

The Truth About CrossFit by Chris Shugart

"Was I in the right place?" I asked myself for the second time that day.

The little street near Southern Methodist University in Dallas was an incongruous blend of old houses and new bars teeming with college kids. It was 9 p.m. and the sun had set, making it impossible for me to read the street numbers. Finally I pulled over next to a bar called *The Green Elephant* to look at my directions again.

And that's when I saw them, a handful of men and women lunging down a long corridor holding Olympic bars over their heads. A well-built young man held a timer and appeared to be either encouraging them or yelling at them.

I'd finally found CrossFit Dallas Central, one of 650 CrossFit affiliate gyms.

Later I learned that the athletes — which included members of the SMU lacrosse team — were performing what the owner of the facility called a "single-movement mindfuck." This group was on their 28th minute of overhead walking lunges, the only exercise in that day's workout. The record was 400 meters in 20 minutes flat. The sweat poured.

Earlier that day, at 6:45 a.m., I'd had the same experience, driving around an industrial-warehouse district in Plano looking for building numbers in the dark. That time, instead of lunging lacrosse players, I was clued in by a man running by my truck wearing a weighted vest. I followed.

Ripping the vest off, he walked through a door with me close behind. CrossFit Plano was small but well-equipped with the standard markers of the "CF" gym: bumper plates, Olympic bars, kettlebells, dumbbells, gymnastic rings, climbing ropes, tractor tires, bands, Concept II rowers, medicine balls, pull-up bars.



The runner dashed into the next room and began to do kippping pull-ups. I learned later he was doing "Murph": a one-mile run in a vest followed by 100 pull-ups, 200 push-ups, 300 body-weight squats, and another one-mile run, all done against the clock.

This "WOD," or Workout of the Day, was named after a Navy Lieutenant and CrossFit enthusiast killed in Afghanistan. Most other WODs are given girl names, like they used to do with hurricanes.

I was there to learn the truth about CrossFit, the training phenomenon dubbed "one of the fastest-growing fitness movements on the planet" by the Business News Network. Later, I'd do interviews with CF fans and critics, make phone calls, and read everything I could find online. But I'd start by driving to Dallas and doing CrossFit ... twice in one day.

This is what I learned. This, as I see it, is the truth about some of the most controversial aspects of CrossFit.

The Truth About CrossFit's Training Goals

"CrossFit is not a specialized fitness program, but a deliberate attempt to optimize physical competence in each of 10 recognized fitness domains," says founder Greg Glassman in the [Foundations document](#). Those domains are: cardiovascular and respiratory endurance, stamina, strength, flexibility, power, speed, coordination, agility, balance, and accuracy.

CrossFit coaches like to point out that even champions in certain sports have huge gaps in their fitness, as defined by the above 10 domains. Ironman competitors score high in some areas, low in others. The marathoner dominates cardio endurance but he isn't strong. The powerlifter is strong, but often has very low endurance and can't do a single pull-up.

If your goal is to specialize and compete in one sport, then CrossFit isn't for you. Instead, the goal of the CrossFitter is to become "competent" in all 10 domains. He may never be a top gymnast but he will develop great body control. He may never win a marathon, but he can enter a 5K without training for it and finish near the top.

Troy Dodson, owner of CrossFit Plano, says that for the CrossFitter, fitness *itself* is the sport. Indeed, CrossFit draws a lot of ex-athletes, and the CrossFit [Games](#) are growing in popularity and pulling big-time sponsors. If it sticks, CrossFit competition will join a distinguished list of training methods that eventually became competitive sports, including Olympic lifting, powerlifting, and strongman.

The CF goal of overall fitness, "functional" strength, and all-around preparedness has attracted many law-enforcement agencies, military and firefighting units, and martial artists who like the "train for the unknown and unknowable" philosophy.



According to the CrossFit [website](#), "Our specialty is not specializing. Combat, survival, many sports, and life reward this kind of fitness and, on average, punish the specialist."

