

THIS IS HARDCORE

CrossFit workouts are definitely not for the faint-hearted. In fact, according to founder Greg Glassman, it's no exaggeration to say they could even kill you

Words: John Shepherd. Photographs: XXXXX



Blood, sweat and tears. Far, far away from the world of shiny exercise machines with video screens, soft, clean towels, power showers and pampering, you'll find CrossFit - it's definitely not for the faint hearted

WORDS: JOHN SHEPHERD. PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES

In the 1980s 'going for the burn' was the workout phrase; with CrossFit it's more about 'going till you explode'. Two decades ago, former gymnast Glassman - known simply as 'coach' to his thousands of followers - began developing his exercise system. He put it together after studying elite athlete routines and adding to this what he describes as, 'a willingness, if not eagerness, to experiment, coupled with a total disregard for conventional wisdom.' 'Disregard for conventional wisdom' is a statement that will either bury you or turn you into a messiah. And it seems that Glassman and CrossFit has converted many to become its disciples - men and women who want to push hard and enter into territory that few others would. CrossFit was designed to be an adjunct to other training, but it can be a sport in itself. 'Our programmes deliver a fitness that is by design broad, general and inclusive. Our speciality is not specialising,' explains Glassman.

Its followers believe that CrossFit gets their bodies into the shape they could have only dreamt about. Although CrossFit is a fusion of numerous training modalities, such as weight training and gymnastics, the key underpinning factor is intensity. Worldwide CrossFitters tune in for their daily WOD (workout of the day), which is posted on www.crossfit.com. There are stories of people ending up in hospital after tackling

these. As the hyperbolic Glassman says by way of warning, 'It can kill you, I've always been completely honest about that.' But CrossFitters seem to revel in the pain and the potential danger. Their unofficial mascot is called 'Pukey' and we don't have to tell you why. When HFM checked out the site, we nearly brought our protein shake up, when we saw the workout that thousands would be tackling that day:

- Row 500m**
- Bench body weight x 30**
- Row 1000m**
- Bench body weight x 20**
- Row 2000m**
- Bench body weight x 10**

Rest? There's no rest and you just go for it. Complete the workout and while you're greeting Pukey, post your time on the site. WODs are set for 'everyone' but should obviously not be performed by 'everyone' and to be fair, CrossFit explains that the workouts can be adjusted to reflect an individual's level of ability.

Calling all fanatics

Despite the controversy we can see how CrossFit can be addictive - after all, indoor rowers are just as fanatical



about rowing usually the 2k distance and the 'ergonuts' post their 500m split times, power outputs and stroke rates ad nauseam on Concept2's website. But there is only just one technique for erging – yet with CrossFit there are a myriad and some are far from mainstream. Weight lifting is integral and the lifts are dynamic, such as the clean and jerk, snatch and the push-press. No easy lifts to learn safely. Kettlebells are also key CrossFit tools and you'll do exercises such as the 'Turkish get-up' and the 'farmer's walk' – exercises that will test your whole body. You've also got to be able to handle your body weight and there are plenty of squats, pull ups and push ups, one of the latter – the 'straight arm pull to inverted hang' – would test the skills of a monkey. This is probably why Glassman comments about not being wary about breaking your neck.

Although it's not officially endorsed by them, CrossFit has become very popular with the services. Poignantly the US CrossFit website has a number of 'hero' workouts named after servicemen and service women who died in the line of duty. It's estimated that the site gets over 25,000 unique visitors a week.

A specific diet is also an integral element of CrossFit. Protein consumption is emphasised over the other

macronutrients. You'll be advised to consume 30 per cent of your daily diet from protein sources (as opposed to the 10-15 per cent that is generally recommended). Slow-energy-releasing carbohydrates should form 40 per cent of your diet and predominantly monounsaturated (healthy) fats make up the other 30 per cent. Delving deeper into the CrossFit approach, it becomes quite apparent that their approach to eating is actually the 'sensible brother' to its slightly wilder exercise sibling. Healthy, natural foods should be eaten and highly processed and sugary (high-glycaemic) ones avoided. As it says on the site, 'In plain language, base your diet on garden vegetables, especially greens, lean meats, nuts

and seeds, little starch, and no sugar. That's about as simple as we can get.'

