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Physical Culture

## Getting Fit, Even if It Kills You

By STEPHANIE COOPERMAN

WHILE many gymgoers complain that they might not survive a tough workout, Brian Anderson can speak from experience. For his first CrossFit session, he swung a 44-pound steel ball with a handle over his head and between his legs. The aim was to do 50 quick repetitions, rest and repeat. After 30 minutes, Mr. Anderson, a 38-year-old member of the special weapons and tactics team in the sheriff's office in Tacoma, Wash., left the gym with his muscles sapped and back pain so excruciating that he had to lie in the driveway to collect himself.

That night he went to the emergency room, where doctors told him he had rhabdomyolysis, which is caused when muscle fiber breaks down and is released into the bloodstream, poisoning the kidneys. He spent six days in intensive care.

Yet six months later Mr. Anderson, a former Army Ranger, was back in the gym, performing the very exercises that nearly killed him. "I see pushing my body to the point where the muscles destroy themselves as a huge benefit of CrossFit," he said.

In the last year this controversial exercise program has attracted a growing following of thousands nationwide, who log on to [CrossFit.com](http://CrossFit.com) for a daily workout, said its founder, Greg Glassman. Participants skip StairMasters and weight machines. Instead they do high-intensity workouts that mix gymnastics, track and field skills and bodybuilding, resting very little between movements.

The emphasis is on speed and weight hoisted, not technique. And the importance placed on quantifiable results has attracted hard-charging people like hedge fund managers, former Olympians and scientists. But some exercise experts are troubled by the lack of guidance for beginners, who may dive into stressful workouts as Mr. Anderson did. (He had not worked out regularly for two years.) "There's no way inexperienced people doing this are not going to hurt themselves," said Wayne Winnick, a sports medicine specialist in private practice in Manhattan, who also works for the New York City Marathon.

Other critics say that even fit people risk injury if they exercise strenuously and too quickly to give form its due, as CrossFit participants often do. For people who like to push the limits of fitness and strength - there are many police officers, firefighters and military personnel in the ranks of CrossFit athletes - the risks are worth it, because they consider it the most challenging workout around.

The short grueling sessions aren't for the weekend gym warrior. The three-days-on, one-day-rest schedule includes workouts like "Cindy": 20 minutes of as many repetitions as you can of 5 pull-ups, 10 push-ups, 15 squats. "Fight Gone Bad" entails rotating through five exercises, including throwing a 20-pound ball at a target 10 feet away. And only veteran CrossFit devotees even attempt, and few complete, "Murph," a timed mile run, 100 pull-ups, 200 push-ups, 300 squats and then a second mile run. (A weighted vest is optional.)

Mr. Glassman, CrossFit's founder, does not discount his regimen's risks, even to those who are in shape and take the time to warm up their bodies before a session.

"It can kill you," he said. "I've always been completely honest about that."

But CrossFitters revel in the challenge. A common axiom among practitioners is "I met Pukey," meaning they worked out so hard they vomited. Some even own T-shirts emblazoned with a clown, Pukey. CrossFit's other mascot is Uncle Rhabdo, another clown, whose kidneys have spilled onto the floor presumably due to rhabdomyolysis.

Mr. Glassman, 49, a former gymnast from Santa Cruz, Calif., walks with a slight limp because of a knee injury, and at 5-foot-7 and 185 pounds admits he should lose weight. He began developing CrossFit more than two decades ago, but he says that he spends so much time running the business now that he no longer regularly does the routines. At first his program was a hard sell to clients who weren't keen to climb ropes or grapple with gymnastic rings.

Then in 2001 he launched CrossFit.com and began publishing a monthly journal and holding seminars at his California gym. People from around the world have come to learn Mr. Glassman's techniques. Today CrossFit has more than 50 affiliates in 21 states and 5 countries, Mr. Glassman said. And CrossFit.com has 25,000 unique visitors a week, according to WebSideStory, a Web analytics company in Seattle.

