullivan/CrossFit Journal

The Coach’s Prep Course was born out of the need for more focused trainer development.

same. It remains a course preserving Coach Glassman’s original, timeless message on developing superior fitness. Participants spend two days with CrossFit’s top trainers learning movement and methodology and—perhaps most importantly—being immersed in CrossFit culture. They experience the excellence, camaraderie and credibility of the community that is exemplified by our staff. There is no offering we value more. Do not mistake the Level 1’s “introductory” nature with lightness; there is a reason why the Level 1 alone is required for affiliation.

We value experiential learning and therefore require full participation from attendees in all parts of the course, including workouts. This credential also has a 55-question multiple-choice test. Passing this test affords the individual a Level 1 Trainer Certificate, and holders of the Level 1 Certificate have demonstrated an understanding of the material taught at the course. The course has been an accredited Certificate Course under the [American National Standards Institute \(ANSI\)](#) since 2010. The Level 1 is the first step on the path to becoming a competent trainer. CF-L1 trainers have the fundamentals required to responsibly train others through firsthand exposure, and they continue to learn via experience.

Level 2: Level 2 Certificate Course (CPC)

Title Abbreviation: CF-L2

As mentioned, the CPC was developed after the 2008-2010 Level 2 was taken out of circulation. Removing the performance test from this course placed the focus primarily on developing skills and creating better trainers. This course was also a response to community feedback suggesting the Level 1 was “not enough” and suggesting the need for increased capacity and quality in an affiliate trainer.

It is recommended students spend at least six months training others in CrossFit before attending the Level 2 (CPC). The course is restricted to 21 attendees, a much smaller student-to-instructor ratio than the Level 1, and two full days are spent “workshopping” training skills. We minimize classroom time and maximize interactive hands-on work while providing actionable feedback to participants. Lectures are discussion oriented and culminate in on-site practical application, such as drills for programming analysis and effective class management.

The Level 2 Certificate Course is an intermediate-level training course meant to provide students with improved skills, a strong sense of their strengths and weaknesses, and actionable ways to improve. Trainers who hold a Level 2 Certificate have demonstrated an understanding of the CPC material to include more intermediate-level seeing, correcting and programming skills. In the absence of any other information, one can assume a CF-L2 trainer is a more experienced and self-aware CrossFit trainer who has spent time identifying strengths and weaknesses, as well as learning actionable methods for improvement and professional development.

Certification

Level 3: Certified CrossFit Trainer Accreditation Pending

Title Abbreviation: CCFT and CF-L3

The Certified CrossFit Trainer (CCFT) credential is perhaps the most different from the historical offerings. It is a computer-based examination delivered at testing centers throughout the world.

This exam makes use of photos and videos in addition to written questions. The exam questions are designed to require the candidate to synthesize and apply knowledge gained through his or her training experience. There are also eligibility requirements that include a significant number of practical coaching hours, as well

as continuing-education requirements for maintaining the credential upon successful completion. Of note, the CCFT has two eligibility paths. One path requires CrossFit coursework and training experience, and the other does not. The reason is because the CCFT is under application for ANSI accreditation. One way accrediting bodies such as ANSI ensure impartiality and mitigate conflicts of interest is by requiring a certification to have at least one eligibility path that is independent from the certifying organization.

The CCFT allows the experienced trainer to demonstrate more advanced CrossFit training knowledge and commit to a long-term standard of professional accountability. The purpose is to thoroughly evaluate an individual's knowledge and skills related to safeguarding the health of clients and improving their fitness.

“Certification” means “demonstration,” usually through examination, of current skills and knowledge. Unlike the



Anne Talheim/CrossFit Journal

The CCFT allows the experienced trainer to demonstrate more advanced knowledge of CrossFit training.

L1 and L2 *Certificate Courses*, the CCFT is not a training program: There is no course work directly associated with the credential. There is an exam only.

The study material, in addition to coaching experience, is meant to help candidates prepare. The material covers important issues, concepts and methods relevant to CrossFit training. However, candidates must draw primarily on their own experience as trainers to be successful.

Trainers holding the CCFT credential have demonstrated competency across the breadth and depth of CrossFit coaching concepts and skills. They have met the eligibility requirements, including coaching experience and education. They also uphold a standard of professional practice and commitment to continuing education for as long as they hold the credential. This certification is being developed and administered in accordance with ANSI standards of accreditation for certification. Additionally, those trainers who attain this credential via the Level 1 and Level 2 certificate path will also be distinguished as CrossFit Level 3 trainers or CF-L3.

Level 4: Certified CrossFit Coach

Title Abbreviation: CF-L4

There is a consensus in our community, steeped in the no-bullshit, evidence-based tradition, that performance is the sole measure of progress. It is no different for a trainer: What really matters happens with your clients in the gym, not on an exam.

The Level 4 Certification is a performance-based evaluation. It is designed to identify and acknowledge coaches who have mastered their craft. In the early years, the highest honor in the CrossFit community was to be bestowed the title of "Coach." To earn that honor, a trainer had to add significant value to the community through knowledge, talent and hard work. From 2004 until today, the title was officially granted when Coach Glassman called you such. In our minds, it was akin to being knighted.

