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Addicted to CrossFit
by [Dana Thompson](#)

When 13-year-old Katherine Brouker suffered a stress fracture in her leg early last fall playing volleyball, both her orthopedist and physical therapist recommended a varied regimen of strength training to help heal her injury and prevent future ones. After researching a number of options, her parents settled on a CrossFit gym because it offered a facilitated strengthening program most closely aligned with the recommendations of Katherine's P.T. Now, three months later, CrossFit has become a family affair, with Katherine's 18-year-old brother Jake and both her parents also participating in CrossFit classes.

What exactly is CrossFit? It's a term that refers to a strength and conditioning program developed in 1995 in a garage by former high school gymnast Gregg Glassman and his ex-wife, Lauren. Relying heavily on the principles of gymnastics and weight training, CrossFit uses rings, bars, kettlebells, barbells, medicine balls and free weights for aerobic and anaerobic exercises in myriad ways to build strength and fitness. Indeed, most CrossFit gyms are still garage-like in feel and are a hybrid of weight room and gymnastics gym, chalk and mats included.

"Functional" fitness, using everyday life movements, is the key, according to CrossFit trainers. Lifting, squatting, pulling, pushing, bending, jumping, carrying and running are functional movements, and all are utilized in a typical CrossFit workout. CrossFit proponents maintain that true fitness isn't measured in how well a person performs a specific, repetitive activity — such as running, swimming or rowing — but rather it reflects how well a person "functions" while performing all the tasks they are presented with in life, from everyday activities to their chosen profession, hobbies and athletic pursuits.

From the CrossFit perspective, the difference in fitness requirements between a world-class athlete and a 75-year-old varies only by degree and intensity; one strives for competitive dominance, while the other really just requires functional competence. Each must be physically capable to handle the tasks at hand, both the expected and the unexpected, whether it's tackling the giant slalom or playing with a rambunctious grandchild. Because CrossFit workouts are an ever-changing combination of basic lifelike movements, each workout is highly scalable — meaning anyone, at any fitness level, can do them.

After observing the benefits to both her daughter, who is back playing volleyball, and her son, 51-year-old Kris Brouker recently decided to try CrossFit herself. A mother of three and a long-time runner, Brouker recently agreed to run Seattle's Rock 'n' Roll Marathon in June 2011 with her eldest daughter. "I was looking for more endurance and strength to help with my training," says Brouker. "I don't feel as winded when I'm running, and I like that it's something new."

This desire to shake things up and try something different is a large part of CrossFit's appeal,

and dedicated CrossFitters believe that routine is the enemy. Because the body quickly becomes efficient at performing repetitive tasks, the goal of each CrossFit workout is to offer different combinations of quick and intense functional strength and conditioning movements that challenge and confuse the body. Ideally, movements are done often and intensely enough to stress bone and muscle and push the cardiovascular system, but not so often that the body gets kicked into autopilot.

“We want to expose an athlete to as much as possible, as often as possible, using movements that you would see in actual life,” says Nadia Shatila, a CrossFit trainer and owner of CrossFit Belltown.

In CrossFit lingo, each workout is called a WOD, or Workout of the Day. For instance, one typical WOD might include a tapering cyclical sequence of 21, then 15, then 9 deadlifts, ring dips and kettlebell swings. A WOD called “Fran” is composed of “thrusters” (a squat moving into a barbell push press over the head), followed by pull-ups in a declining sequence of 21-15-9. Each day’s WOD is posted on a gym’s website so people can get a mental head start.

Class sizes vary depending on the gym; yet regardless of size, classes generally start with a group warm-up, followed by instruction on proper technique by CrossFit trainers. Then the class divides into groups based on ability to perform the WOD, which generally takes between five to 20 minutes, depending on that day’s agenda. Within each group, everyone goes at his or her own pace, competing against themselves and the clock. Onlookers rib and cheer those in the midst of the workout, and they get the same treatment when it’s their turn. For many, it’s this supportive and social atmosphere, as well as the variety CrossFit offers, that hooks them as much as the physical results.

Most proponents claim that their “obsession” is rooted in the tangible results. Across the board, enthusiasts say they feel stronger, fitter and quicker — which in itself is seductive.

“CrossFit is about how you feel, and not about the scale or about your body fat.” says Shatila. “After I started doing CrossFit my clothes fit in a different way, my posture got better, and I felt altogether more confident.”

