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A workout that's fast, furious and not for the faint of heart

CrossFit promises -- and delivers -- an intense blend of aerobic and strength training.

By Roy M. Wallack, Special to The Times
April 10, 2006

I'm hyperventilating. Twelve minutes into what I thought was a simple, 20-minute workout of pull-ups, kettle bell swings and short-distance runs, I'm bent over with my hands on my knees, mouth wide open, head spinning, shoulders numb and torso heaving with giant belly breaths. I'm spent, I feel nauseated.

"Hurry up!" urges my trainer. "You're on the verge of being beaten by a 38-year-old housewife who is four months pregnant!" As a lifelong gym rat, endurance cyclist and runner, I thought I was fit — until my first day of CrossFit, a free, fast-growing, largely underground workout plan that some say is rewriting the rules of fitness.

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The conventional wisdom is that you can't accomplish aerobic and strength training at the same time, and that you certainly can't develop world-class fitness on 20 or 30 minutes a day. CrossFit says you can — if you push hard enough.

CrossFit is extreme, intense cross-training that can be done with basic gym equipment — in a group or alone — both for general fitness and as a base for specific sports. It's been used for several years in law enforcement, firefighting and military circles; adherents have included members of the Miami FBI SWAT team, the Colorado State Patrol, the Jacksonville, Fla.,

Sheriff's Department, the Des Moines, Iowa, Police Department, the Honolulu Fire Department, the Orange County Fire Authority Academy and the Canadian Army. Now the program is exploding into the mainstream.

Eighty-four official trainers (double that of a year ago) teach CrossFit in major cities around the country. People who need to learn proper form — or who simply need to be pushed — can find a list of trainers on the website, <http://www.crossfit.com>. The guy who put me through my paces, Santa Monica CrossFit affiliate Andy Petranek charges \$25 for the initial session and \$15 for repeat visits.

People who already know how to do the moves with proper form — and who have no trouble with self-motivation — can go straight to the workouts, posted free online every day.

The regimens are short and brutal, replacing ordinary weight lifting and steady-state aerobic training with mixed-up, amped-up, double-espresso workouts that leave you reeling — and quickly begin melting fat, building muscle, increasing flexibility and giving you measurable increases in both aerobic capacity and strength.

CrossFit takes basic, functional-fitness exercises — squats, push-ups, pull-ups, dips, dead-lifts, medicine ball throws and more — emphasizes full range of motion (i.e. on a squat, lowering your rear-end to within a foot of the ground, then fully straightening your legs as you explode to a standing position), and adds short bursts of cardio. Then it throws them into a blender and flips the switch to "purée."

The mix, different day to day, blasts every muscle in your body while providing adequate recovery time for growth. The fast pace provides metabolic benefits that have been supported by at least two small studies.

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CrossFit success stories are legion. Petranek says that two months of doing only the three-days-on/one-day-off "Workouts of the Day" (WODs) regimen raised his maximum pull-up count from 15 to 42 and dropped his 5K run time from 23:50 to 21 flat.

"And the only running I did the whole time were the quarter-mile runs in the WODs," he says.

Ed Korb, 34, a loan broker from Tustin, says four months of CrossFit dropped his 5K time by 3 minutes, 29 seconds while it raised his body weight from 150 to 164 — "all muscle," he says.

Monrovia trainer Eric LeClair, 28, who started CrossFit in 2004 and began teaching it last year, gained 14 pounds and got faster in all his running events, including four minutes in the Camp Pendleton 10K Mud Run last year.

In my class, every one of Petranek's clients — triathletes, runners, tennis players and those just out for general fitness — said CrossFit had helped them lose fat, add muscle and get significantly faster and fatigue-resistant on less time.

The regimen also apparently works for world-class athletes. Olympic skier Jonna Mendes credits her recovery from a poor 2004 season to CrossFit.

Ultimate Fighting world champion Chuck "The Iceman" Liddell has been undefeated since he added CrossFit to his training regimen two years ago. "Chuck dreads CrossFit because it's the hardest part of his workout," says his trainer John Hackelman, who forced it on him, "but it has raised his all-body fitness levels so high that no one can stay with him."