It's not so simple when it comes to CrossFit as a sport. Imagine Usain Bolt turning up at the Olympics and not knowing which sport he'd be competing in, let alone which sprint. The unknown is integral to CrossFit sport. The events are only made public at the last minute. There will be competitions for men and women and for teams. In 2008 the events were:

DAY 1

5 DEAD-LIFTS – 275lbs for men and 185lbs for women

10 BURPEES x 5 for time

THRUSTERS – 95lbs men, 65lbs women (this is a front squat, push press combo)

PULL-UPS 21,15, 9 reps for time

750m steep trail run

DAY 2

30 squat, clean and jerks for time – 155lbs men, 65lbs women)

The overall winners are decided on their time scores – the fastest is the winner. [EFM](#)

CROSSFIT PRINCIPLES ACCORDING TO GREG GLASSMAN

- 1 Gymnasts learn sports faster than other athletes.
- 2 Olympic lifters can apply more useful power to more activities than other athletes.
- 3 Power-lifters are stronger than other athletes.
- 4 Sprinters can match the cardiovascular performance of endurance athletes even at extended efforts.
- 5 Endurance athletes are woefully lacking in total physical capacity.
- 6 With high carb diets you either get fat or weak.
- 7 Bodybuilders can't punch, jump, run, or throw like athletes can.
- 8 Segmenting training efforts delivers a segmented capacity.
- 9 Optimising physical capacity requires training at unsustainable intensities.
- 10 The world's most successful athletes and coaches rely on exercise science the way 'deer hunters rely on the accordion'.

CROSSFIT IN THE UK

THERE ARE A NUMBER OF PEOPLE ORGANISING CROSSFIT IN THE UK. EFM SPOKE TO ANDREW STEMLER OF CROSSFIT LONDON

What advice have you got for anyone taking up CrossFit?

Firstly, you should start light, then build up your intensity. It's also crucial that you learn the major CrossFit moves and don't be tempted to substitute them for the silly isolation exercise, like biceps curls, that



you learn in most gyms. Build up your 'physical literacy'. If you cannot squat, press, dead-lift, do dips and pull ups, run, use kettlebells, row and Olympic lift, then you are, to all intents and purposes, physically illiterate.

What kind of people should do CrossFit?

People who realise that excellence at a particular sport is not necessarily fitness – in the event of crisis humans need to be able to call on a variety of skills.



How is CrossFit organised in the UK?

The governing body is CrossFit USA. All UK CrossFit organisations must affiliate; if the group near you is not listed on the CrossFit main site it's a rip off.

How are instructors trained in the UK?

The certification of instructors is wholly the responsibility of CrossFit USA. We run an 'i-course', which simply teaches all the basic moves in one day, but does not purport to be a CrossFit instructor



training course. However, it is great preparation for the real thing. I also organise additional teacher training sessions for people who help at the i-courses for continuing professional development. The better CrossFit instructors also spend time with champions in CrossFit disciplines. I train, for example, weekly (as a pupil) with elite weight-lifters and gymnasts.

Is there a GB CrossFit competition?

Not at present, but there was a qualifier from Ireland



in April for the main games in the USA.

Do you post your own WOD?

Yes, at <http://cflondon.blogspot.com>

What do you think of the comments that CrossFit is dangerous?

These are made by a few people who haven't seen it or done it and are probably too weak, frightened, unskilled and insecure to have a go. All of the moves are from recognised sports. The issue of intensity worries some,



especially those who are not up-to-date with the current research and literature.

Can CrossFit be too intense?

Yes, there have been some cases where people have pushed themselves too far, too soon and have subjected themselves to exertional rhabdomyolysis (a condition associated with pushing too hard and breaking down too much muscle tissue that enters the bloodstream). However, this does not only occur in our sport, it has been known to happen in some basic army



training regimes and some marathon runners have suffered too. It's common sense – if you had not run before then you would not make your first session a marathon.

How many people get involved in your classes and what do you do?

I'm mainly a personal trainer, so my PT clients follow CrossFit. We also have a pool of about 25 people who show up at our open session. We train in small groups of three to seven and in larger groups



of 20, but they're new people on the i-course.

Who's a typical CrossFitter in the UK?

A real broad cross-section. I'm 48 and a former estate agent, but there are bodyguards, martial artists, marines, housewives, trainee osteopaths, an art director, several public figures, loads of merchant bankers and first responders. The oldest person on our courses has been 62.

• Contact Andrew Stemler at: www.stemlerfit.com