

A Newbie's Guide to Crossfit

By Amy Harrelson

Okay, so I'm not truly a "newbie" to Crossfit anymore, although on any given day I may feel like one again. I actually started Crossfit in October 2009; in the beginning attending two days a week in addition to cycling, short distance running routines and Pilates. My experience in fitness up until that point certainly didn't amount to much. After years of weight loss ups and downs, and feeling overwhelmed at the idea of going to a traditional gym, I started to work out at a weight loss center when I was thirty. It was about five months after I had given birth to my youngest daughter. I did end up losing about twenty-five pounds at the center, but then they closed and sold their membership to a nearby "ladies-only" gym.

I tried. I really did. I attended a boot camp, a few classes here and there. Weeks would go by without me gracing the place with my presence. It seemed that I needed that accountability factor to continue to succeed, and when I wasn't in a program of some kind, I faltered. Eventually that gym closed its doors, too. I knew I wanted to join another gym, but I wasn't sure what direction to go. I had been going to cycling and Pilates classes through Ingrid, a former instructor at my old gym, and she walked me next door to Crossfit one morning and showed me what went on in there. Though intimidating to someone at my fitness level, over the next few months I toyed with the idea that I, too, could be a Crossfitter, and I took the plunge.

I would love to say that I was immediately hooked and able to catch up with the other long-time Crossfitters in a few short weeks, but it was definitely not the case. I have often joked that I am a "remedial Crossfitter", but the truth is that one of the best things about Crossfit is that you do advance at your own pace. Thankfully, I have very patient trainers and supportive fellow Crossfitters at my affiliate that have always encouraged me.

In the past year, I have learned more about Olympic weightlifting and its terminology, endurance feats and fitness in general than I ever have before in my life. I've tried things I would not have had the courage, support or know-how to try on my own, and proved to myself that my body is a lot more capable than I have given it credit for in the past. Not that I've mastered everything—in some ways it feels like quite the opposite—but the way Crossfit works I never get bored with a routine, and I continue to learn new techniques and moves each week.

Recently my husband, Darrell, has begun doing Crossfit with me, and it has reminded me of how it felt in the very beginning. Humbling, for sure—yet strangely empowering at the same time. Seeing him learn the basic exercises in the warm up made me realize that I have accomplished a lot in the past year, but like witnessing an infant's growth over a year, improvement happened slowly enough I hadn't recognized the changes until I saw someone else beginning from square one.

Why Crossfit?

Each decade brings new trends and fads in the fitness and dieting industry (Jane Fonda aerobics, anyone?). Legwarmers aside, most fitness experts agree that it is important to build both strength and endurance—something the combination of both cardio conditioning and building lean muscle by lifting weights Crossfit provides. While other schools of thought lean towards more repetitions with lighter weights, in Crossfit one focuses on correct form to find his or her maximum lifting ability. Yet, it's definitely not all push presses and back squats in Crossfit as there is always a component of endurance and even gymnastics involved with the training.

Unlike other types of “box” gyms, the support network in Crossfit is like nothing else out there. In addition to having a trainer certified in Crossfit at the facility, there is a Crossfit family-of-sorts that is incredibly supportive and encouraging. Ask any Crossfitter if they prefer to do a WOD (Work Out of the Day) alone or with another person, and you’ll hear the same response—definitely with another person. While there’s the usual friendly competition during these work outs, everyone looks out for each other and shares in each other’s successes. It is this aspect that keeps me motivated to go each week. I once summed it up to a friend, “Crossfit makes me do things that I would never push myself to do on my own, and there’s somebody there that actually cares that I do them!”

So what exactly is Crossfit?

Type in “Crossfit” in any search engine, and you will see it described by both those who truly believe in the concept, as well as those who taut it as dangerous. Greg Glassman, who founded Crossfit in 1995, defines it on his website, www.crossfit.com, as a conditioning program for elite athletes and notes that several military organizations, fireman and law enforcement agencies use Crossfit as their physical training program. The website serves as the “official” answer place on all things Crossfit, and hosts a wealth of information on the various warm ups and exercises used, competitions known as Crossfit Games and even nutrition.

On a much more personal letter, almost all affiliates have their own websites that feature that gym’s individual programs and events. According to Wikipedia, there are over 1,700 Crossfit affiliates in 2010, and the number continues to grow. The best thing to do first is visit an affiliate’s website to see exactly what kind of training they offer. Many, like www.crossfitstcharles.com, where I attend, offer free demo classes as well as beginning programs like Boot Camps to introduce a beginner to the various exercises used in Crossfit. While a website can be a great place to explore the concepts of a particular Crossfit affiliate, experiencing it first-hand is the only way to begin to understand it.

The Crossfit Experience

All Crossfit sessions begin with a warm-up. There is a standard warm-up, which is designed to prepare the muscles for the WOD. A standard warm-up includes a combination of cardio, gymnastic moves such as ring dips and ring rows, and fitness basics like pull-ups, push ups, sit ups, squats and back extensions. Additional warm-ups beyond the standard ones used by the gym, involving other exercises may be performed, especially if the trainer wants to focus on a particular muscle group used in the WOD. At times the trainer will also include warm-up exercises specifically for an athlete who may need extra help in a specific muscle group or area.