That was exactly what Greg Glassman, 49, had in mind when he developed CrossFit at several L.A.-area Gold's Gyms in the 1980s. A former high school gymnast with a manic, fact-spewing speaking style and a pronounced limp from an old rings injury, Glassman would experiment with new exercises in order to give his police and firefighter clientele an edge.

When he spiced up their weight-lifting routines with gymnastics moves such as handstands and ring push-ups, he noticed pronounced gains in strength, flexibility and overall function and coordination. Then he added all-body fitness exercises like deep squat thrusts and medicine ball throws, and finally — thinking that running was the most natural aerobic exercise — added intervals. The fitness levels ramped up even more.

CrossFit and its three principles — functionality, intensity and variety — were born.

"It became clear that a single, blended workout of gymnastics, lifting and aerobics, done at an all-out pace, generated better all-round fitness than training each discipline separately on alternate days," says Glassman. "Segmented' trainers can't keep up with us on our workouts. CrossFitters may not be as strong as a pure lifter, or as fast as a pure runner, but we're better than them in everything else. And we can do more real-life stuff."

That message began to resonate with SWAT team members, Navy Seals and police. In 1995, hired to train the Santa Cruz Police Department, Glassman moved north, opened a gym, and developed more exercise routines.

In 2000, he started getting attention from the fitness world at large when he launched a website and began posting his various WODs. He gave them female names, such as "Helen," "Fran," and "Cindy," because they reminded him of hurricanes.

Glassman's theory of blended, all-out workouts gained some academic validity from a 1996 study published in *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise* by Izumi Tabata of Japan's National Institute of Fitness and Sports. It showed that 20-second, all-out bursts of intermittent high-intensity training with little rest in between, similar in style to CrossFit, caused "significant" rises in both aerobic and anaerobic (strength) capacity.

"We already knew CrossFit was already doing that, but now thanks to Tabata we knew why metabolically," said Glassman. "The eggheads were pleased."

He's prouder of the pat on the back he got last summer from the Canadian Infantry School in Gaagetown, New Brunswick, which conducted a seven-week trial of CrossFit versus its own rigorous Canadian Fitness Manual training plan. The results: CrossFit scored higher in every fitness category and was ranked more enjoyable by most of the 110 officer candidates tested.

"They found it challenging and pertinent to what we do in the military and enjoyed the competitive aspects," said test organizer Captain J.T. Williams.

He admitted, however, that a minority did not enjoy CrossFit's intensity or find its competitive aspects motivating. That was no surprise to Glassman, who says that 80%



of the people who sign up for classes at his gym don't stick with it.

"It's too hard for them; many don't get turned on by competing — with others or themselves," he says. "And some people just don't like working out so hard that they might puke" — an involuntary reaction to the lactic acid that floods into the bloodstream with anaerobic workouts.

The irreverent Glassman celebrates the discomfort his workout can engender by selling a popular T-shirt featuring CrossFit's cartoon mascot, Pukie, a deranged clown spewing a stream of green bile.

On my first day, after I finished Helen (three rounds of 21 kettle bell swings, 12 pull-ups, and a quarter-mile run), I was so exhausted that I had to lie down in my car for half an hour. And that was with a time of 17 minutes, 35 seconds — a minute behind the pregnant woman and more than double the Helen world record of 7:35, set by a Santa Cruz police officer.

Fortunately, your body gets somewhat used to and even energized by this stress, which Glassman says is "natural because it's the way we all played as kids."

Over the next two months of doing CrossFit three days a week, I cut three minutes off my Helen, saw gains in nearly all strength categories, and could ride a bike uphill noticeably faster than ever before.

And although I haven't soiled my tank top yet, I wear my Pukie shirt with pride. After you make it through a couple CrossFit workouts — tossing your cookies or not — you feel like you've earned it.

*

Andy Petranek can be reached at <http://www.petranekfitness.com> . For other trainers, go to <http://www.crossfit.com> .

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