Experienced CrossFitters aren't the strongest athletes out there, but they're stronger than most. They're not the fastest either, but they're fast. Their claim to fame is their *completeness*.

And it's easy to see the appeal: Why be big if you're not functional? Why have great endurance if you have no strength and power? Why not be competent in all of those things?

Critics point out that being "competent" at everything makes you great at nothing. It's a valid criticism, but it doesn't bother the CrossFit community. They revel in their versatility and believe strongly that being skilled in every aspect of fitness makes them, as their T-shirts proclaim, "unfuckwithable."

The truth? If you're not competing in a specific sport that measures only a few athletic qualities, then why not become fully rounded? Why be the guy with the big bench who can't run up a flight of stairs? Why be the guy who can run 10 miles on the treadmill but who can't help someone move a couch?

Perhaps CrossFitter Richard Doughty summed it up best when he wrote on a CF forum, "Does CrossFit make sense for an NFL linebacker? No. Does an NFL linebacker's program make sense for regular people who want to be able to do everything well? No."

If you have a specific goal in your training — top-level competitive mountain biking, bodybuilding, a 600-pound deadlift — then CrossFit isn't for you. You need to specialize. If you want to be good, but not great, at a variety of athletic qualities, then CrossFit is a good option. And that's the truth.

The Truth About Greg Glassman

Greg Glassman is the founder of CrossFit. A former gymnast, the 49-year-old Glassman is credited with "creating" CrossFit in the 1980s, though the mix-and-match training system wasn't officially named

until much later. The first CrossFit gym was opened by Glassman in 1995 and the website was launched in 2001.

Glassman is a controversial figure, quick to make enemies. While he's revered by some in the CrossFit community (many of whom clamor to get their photos taken with him), he's also been called a "lunatic" by at least one former CF coach. "The major problem with CrossFit is Glassman himself. His personality, his ego ... he's now doing CrossFit more harm than good," said the former coach, who asked not to be identified by name because of ongoing friction.

Glassman is frequently confrontational to those who question his protocols. A couple of years back, TC wrote the following snarky lines in one of his [Atomic Dog](#) columns:

"...and screw *Crossfit* and their like. What, you have so little imagination that you need a website for housewives and pampered stockbrokers to give you your daily, completely arbitrary workout?

Friday's workout:

Run 400 meters

Do 20 push-ups

Dance like a cast member of the Broadway musical Cats for 15 minutes

That's a workout! You're all *winners!*

Jesus!"

In retaliation, Glassman publically challenged to a \$10,000 competition against a female CrossFit athlete. When he received no reply, he called [TC](#) a "T-Nation clown."

Oddly, he didn't challenge TC *himself*. Perhaps this is because Glassman is admittedly overweight and no longer does CrossFit WODs, according to a 2005 [New York Times article](#). Sure enough, photos of Glassman show a man who looks out of shape.



In addition, when Glassman asked *Testosterone* contributor Dan John to defend CrossFit and Dan

refused, Glassman referred to him as a coward and cut ties. Still, Dan, who trained two years in the CrossFit style, is acknowledged by many CrossFitters for his contributions to the training philosophy.

One important aspect of CrossFit is the [Tabata method](#), a protocol that involves training the aerobic and anaerobic energy systems simultaneously, using short sets of all-out effort followed by even shorter rest periods. Dan is credited with introducing the Tabata method — first used in Japanese research, and later tested with elite athletes in a variety of sports — to regular gym rats looking for quick fat loss.

Despite the cutting of ties, most CrossFitters still give Dan a lot of credit for their training protocols. Dan, by the way, tells me that he's never made a penny from his CrossFit contributions.

Another example of Glassman's reportedly heavy-handed style: A master of "Google spanking," Glassman responded to a lawsuit filed by Makimba Mimms, a former Navy CrossFitter who claims he suffered permanent disability from a CrossFit workout, by posting a [video](#) of children doing the allegedly dangerous workout, which was sarcastically renamed "Makimba." (CrossFit and Glassman were not named as [defendants](#) in the suit; Mimms was ultimately awarded \$300,000 for his injuries.)