Mr. Glassman's followers call him Coach and share a cultlike devotion to his theories.

"We are all drinking the Kool-Aid," said Eugene Allen, another Tacoma SWAT team member who introduced Mr. Anderson to CrossFit last summer. "It's hard not to catch Coach's enthusiasm."

Devotees say CrossFit has enabled them to challenge their bodies in ways they never thought possible. Eva Twardokens, 40, an Olympic alpine skier in the 1992 and 1994 Games, said years of CrossFit training have enabled her to bench-press 155 pounds, 20 more than she could when she was training for the Olympics.

Tariq Kassum, 31, a research analyst in New York, found both the workout community and the variety of difficult exercises he was looking for. Online, where some participants record their workout progress, people cheered him on as his upper-body strength increased. When he started CrossFit, Mr. Kassum was unable to do a handstand, but after a year with the program he can do push-ups from that position. CrossFit exercises can be made more or less intense based on a person's abilities, but the workouts are the same for everyone, from marines to senior citizens. And some critics say that is a big part of what's wrong.

"My concern is that one cookie-cutter program doesn't apply to everyone," said Fabio Comana, an exercise physiologist at the American Council on Exercise. He said people in their 60's who have osteoporosis, for example, may not be able to do an overhead press, pushing a barbell over one's head.

CrossFit enthusiasts are also criticized for being cavalier about the injuries they sustain, including chronic soreness, pulled muscles and even some separated shoulders. Norma Loehr, 37, a vice president for a financial services company in New York, was sidelined for a week after she strained her back doing "Three Bars of Death," 10 sets of 3 lifts using barbells that weigh up to one and a half times as much as the person using them. She realized the barbells were too heavy, but she didn't want to waste the seconds it would have taken to change plates.

Mr. Glassman said that he has never been sued by an injured client and that paramedics have never had to treat one of his clients in his gym. But he acknowledged that as many as six CrossFit participants have suffered rhabdomyolysis, which often sets in more than a day after excessive exercise.

After they complete the workout of the day, hundreds of people post their times and the amount they have lifted on the Web site, making CrossFit a competitive online sport.

"When I first started the program, I could barely do a pull-up, so I was embarrassed to post," Mr. Kassum said. "Now that I can do 20 or 30, I'm on there every day. People on there are animals."

Those people include Kelly Moore, a 42-year-old Wisconsin police dispatcher and former powerlifter who is 5 feet tall and 117 pounds and has eight-pack abs. Her self-reported statistics have become the stuff of legend on CrossFit.com, inspiring both praise ("Pull-ups with a broken hand? You rock!") and amazement that she beats most men on the site. ("I'll be chasing Kelly until I die. At this rate, literally.")

CrossFit has an especially large number of police, firefighter and military participants. Members of Navy Seals, Air Force Pararescue and Special Forces groups also do workouts. And though it is not recognized as an official military regimen, CrossFit has drawn the attention of people in charge of military preparation. Capt. Timothy Joyce teaches CrossFit to marines in the Fleet Support Division in Barstow, Calif. And Capt. J. T. Williams, the chief standards officer at the Canadian Infantry School, where officers are trained, helped run a six-week trial where half of the participants followed the school's fitness program and half did CrossFit workouts. He declared CrossFit "very effective."

In recent months a group of New York CrossFit athletes have tried unsuccessfully to find a home gym. Joshua Newman, the group's organizer, said gym managers expressed concerns that they took up too much space, or even that their fast and furious pull-ups would break the apparatus.

"They used too many pieces of equipment at one time, and we got a lot of complaints from trainers who didn't like being on the floor with them," said Eric Slayton, the owner of New York Underground Fitness, a Midtown gym that Crossfit New York called home for a few weeks. "They put too much emphasis on getting things done in a certain amount of time and not enough on form."

But for Mr. Glassman, dismissals of his extreme workouts merely help him weed out people he considers weak-willed. "If you find the notion of falling off the rings and breaking your neck so foreign to you, then we don't want you in our ranks," he said.