Since its inception in 1995, CrossFit has rapidly become an international phenomenon, with the number of affiliated gyms growing, according to Wikipedia, from approximately 18 in 2005 to almost 1,700 worldwide in 2010. Seattle alone has at least a dozen full-fledged affiliated CrossFit gyms, while many traditional gyms and gymnastics facilities also offer CrossFit-type classes.

The Annual CrossFit Games — an open Olympic-type venue for all comers to compete in overall strength and fitness competitions — was inaugurated in 2007, and Charity Vale, a local CrossFit enthusiast, mother of three and owner of Snohomish CrossFit, took second place overall at the 2009 games. This year’s event, the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games, is scheduled for July 29–31 in Los Angeles and offers a \$1 million prize purse.

While variety is part of CrossFit’s appeal, another is clearly getting one’s proverbial backside kicked. People who are already athletes and consider themselves in good shape report that CrossFit workouts challenge them in new ways in a surprisingly short amount of time.

Shatila, a former national level gymnast, as well as a swimmer and soccer player, first tried CrossFit approximately five years ago at the age of 27, at a traditional gym where she was a member. A trainer there asked her to try out a CrossFit routine he had put together.

“He put me through a 20-minute workout that crushed my soul,” says Shatila. “Typically, I would do two to two and a half hours of cardio and weights, and I couldn’t understand how such a short workout could be so much harder. I’d never experienced anything like it.”

Brandi Exarhos, had a similar experience. A former gymnast, as well as a mother of two, eight-time marathoner and self-professed endurance junky, Exarhos considered herself pretty fit. A couple of years ago, she tried a CrossFit class while visiting friends in San Diego.

“The first workout lasted 10 minutes,” she says. “The next day I was so sore I couldn’t walk down the stairs. How is it possible that I’m this wrecked, I thought...and I’ve been hooked ever since.” Exarhos’ husband, Chris, is also now a certified CrossFit trainer, and their two daughters also attend classes.

For many CrossFit enthusiasts, it is this challenge, this competition with their own body combined with a humbling workout that gets them hooked and coming back for more.

For detractors, the intensity is one of the chief complaints about CrossFit. Many think the workouts are too intense, with the potential for injury or worse.

WODs are posted online, making it easy to do a workout at home without a trainer, possibly leading to the use of incorrect form which can lead to spinal or muscle injury. And because workouts are quick and intense, CrossFit may increase the risk of rhabdomyolysis, which is a rapid breakdown of skeletal muscle that can cause potentially life-threatening kidney failure. However, these risks are inherent in any intense strength-training program and are greater if people engage in intense workouts without proper training or supervision. This is one of the reasons a qualified trainer is important in CrossFit.

"Intensity is relative to a person's mental and physical capacity," says Jake Platt, a former martial arts practitioner, who is a CrossFit trainer and the owner of NWCrossFit, one of the largest CrossFit affiliates in the world, with three Puget Sound locations.

"I tell people, 'You need to crawl before you can walk, you need to walk before you can run, and you need to run before you can sprint,'" says Platt.

He acknowledges that there are risks with CrossFit and that close monitoring and safe form are essential. During a workout at his gyms, two or three certified CrossFit trainers are generally present to make sure each member uses correct form and body mechanics.

"You need to be very careful as a coach and not overdo it with people — it is very important that CrossFit is done safely and that not only do the trainers monitor clients, but that people self-monitor themselves as well," says Platt, who first tried CrossFit in 2006 and converted his first conventional gym in Green Lake to a CrossFit facility in 2007.

"But done properly, CrossFit offers pure results — you learn how to move really well and really strong, whether you're an elite athlete or someone just wanting to get fit."

While the image of CrossFit, with its heavy use of dead lifts and free weights, and its popularity among male military, firemen and police officers tends to be a male-dominated environment full of die-hard adrenaline addicts, it is, in fact, quite popular with women. Most gyms have roughly an equal number of male and female clients.

Over sixty percent of Platt's current clientele are women, who regularly tell Platt they feel stronger, more toned and faster, including 84-year-old grandmother Ruth Aoki.

"Ruth loves the support and the scaling of the (CrossFit) workouts, and realizes that the functional movements help her range of motion and balance so that she can get around safely," says her son Paul.

"CrossFit is an empowering experience for women," says Platt. "Because workouts are so much more efficient than a typical gym workout, women get amazing results in a much shorter period of time, which for busy soccer moms, is ideal. Plus feeling stronger is empowering." No wonder people get hooked.

Dana Thompson is a Bainbridge Island-based freelance writer and mother of two who knows that increasing her strength would be a good thing.

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