The truth about Glassman? He's a leader, an innovator, and, it seems, a man who's not easy to get along with.

For the record, *Testosterone* requested an interview with Glassman to get his side on these issues, but we were ultimately refused after Glassman read a list of our proposed questions.

The Truth About those Clowns

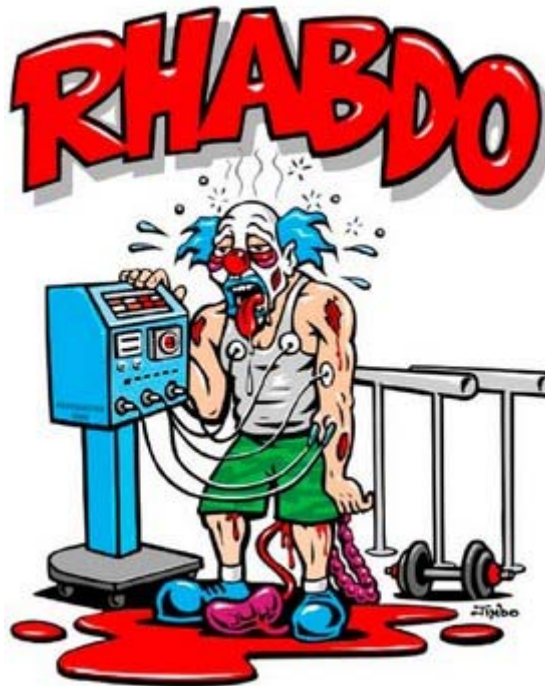
Hang around long enough in the CrossFit world and you'll no doubt hear about "Pukey the Clown" and "Uncle Rhabdo," mascots, of a sort, for CrossFit.

It goes like this: You puke during a CrossFit workout, you get an "I met Pukey" T-shirt featuring a clown losing his lunch. "Our goal isn't to make you throw up, of course," said Dodson, the Plano CrossFit coach, "but it happens sometimes. The clown T-shirt is just to lighten things up and let the person know they've pushed themselves hard."



Greg Glassman and the infamous Pukey T-shirt.

The walls of Dodson's facility are covered in photos, many of them showing people lying on the ground or on their hands and knees after a CrossFit workout. Throwing up, of course, doesn't lead to increased fitness in any domain, but the lightheartedness of Pukey is forgivable. Uncle Rhabdo, on the other hand, may not be.



Rhabdo, or rhabdomyolysis, is caused when muscle fiber breaks down, gets released into the bloodstream, and poisons the kidneys. On a CrossFit FAQ for affiliates, in a [section](#) titled "Ten Tips for

Successful Affiliation (AKA Our Business Plan)," tip number four reads:

"Don't kill anyone. Rhabdomyolysis is a potentially lethal threat to newcomers; be very careful. This is a very real and present danger. Avoiding 'rhabdo' should be the primary concern of first- and second-time workouts. Throwing [an] unknown newbie into an established group class is an invitation to rhabdo."

That's the official line, at least. Hardcore CrossFitters sometimes have a different opinion. On CrossFit's forums, those who claim to have developed rhabdo from standard WODs are called "pussies." Others claim that rhabdo is almost impossible to get from any type of training and is found more often in car-accident victims and the occasional ill-prepared marathon runner. One CrossFit critic has said that the warnings about rhabdo were more of a marketing gimmick to show how tough the workouts can be.

Whatever the case, it's not the potentially injurious nature inherent to all intense forms of athleticism that garners criticism; it's the sometimes flippant response by CrossFit, symbolized by the T-shirt with the image of a dying clown.

Glassman dismisses most of the "CrossFit is dangerous" criticisms with the macho posturing for which he's become known: "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 in that 2005 *New York Times* article.



A CrossFitter dresses as Pukey at a CrossFit event.

The truth about the clowns? Pukey is silly fun. Uncle Rhabdo is in poor taste, to say the least. Glassman? As charming as ever.

The Truth About CrossFit Women

It's said that CrossFit makes men small and women hot, and every female CrossFitter is a stunning example of female athleticism and sexuality.

