

### Get Fit or Die Trying

The world's hottest fitness trend can put you in the hospital. So why are so many people doing it?

by Larry Gallagher

"Halfway there!" shouts Adrian Bozman, my trainer at the San Francisco branch of CrossFit. I hate him deeply. In a makeshift tent that looks like it was put together by drunken Uzbeks with a welding torch and a pile of stolen scrap metal, I'm well into a frantic regimen of dead lifts (lifting a weighted barbell from the ground to your waist) and burpees (a lethal combination of push-ups, squat-thrusts, and jumps that still strikes fear in the hearts of former high school athletes) performed in rapid succession with very little rest. Dead lift, dead lift, dead lift; burpee, burpee, burpee. All around me, 14 other men and women are suffering through the same intense routine to a soundtrack of arena rock that was shitty in the '80s and hasn't gotten any better. Just six minutes in, and I'm wanting to die.

This crappy tent isn't exactly the sort of place where you would expect to find one of the world's fastest-growing fitness phenomena, but as I'm discovering, CrossFit is so ridiculously difficult that you would never expect it to have become so popular in the first place. Nevertheless, 450 CrossFit affiliates have popped up over the past six years from New York to Tokyo.

"Nine minutes!" shouts Bozman as my legs start to do the baby-deer wobble. I'm paired with Ben and Ananda, two beefy guys who each look like they could bench-press me one-handed. When it's their turn to do dead lifts, they add another 50 pounds of bumper plates.

"Push down through your heels!" they yell at each other, while I sneak a few seconds of rest. "Chest up! Straight back!"

"Time!" Bozman mercifully exclaims. Twelve minutes doesn't sound like that long, but when it's filled with burpees and dead lifts, it feels like hours. I'm doubled over, panting, watching my peers disappear into the San Francisco night. As they go I'm left wondering what team of therapists I'm going to have to hire to make it through my month of CrossFit.

Although I consider myself to be in decent shape, I have long avoided the modern gym, with its Gerbil-Tracks and Hamster-Masters, preferring instead a regimen of bike riding up and down the hills of San Francisco, plus enough ashtanga yoga to keep my 44-year-old ectomorphic frame in minimal working order.

CrossFit exercises, which consist of everything from clean-and-jerks to rope-climbing to shuttle runs performed in a series of high-speed circuits, would certainly be a departure. But the philosophy behind it — a workout that readies your body for virtually any physical activity and can be geared toward anyone from pro athletes to lanky writers — seemed intriguing. So I signed up for a month.

CrossFit founder Greg Glassman, 52, doesn't hold back in describing his creation: "It's revolutionary," he says, which seems odd given the old-school modalities we were going through every day — medicine ballthrowing, tire-flipping, sled-dragging. But to the extent that it is subverting the dominant paradigms of fitness, Glassman's claim might not be as hyperbolic as it sounds.

Glassman developed CrossFit while working as a personal trainer in Southern California, drawing on a lifetime of experimentation. An avid cyclist, weightlifter, and gymnast, he used to jokingly refer to himself as the "world's best athlete." Over the years he began to grow frustrated with the two ideals of American fitness: the near-anorectic Ironman type, on the one hand, and the narcissistic gym-rat musclehead on the other.

Instead, Glassman sought to redefine fitness in its broadest sense, to include not only cardiovascular endurance and brute strength, but flexibility, power, speed, coordination, agility, accuracy, and balance: the wide range of physical attributes that allowed our simian ancestors to navigate the jungles of prehistory successfully enough to pass their genes on to us.

Based on his own experience in athletics, Glassman began creating what he felt were the most optimal exercise routines: constantly varied, functional movements done at high intensity. Every day would bring an unannounced set of challenges — different Olympic lifts, dumbbell-swings, box-jumps, pull-ups or hangs — in any number of different combinations, done at full speed for up to approximately 20 minutes.

In 2001, when CrossFit mounted its first crude website, the phenomenon finally spread beyond Glassman's home gym. The grueling daily workouts posted on crossfit.com caught the attention of fitness freaks around the country, along with a growing cadre of law enforcement agencies, fire departments, professional athletes, and Navy SEALs who liked its tough-guy rigor.

It also inspired mountaineering legend Mark Twight to start Salt Lake Citybased Gym Jones, which takes Glassman's program one step further by customizing workouts for individual athletes' needs.

A typical CrossFit routine might consist of a 400-meter run, 50 squats, and 30 back extensions — repeated five times. Soon after the website was created, Glassman began licensing the name, and affiliates began sprouting up around the world. Glassman also began merchandising the brand, selling everything from CrossFit calendars to highlight videos to T-shirts and hats with slogans like MESS YOU UP and SMOKE YOU LIKE CHEAP CRACK.

