
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

On Transformation

Nick deadlifted 300 lb. at 13—and then he changed his entire life. E.M. Burton explains.

By E.M. Burton with Tracy Watzek

July 2012



All images: E.M. Burton

I've been interviewing CrossFit trainers in the course of my work lately, and it seems the No. 1 thing they like about their job is seeing people transform.

The transformation will be different for everyone undergoing it, but it has a common thread: you're watching someone get better. At everything.

1 of 5



Nick's 300-lb. deadlift in November 2011 stirred up the Facebook community in a very big way.

The reality is we are all transforming all the time. Without our even trying, our bodies are constantly changing. The difference with CrossFit is that you're controlling the direction of the shift.

**Everyone who begins to
CrossFit knows intimately
how the workouts have
changed their lives.**

When you change form from one thing to another, the mass you were before is gone forever. This sounds too essentialist, you think. Life is perhaps more leaky than that. But I don't think I'm off the mark here. The physical changes are the most obvious and immediately apparent: the legs firm up, the skin clears up, the smile comes more easily, the

shoulders become strong and look great when hung with the same old clothes. But there are ways in which our lives evolve and become new that are also intensified—for lack of a better word—by the workouts. These things are not always tangible or really easily described.

Everyone who begins to CrossFit knows intimately how the workouts have changed their lives. The intensity of the workout destroys you down to next to nothing; we learn things about ourselves in our darkest hours.

CrossFit offers me the opportunity to see my life differently all the time. I have learned that I have incredible fortitude. Now I know that I can bear more of the unfortunate things in life than I ever thought possible.

This might seem like it's of a smaller scale, but one of the things I most love about my own transformation is picking up my daughter. All the time. It seems like such a silly thing. But thanks to CrossFit, it's been fun to pick her up and bounce her around the room. Even her teachers have remarked on it. Dancing, too. We dance more now.

As a parent, I admit for me the concept of transformation is much more significant when we're talking about positive change in a child's life, when young people come to have a sense of themselves that is greater than their previous conception. This made me consider the kind of transformation that can occur in an entire family. By doing CrossFit, we build capacity. In this context, what I'm finding is a greater capacity for love.

Last month, I met with three families to discuss how CrossFit has transformed their lives. In the course of interviewing Tracy Watzek; her nephew, Nick; and her new husband, Doug, and in the ensuing emails that followed, I found that Tracy has a great ability to tell her family's story. So I asked her to write it down for us.

Tracy and Nick: By Tracy Watzek

If you follow CrossFit's Facebook site, you may remember Nick from early December 2011. A video of Nick deadlifting 300 lb. was posted on the site, and it caused a stir. Most comments praised him and his strength. Some comments were critical of his physique, others of the fact that he was lifting 300 lb. This might seem unremarkable, except for the fact that when Nick lifted that 300 lb. on Nov. 19, 2011, he was only three weeks past his 13th birthday.

It was just days before this lift—the one heard 'round the world, based on the number and divisiveness of the Facebook comments—that Nick had said, "I'm ready." By "ready," he meant that he had decided to turn around his life. I also committed to do whatever I could to help him accomplish what millions of people fail to accomplish: to start and maintain healthy eating.

At the time of his decision, Nick was 13 years old and 222 lb. He had reached the threshold between "unhealthy" and "sick" and was crossing over into the "sick" range. Nick was always a big child—almost 10 lb. when he was born. He was always taller than other kids, and, beginning around 10 or 11 years old, he significantly outweighed most kids his age.

He was not always overweight, however. When he began attending classes at CrossFit Brand X in November 2005—first in martial arts (my idea, to teach him structure and self-discipline), followed by CrossFit Kids a short while later—Nick was thin, perhaps even underweight. For a few years, Nick regularly attended his classes. He eventually outgrew the CrossFit Kids classes and was invited to the Teen CrossFit and Teen Weightlifting classes.



Nick has lost nearly 50 lb. since he committed to eating better.

I hoped that the increased level of intensity in his workouts would reverse, or at least stabilize, his increasing weight, but it did not. Nick reached a point where he no longer had a desire to regularly attend classes because he was not making progress and he was increasingly self-conscious of the fact that he had to scale so many exercises, such as pull-ups.

I struggled to help him with his situation. Trying to keep Nick's mind off other problems, I indulged him in unhealthy ways with poorly chosen food and breaks from the gym. However, every so often, I would try to make a change to his eating habits—better foods and smaller portions—but our resolve would wane, and his weight continued to slowly but steadily increase.



A young Nick training at CrossFit Brand X.

Coach Jeff Martin of CrossFit Kids and owner of CrossFit Brand X approached me around the second week of November 2011. He wanted to let me know he had heard Nick was having some difficulties at school due to being picked on about his weight. Jeff also wanted to check with me about whether or not he could talk to Nick about healthy eating because Jeff strongly believed Nick had to make a change now or struggle with his weight for the rest of his life. Both Jeff and I also knew that while Nick was tremendously strong physically, he was still a young teenager and required a positive, non-critical approach.

I gave Nick a heads up that Jeff would be talking to him soon. Nick immediately knew that the focus would be on his weight. I began explaining why it was concerning us and how a change had to happen now before it was too late. Nick stewed for a couple of days until Jeff talked to him on Nov. 17, 2011. I'm not exactly sure what Jeff said to him as I let him take Nick aside without me (I did not believe my crying would make the conversation enjoyable for anyone involved), but I do know that Jeff is gentle, straightforward and honest and has quite a knack for commanding one's attention, respect and agreement.