We can't argue with the second half of that statement.



The Truth About CrossFit Being Anti-Bodybuilding and Anti-Powerlifting

Is CrossFit "anti-building" or "anti-powerlifting"? Yes ... and no. The biggest criticism CF has of bodybuilding is that bodybuilders aren't "functional."

Remember, CrossFit is anti-*specialization*. Bodybuilding and powerlifting are all about specialization. In that sense, CrossFit is also anti-endurance and anti-anything else that focuses too much on any one of the 10 domains of fitness. CrossFit advocates, however, do state that CF can be used to supplement sport-specific training for competitive athletes. In that sense, CrossFit functions as GPP, or General Physical Preparedness.

Whether someone chooses to specialize in hypertrophy or pure strength, or chooses to build some muscle while simultaneously chasing cardio endurance, flexibility, power, and other goals, is a matter of preference. The powerlifter chooses to chase one domain and would rather be able to do one heavy rep for a PR than 300 "air squats" for time. Controversy arises, however, when Glassman states that CrossFit leads to better hypertrophy than natural bodybuilding.

Specifically, he offers this [hierarchy](#) of effective mass-gaining strategies, ranked from most to least effective:

1. Bodybuilding on steroids
2. CrossFitting on steroids
3. CrossFitting without steroids
4. Bodybuilding without steroids

In other words, Glassman claims that natural CrossFitters have more muscle mass than natural

bodybuilders, based on this argument:

"The bodybuilding model is designed around, requires, steroids for significant hypertrophy. The neuroendocrine response of bodybuilding protocols is so blunted that without 'exogenous hormonal therapy' little happens. The CrossFit protocol is designed to elicit a substantial neuroendocrine wallop and hence packs an anabolic punch that puts on impressive amounts of muscle, though that is not our concern. Strength is. Natural bodybuilders (the natural ones that are not on steroids) never approach the mass that our athletes do. They don't come close."

When challenged, CrossFit likes to roll out their token bodybuilder, Josh Bunch.



But Bunch had used [traditional bodybuilding methods](#) for years before adopting CrossFit. He has also said, in interviews, that he modified CrossFit to fit his bodybuilding goals, adding "hypertrophy-inducing and muscle-shaping isolation exercises on top of core CrossFit programming."

Likewise, some of the most well-developed female CrossFitters had great bodies before they ever discovered CrossFit; some even competed in figure and bodybuilding pre-CrossFit.

The truth? In my research, the only CrossFitters I've seen who display the hypertrophy of a natural bodybuilder built their bodies with traditional bodybuilding techniques first, *then* adopted CrossFit.

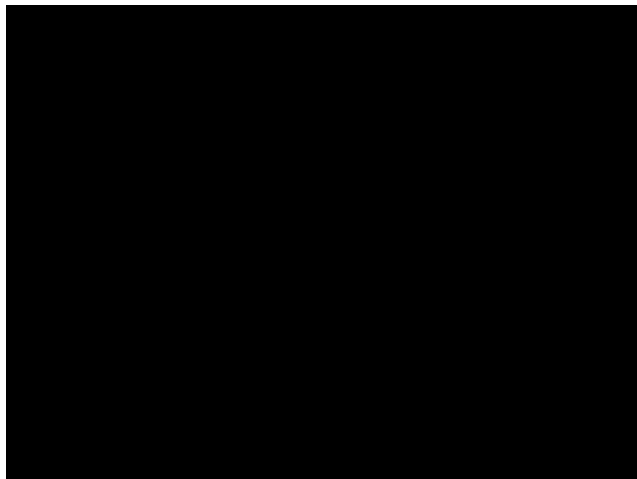
Yes, CrossFit can build muscle, especially in the newbie or even the experienced trainee who hasn't changed his program in years. And there are some impressive physiques to be seen in CrossFit gyms. But no one is ever going to win a bodybuilding contest, natural or otherwise, by using *only* CrossFit workouts.