But as CrossFit grew, criticism of the program mounted. For one thing, a handful of first-timers found themselves in the hospital with rhabdomyolysis, a potentially fatal condition that's caused when fibers from ruptured muscle tissue enter the bloodstream and poison the kidneys. While CrossFitters take a certain playful pride in the idea of leaving one's lunch on the mat (see mascot: "Pukie the Clown"), this was no laughing matter. As a preventive measure, Glassman published a few cautionary articles in his monthly e-magazine, *CrossFit Journal*, and warned affiliates to be careful about ramping up intensity too quickly. In the long run, he contends, this type of workout is actually the best prophylactic against the condition. "No experienced CrossFitter has had any rhabdo problems," he says.

Another charge that critics have lobbed at CrossFit is that it encourages bad exercise form, which could lead people to hurt themselves. "My only caution is the safety question," says Stirling Spencer, a personal trainer in San Francisco who is otherwise impressed with the CrossFit program. "These exercises can be complicated and take a lot of focus, especially when you start getting tired. They lend themselves to the possibility of injury."

"Nothing is perfectly safe, nor should it be," Glassman responds. "Making mistakes is an unavoidable, essential aspect of skills development." And when stacked against other popular physical endeavors, he says, the risks are even more negligible. "I don't know of a strength and conditioning program anywhere, CrossFit included, that has the injury rate of basketball, rugby, or soccer."

Perhaps a better barometer for just how safe CrossFit actually is, is the fact that some doctors actually endorse the program. Kevin Stone, an orthopedic surgeon at the San Francisco-based Stone Clinic, selectively recommends CrossFit to many of his patients, not only following an operation, but sometimes in lieu of it. "Many times, if we can help that patient get on a good training program, they can regain their range of motion, regain their strength, and they can avoid surgical debridement," he says.

The beauty of CrossFit — and one of the keys to its success — is that every workout can be scaled down to meet one's capabilities. Indeed, from my first night at San Francisco CrossFit, the coaches advised me on how to lower weights, reduce reps, and modify push-ups and pull-ups to keep me in the game — while still kicking my ass.

Each day our coaches hammered home how these basic movements, enlisting coordinated chains of muscles, were relevant in our lives. "This is how you get a case of wine up on top of your refrigerator," Kelly Starrett, 34, the founder and head coach at SFCF, would say. "This is how you get a box of xerox paper off the floor."

But it is the intensity that really sets CrossFit apart from other fitness programs. Surrounded on either end by warm-ups and stretching, the core of a CrossFit workout usually lasts between five and 20 minutes, and sometimes the only break you get is the one you steal to keep from passing out. Researchers such as Dr. Izumi Tabata, a Japanese sports science specialist, have found that alternating short bursts of exertion and rest significantly improves one's aerobic and anaerobic capacities. Dr. Stone has seen the same results in his patients. "People who adopted this program improved their performance at rates that we hadn't seen before."

Another convert is pro kayaker Brad Ludden, 27, who stumbled upon CrossFit four years ago. He had met with early success on the professional circuit (he was national champion at the age of 17), but by 21 he had already started to "sunset." A CrossFitting friend took him aside and issued him a warning. "He said, 'You're on a crash course. You're either going to kill yourself or injure yourself to the point of ending your career.'"

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Despite such testimonials, guys like Billy Polson, a personal trainer and founder of Diakadi Body in San Francisco, warn that CrossFit isn't for everyone. "I think it will definitely be for people who are really wanting to test who they are and what they're capable of," he says. "And from my experience, a lot of people are scared of that." Glassman thinks we have better things to be scared of. "As a culture we live in fear of cancer and heart disease, but what's driving people into nursing homes is the loss of functional capacity," he says. "The real risk is in not learning these movements."

A month after my CrossFit initiation, I'm still at it. Our challenge for today is to row 500 meters on a rowing machine for time, perform 27 shoulder press variations with a weighted barbell, then go back and beat our original time on the rower. Bozman suggests that it might be a good strategy to back off a little on the first row — then adds with a grin, "if you're a lame-ass."

I am not a lame-ass. After a month of this stuff, I've achieved my primary fitness goal: to not meet Uncle Rhabdo or Uncle Repetitive Stress Injury. But more than that, a rankling pain in my shoulder that I'd had before I started the program seems to have quieted down. My 10npush-up max went up to 25, and two pull-ups turned into nine. I'm quickly in the best all-around shape I've ever been in. The San Francisco hills seem flatter, and last week, for the first time in my life, I was able to do a handstand without touching the wall.

An even better metric by which to gauge my adaptation was the speed with which my middle-aged carcass was able to recuperate from a workout. By the end of my month of CrossFitting, I could go through the workout at pretty close to maximum exertion and not feel too punished the next day.

But the real transformation was in my mind. Somehow, in the course of a month, the bug bit me. I became hooked by many of the skills of which I had gotten a taste, especially the Olympic lifting, and grew curious about my limits. I can't promise how long it will hold my interest, but I was smitten enough to lay down \$150 to sign up for another month.

On the rowing machine I'm busting my ass to beat my time of 1:49 in the 500-meter row. By the time I'm halfway through, everyone else is finished with their routines, and one by one they gather around to cheer me on. "C'mon, pull!" shout my fellow CrossFitters. "Sit up straight! Pull long!" I dig deep and row harder. When the 500 meters are up, I look at my time: 1:46.