Nick and I both knew that the road ahead would be tough. However, that same evening we began following Jeff's simple rules: no bread, no sugar, no pasta, no potatoes and regular attendance at class. I made ham and eggs for the

entire family, and Nick seemed satisfied. The next day, and every day since, we have worked hard to follow Jeff's rules, although it has been a difficult transition for both of us.

It is not easy enabling Nick to eat healthfully. It is difficult to ensure healthy meals and snacks are ready and always available, but it is essential for him to avoid poor eating and to learn proper portioning. The extra time spent in the kitchen cooking, preparing and packaging, not to mention the extra time shopping, is more than worth it. Nick has rarely complained about no longer eating the things he previously ate; he simply says "OK" when presented with the day's menu. He now recognizes that small goals lead to long-term change.

Although the choice to be patient with and accepting of this new lifestyle was wholly Nick's, the previous choice to eat poorly was not necessarily his own. Being only 13, he obviously can neither drive to the grocery store to shop nor cook his own meals. As a result, he wound up in an unhealthy state. I carry the guilt that, because I decided to take the easy route and enable him to eat unhealthy meals and snacks, he suffered physically and mentally. Because I shirked my responsibility to ensure he had healthy food, he was bullied, depressed and unhealthy. As a parent or

Nick now recognizes that small goals lead to long-term change.

guardian, it is our responsibility to ensure our children's health. Those who deny that the weight issues of today's children are not significantly the fault of their parents or guardians are misguided.

Six months after the lift heard 'round the world, Nick has lost nearly 50 lb. and as a result has gained access to a whole new world. He is filled with self-confidence and walks with his head held high and chest out. He is pursuing athletic opportunities; he will play football this fall when he enters the ninth grade, where previously he was too big to qualify.

And he is learning self-control and healthful living. I am confident that if left to his own devices, Nick will not raid the carbs. Nick is unrecognizable from the video posted on Facebook. He looks like an athlete. He is an athlete. Strangers compliment him on his physique and are stunned to find out he is only 13 years old. He no longer has to scale the workouts. Kipping pull-ups? Too easy. Dead-hang pull-ups? No problem! Toes-to-bars? Even easier. Double-unders? C'mon—maybe triple-unders are hard, but not double-unders. Run? What 13-year-old kid wants to? His current list of exercises to conquer includes handstand push-ups, handstand walks and muscle-ups. I have no doubts he will achieve all of them soon. He feeds off moments of success and is hungry for the praise that comes with each achievement.

Engaging in CrossFit and healthy eating turned around my health.

Yet Nick is a typical 13-year-old—he rolls his eyes when he is complimented (by me, at least), he faces academic and home-life struggles, he lives for video games, and he has not had the world handed to him. Despite all his challenges, he's still found something to embrace, something that gives him hope, something that makes him feel like he can conquer the world: CrossFit.

The support, education, compassion and encouragement we receive from Jeff and Mikki Lee Martin and all the trainers at CrossFit Brand X (Dan Strametz, Dan Edelman, Connor Martin, Keegan Martin and Debbie Rakos) is priceless, and I cannot thank them enough. Jeff said to me, after Nick had lost about 30 lb., "If he gets nothing more out of this or goes no further in CrossFit, he has learned control and that he can control things." A very powerful concept for a young person.

Not to be forgotten, of course, are Nick's fellow CrossFit Kids, who have cheered him on and encouraged him when times are tough. For instance, Cole Dick, a young athlete with an inspirational story of his own, came up to me a couple of months ago after I had helped Nick struggle through extra pull-up work. He patted me on the shoulder and said, "Nick's doing great, and so are you, Tracy."

As I write this, I have tears streaming down my face, thinking of how I should have been more careful and proactive with Nick. Having gone through my own transformation, I should never have allowed Nick to become unhealthy. I was in dire straits when I began CrossFit shortly after Nick. I would like to say the appeal of lifting heavy things and jumping around a lot was what drew me to CrossFit, but it was not. As a result of taking Nick to his classes, I began to feel obligated to participate. At the time, I was withdrawn, depressed, and taking prescription antacids and diabetic medication on a daily basis.

Engaging in CrossFit and healthy eating turned around my health. Medication was no longer necessary, and because my health improved, my outlook and my mood improved. I have so much more confidence that I opened myself up, I let another person into my life, and last year I got married in front of a crowd that included all my trainers and several fellow gym members. Without CrossFit and the gains I have made directly as a result of my participation, I would not be where I am today—happy, healthy and sore (sometimes), with a happy and healthy family. CrossFit is life changing. CrossFit is life improving.

Who would have thought being able to do pull-ups could have such a profound and deep effect on your life? I honestly felt I could do anything after my first one. I have no doubt that Nick felt the same, although I would never know because he would never tell me. The fact that he was, at that point, equal to his peers must have filled him with such pride—something so difficult for children to feel. The empowerment you feel after killing a workout, even for the average CrossFitter like me, is unparalleled.

By the way, my first pull-up was on March 11, 2010 ... not that I'm keeping track or anything.