The Truth About Cookie-Cutter Routines and Bad Programming

Talk to enough CrossFit coaches and you'll hear about how members of elite military units train right beside housewives and grandmas at CF gyms, all of them using the same workouts. For the most part, this is true.

CrossFitters talk a lot about "scalability." In other words, people in various stages of fitness can perform the same WOD but scale it to fit their ability level. Workouts are scaled by altering load, rest, and intensity. One person in a group class may be doing thrusters with a PVC pipe; another may be using a 135-pound barbell.



The CrossFit philosophy is that every athlete and every regular guy or gal needs to develop the same 10 fitness qualities. The seemingly random WODs do this. "We're asked for workouts for baseball, karate, swimming, dance, boxing, but they all get the same thing: CrossFit," Glassman wrote in a *CrossFit Journal* [article](#).

This is where you often see a disconnect between Glassman and owners of CF-affiliated gyms. The ones I spoke with are more open to specificity. In fact, many of them check out the online Workout of the Day but then go with their own workouts instead. They've drunk the Kool-Aid, but they choose their own flavor.

Strength and conditioning coaches often describe CrossFit's programming — or lack thereof — as senseless and random. Alwyn Cosgrove notes that this "all over the place" programming can be dangerous:

"A recent CrossFit workout was 30 reps of snatches with 135 pounds. A snatch is an explosive exercise designed to train power development. Thirty reps is endurance. You don't use an explosive exercise to train endurance; there are more effective and safer choices.

"Another one was 30 muscle-ups. And if you can't do muscle-ups, do 120 pull-ups and 120 dips. It's just random; it makes no sense. Two days later the program was five sets of five in the push jerk with max loads. That's not looking too healthy for the shoulder joint if you just did 120 dips 48 hours ago."

Mike Boyle adds, "I think high-rep Olympic lifting is dangerous. Be careful with CrossFit."

And here's Charles Poliquin: "If you try to do everything in your workout, you get nothing. CrossFit is different, and maybe even fun for some people, but it's not very effective. No athlete has ever gotten good training like that."

The WODs come straight from CF headquarters, but it's up to individual trainers to decide how they're used. Many of these trainers are officially certified by CrossFit, but that means less than it seems. For \$1,000, you can earn CrossFit's Level 1 certification in a single weekend course. (Level 2 costs \$500, and subsequent certifications cost \$250.) That includes lectures and hands-on demonstrations, but no written test.

No one argues that CrossFit workouts aren't challenging. They sure as hell are. The question is over the disconnect between "hard" and "smart." The truth is that every veteran strength coach I interviewed who's familiar with CF had serious reservations about its programs.

The Truth About the CrossFit "Cult"

CrossFit has been called the fitness equivalent of the Taliban. "CultFit" is a term of derision frequently used in heated forum discussions. And it's easy to compare the doe-eyed devotion to CrossFit to similarly disparaged "HIT Jedi" or members of "Pavel's Kettlebell Kult." In fact, more than one strength and conditioning coach I spoke with compared Glassman to Arthur Jones, which could be a compliment, a condemnation, or a bit of both.

Again, there's a disconnect here between CrossFitters and their charismatic leader. CrossFit affiliates are often more open-minded about other training styles and sport-specific goals. Glassman is more of a hardliner.



But is CrossFit a "cult?" This is subjective, but to my way of thinking CrossFit is no more a cult than Westside-style powerlifting, or training with kettlebells, or pursuing a sport like Brazilian jiu-jitsu. Sure, there's a sense that CrossFitters seem to enjoy being invested in a training system that's different from — and, in their eyes, vastly superior to — competing systems. But you can say that about lots of people you know who're serious about training.

That said, Glassman sometimes comes off as a classic cult leader, charismatic and single-minded and perhaps not 100 percent grounded in the same reality the rest of us perceive. But as long as he avoids putting cyanide in the Kool-Aid he serves his trainees, it's difficult to see a problem with that.

The Truth About the Kipping Pull-Up

Of all the controversial aspects of CrossFit, it's their pull-up variations that often cause the most outrage.