The Level 4 is based on the concept offered at the 2008-2010 Level 2, as well Coach Glassman's historic designation to distinguish the most senior CrossFit trainers. The



Alicia Anthony/CrossFit Journal

Coaches who are inspired by the Level 1 can now pursue three additional credentials. Certified CrossFit Coach (Level 4) is CrossFit's highest certification.

CERTIFIED CROSSFIT COACH (CCFC / CF-L4)

PRE-REQUISITES: CURRENT CF-L3

OBTAIN: PASS PERFORMANCE EVALUATION

MAINTAIN: EVERY 3 YEARS ACQUIRE: 50 CEUs + 900 CROSSFIT TRAINING HOURS CURRENT CPR/AED

CERTIFIED CROSSFIT TRAINER (CCFT / CF-L3)

PRE-REQUISITES:

PATH 1: CF-L1, CF-L2/CPC + 750 HOURS CROSSFIT TRAINING + CPR/AED

OR:

PATH 2: 1500 HOURS STRENGTH & CONDITIONING COACHING + CPR/AED

OBTAIN: PASS EXAMINATION

MAINTAIN: EVERY 3 YEARS ACQUIRE: 50 CEUs + 900 CROSSFIT TRAINING HOURS CURRENT CPR/AED

LEVEL 2 CERTIFICATE COURSE* (CF-L2)

PRE-REQUISITES: CURRENT CF-L1 6 MONTHS TRAINING OTHERS IN CROSSFIT

OBTAIN: 100% PARTICIPATION

MAINTAIN: VALID CF-L1 TRAINER CERTIFICATE

*FORMERLY COACH'S PREP COURSE

LEVEL 1 CERTIFICATE COURSE (CF-L1)

PRE-REQUISITES: NONE

OBTAIN: 100% PARTICIPATION PASS EXAM

MAINTAIN: EVERY 5 YEARS: RE-ATTEND & PASS TEST

CERTIFICATION

TRAINING

CrossFit® CREDENTIALS

ANSI
ANIS ACCREDITED PROGRAM
CERTIFICATE OWNER

Level 4 is now the highest level of CrossFit credential. Unlike the 2008-2010 Level 2, this performance evaluation will be *a test only with no preparation day*. Candidates will be evaluated on their performance in teaching CrossFit movements to others.

This evaluation is for experienced trainers who have been coaching CrossFit for *several years in a group setting*. It is expected that substantial training experience and the L1, L2 and CCFT prerequisites will best prepare candidates for this credential. The successful candidate will be comfortable coaching a group of athletes of varied and unknown abilities through any number of movements common to CrossFit. The successful candidate will also demonstrate empathy, confidence and maturity in relating to trainees. The goal of this evaluation is to provide a distinction for expert coaches within the community. This credential will be available in fall 2014.

Credentialing: In Brief

The goals were, and always will be, to improve quality and rigor. We want to impart to the participant the most relevant and thorough training, education and testing that we can. CrossFit credentials need to have as much meaning and value as any credential can have. We want anyone to be able to search for a trainer in our [Directory](#) and have confidence that the higher the credentials, the greater the assurance of the trainer's skill and ability.

That said, is it possible to have a master coach who only has a Level 1 Certificate? A coach who chases down no credential but the minimum to allow him or her to train clients? Absolutely. I know some, and I would train with them in a heartbeat. They thrive, and their businesses thrive, because what really matters is the service and results provided to clients. Improving this service, and striving for best results for the people in their care, drives them each and every day. This is chasing excellence, and no credential can replace it.

Anyone who has a degree or has attained any certificate or certification knows credentials are meaningful only to a certain extent. Certification drives continuing education and staying active in your field. Similar to the trainer mentioned above, a trainer with an orientation toward excellence can capitalize on each credential by utilizing it to become better for his or her clients. Credentials are also meant to set standards and provide some public orientation and assurance in the absence of direct experience or word-of-mouth referral. We all know we would rather

go to the professional our friends rave about vs. the one with six designations after his or her name. Is the trainer good at his or her craft? That is the bottom line. Just because we are growing, getting accredited and distinguishing credentials based on "standard industry definitions" does not mean—not for one instant—that we are forgetting what really matters: the pursuit of excellence and caring about your clients.

Understandably, there are a lot of "what ifs," unique individual situations and questions. Please take the time to read through this [FAQ](#) to see if we have already addressed your questions. If not, please contact Certifications@CrossFit.com and our team will be happy to assist you.



About the Author



Nicole Carroll began training in 2004 at the original CrossFit Headquarters in Santa Cruz, California, with CrossFit Founder and CEO Greg Glassman. From 2005 to 2008, she traveled with Coach Glassman and assisted in delivering the CrossFit methodology, fundamentals and movements to Level 1 attendees across the world. Carroll is largely responsible for developing the Level 1 Course into the formalized and accredited curriculum it is at present. As Co-Director of the Certification and Training Department, she currently oversees all of the CrossFit curriculum, testing, and staff development for the Level 1 and 2 Certificate Courses and the CCFT/Level 3 and Level 4 Certifications.