The warm-ups generally include prescribed stretches. The types of stretches performed almost always center on mobility as a key component, usually with regard to the WOD. For example, if presses are involved in the strength or work out, stretches known as “shoulder work” will be a part of the warm-up. For myself, I feel this is where the trainers’ personal knowledge of the athlete makes Crossfit shine, as they are able to offer specific stretches to help weak areas that might plague the individual Crossfitter, such tight hamstrings or stiff, inflexible shoulders.

After warming up, there is a strength portion to the workout, where the focus is on a single exercise, usually weight lifting. The strength portion of the training is where athletes and their trainers can really delve into technique and form for moves like clean and jerks, back and front squats, presses, deadlifts and snatches. Proper supervision and knowledgeable trainers are crucial to an athlete’s success in weight lifting. Many times a simple cue from my trainer has not only corrected my form, but encourages a better brain/body connection for a particular move.

Sometimes the strength training involves doing sets “across”, which is doing a certain number of repetitions (reps) at the same weight. The trainer may have the athlete perform a specific number of reps, or have the athlete perform his personal number of reps before reaching muscle failure. Muscle failure is achieved when the body is unable to perform another rep without sacrificing form.

Another way of doing strength sets is to increase the weight gradually while decreasing the number of reps to get to the athlete’s maximum weight. Written in numeric form, like 5-5-5-3-3-1, the beginning weight of the set is generally determined by what a person’s previous maximum weight was the last time they performed that lift. For example, if the maximum weight the athlete was previously able to back squat was 110 pounds, she may start at 85 pounds and increase her weight by 5 pounds each set to attempt to reach 110. Most likely, the Crossfitter will be working on gaining strength, and therefore will try to set a new PR for her new maximum weight and figure the weight accordingly.

When the strength sets have been completed, it’s time for the WOD! While it is an understatement to say these vary, there are a few benchmark WODs, like “Fran” that are designed to measure a Crossfitter’s baseline. “The Girls” are benchmark WODs named after girls’ names, thought not a particular woman, and “The Heroes” are WODs named in honor of military personnel who have fallen in the line of duty. There’s nothing like hearing a hero’s story to motivate you to work a little harder! In beginning programs, the trainer may choose to scale down the WOD to the participant’s level so that the athlete is able to reasonably complete the WOD. To keep safety at the forefront, substitutions are sometimes necessary for a Crossfitter who may be nursing an injury or needs more work in a certain skill set. For example, I have done thrusters instead of clean and jerks because my form needed to improve before attempting to do them safely during a WOD.

Some WODs are for time, and consist of a set number of reps/distances to perform in as short of time as possible. For example, the “Helen” WOD consists of 3 rounds of a 400-meter run, 21-kettlebell swings and 12-pullups. There are also “As Many Rounds As Possible” WODs, known as AMRAP WODs. In an AMRAP WOD, the trainer gives a set amount of time, and the athlete completes as many rounds as possible in that time. “Cindy” consisting of rounds of 5 pull-ups, 10 push-ups and 15 squats in 20 minutes, is an example of an AMRAP WOD. A Ladder-type WOD increases the number of reps performed each minute. (i.e. one pull-up during the first minute, two pull-ups during the second minute, three during the third, etc.)

There is a saying in Crossfit, “Respect the white board!” and it holds true every time. Many times a WOD written on the board seems easy at first glance, but the strength and endurance needed to complete it can be a surprise. The first round of fifteen reps may not be so difficult, but by round seven most will find their bodies feeling the effects of giving it their maximum effort.

Am I Crossfit-Worthy?

“Forging Elite Fitness”, the Crossfit motto, was intimidating to me, a novice in fitness in her late thirties. For months after starting Crossfit, I wasn’t sure if I had the mindset of a “real” Crossfitter. I had a Crossfit t-shirt that hung in my closet several months before I’d wear it, because I worried someone would point out that I hadn’t been exactly an athlete during my first thirty plus years on the planet. In the beginning, I felt like a “wanna-be” athlete—someone who liked to talk the talk, but had no clue as to how to walk the walk. I’d see women lifting almost

twice what I could lift, and wondered what I was thinking, pretending to be some sort of weight lifter! Yet here I am, over a year later, still plugging away at it, while I've seen people at my gym come and go. While my times still aren't the fastest and my weights aren't as heavy as other Crossfitters, I haven't given up yet. Perseverance seems to be my greatest strength in the gym, and I believe I have time on my side. In times of self-doubt in my mind I still need to remind myself that I'm in the middle of a process. A heavy breathing, heart-pounding, grunting-out-loud process.

So if sweating profusely, breathing like an asthmatic and feeling physically spent right after the WOD is the desired effect, am I totally crazy for continuing? There are still occasional days when I truly think I've gotten myself in way over my head and want to quit. But that's when I set a new PR, or improve on a lift, and I know that Crossfit, for me, is the kick in the seat I need. Crossfit spills into the rest of my life, making me ever mindful to push forward to accomplish goals and achieve my personal best. Crossfit-as-inspiration may sound cliché', but to those who stick with it, I guarantee they will find the fitness experience anything but dull.