CF uses a kipping pull-up and chin-up. This is a pull-up initiated by a body swing and a hard pull to the chest. In other words, it's much different from strict pull-ups from a dead hang, which are often used by CrossFitters as warm-up exercises. Kipping pull-ups, with the momentum and body English, allow for higher reps.



Critics are quick to attack: "That's cheating! CrossFit encourages poor form!"

At least, that's what I said, when I considered myself one of those critics. But after learning how to do it

and applying it in a CF workout, I reject my own criticism. It's like comparing a traditional shoulder press to a push press. The latter isn't just a "cheat" version of the former. It's a different exercise, one that perhaps offers more carryover to real-life challenges.

Then there's the jumping pull-up.



Again, it seems easy, like a pull-up shamelessly cheated. But if you do it right, with an explosive drive to the bar, followed by an effort to actively push yourself *back down*, it's a whole new exercise.

Am I going to forgo the dead-hang pull-up in favor of these cool new variations I just learned? No way; I think the strict pull-up is better for hypertrophy. But the others are nice variations to keep in the toolbox, along with jump squats, push presses, and other explosive variations on traditional exercises.

The Truth About CrossFit and *300*

When the movie *300* hit the big screen, people marveled over the actors' physiques. Some credited CrossFit for these transformations, and sure enough, some CrossFit gyms quickly put up *300* movie posters. But did CrossFit really develop those Spartan bodies? Yes and no.

The cast was trained by Mark Twight, founder of Gym Jones. The workout videos released do resemble CrossFit, and Twight was, at one time, affiliated with CrossFit.

From there, the story gets complicated, with a lot of "he said, she said." But the gist seems to be this: CrossFit claims Twight stole their intellectual property, with a [training system](#) that seems as if it could have been cut-and-pasted from the CF playbook.

Twight says he'd already severed ties with CrossFit and had created his own training style by the time he worked with the *300* actors. In an [essay](#) on the Gym Jones site, Twight seems to address the controversy without mentioning any names:

"I learned and practiced several different types of training during the 15 years I earned my living as an athlete. I benefited from relationships with many mentors and coaches. I repay those teachers by not remaining a student. Instead I add their teachings to my own experience and knowledge to create my own way."

The truth here is muddled. The training styles are similar, but how do you copyright a training style that fully admits to being a mish-mash of other disciplines?

One pattern does become clear though: Where Glassman and CrossFit go, bad blood and broken ties follow.

The Whole Truth, Nothing But

Will CrossFit be a fad that fades within the next few years? Maybe. But right now it's going strong, with no shortage of new gym owners willing to pay \$1,000 for the annual affiliation fee. (That's on top of the \$1,000 for Level 1 certification, which is a prerequisite to becoming an affiliate in North America.)

Some of these affiliates are expansive, high-dollar facilities; others are simply garages in suburban neighborhoods. One CrossFit coach, after I promised him anonymity, said that he worries about the fast growth of CrossFit. "Let's just say that quality control is down," he told me.

But let's step back from the Internet pissing contests, politics, lawsuits, and internal drama just a moment and look at the big picture. Right now in America, more than 65 percent of the population is overweight or obese. Kids are dying from adult diseases largely brought on by the basic lack of movement. With those dreary facts in mind, it seems silly to get into bitter debates over any single style of exercising. Allegiances and preferences aside, I'm just glad to see people getting into a gym, whether it's Gold's, Curves, or a CrossFit gym in some city's warehouse district.

Still, I know as well as anyone that "can't we all just get along?" leaves everyone unsatisfied. We need closure.

Is CrossFit the only training system you'll ever need, as its founder and its most enthusiastic members claim? No. And most CrossFitters I've communicated with will acknowledge that. Is CrossFit a fun, challenging, effective training method? Yes ... but only if the benefits it offers are the ones you seek. As long as its goals match *your* goals, I recommend it.



Note: Special thanks to Troy at [The Pound](#); if you're in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, I highly recommend a visit. Also, thanks to Sam at [CrossFit Dallas Central](#).

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