

SERIOUS FITNESS: A BALANCED APPROACH

Neal Thompson, Owner and Chief Instructor of CrossFit Boston

Neal Thompson is the owner and Chief Instructor at CrossFit Boston, one of the original CrossFit affiliates in the country. Neal is certified as a USA Weightlifting Club Coach and has CrossFit Level III certification. He began strength and power training by lifting weights as a wrestler in high school. In college, Neal was Captain of the Division I-AA Bucknell University football team. Neal has combined his love for athletics and an entrepreneurial nature to create the most serious gym in the Boston area. Inspired by his example, several other area gyms have adopted the CrossFit training model.



Mark Connell: What is it that makes a gym serious? What makes CrossFit special?

Neal Thompson: **CrossFit** is all about functional fitness. Fostering the ability in your body to accomplish any task it's presented. The **CrossFit** method is to have no routine. The WOD (Workout of the Day) is a constantly varied set of physical challenges that combine to produce athletes ready to handle any task thrown at them.

Take a look at the WOD on the **CrossFit Boston** web site (or on any **CrossFit** affiliate) and you'll see the variation in what we do.

CrossFit trains two complementary skill areas and adds a third element of high-intensity metabolic conditioning. The skills are Olympic weightlifting and gymnastics. Training the Olympic lifts (snatch, clean & jerk, and also the squat and deadlift) is an unrivaled program to develop explosive power, quickness and strength. The problem is that the Olympic lifts are complicated and require proper teaching, otherwise they can be dangerous. That is why they are neglected at commercial gyms.

Gymnastics is the second skill focus. It broadly includes any body weight exercises, such as pull-ups, dips, squats, jumps, lunges, pushups, and various presses to handstands. The only equipment used is pull-up bars and rings. The key is that these exercises improve the body's strength-to-weight ratio. Commercial gyms gloss over these exercises because they are hard.

Both Olympic lifting and gymnastics are completely functional skill sets. They require the athlete to stabilize their body in space, which engages the core muscles of the trunk and integrates them with the muscles of the arms and legs.

Finally, the third element of **CrossFit** training is high intensity metabolic conditioning. A favorite combination is to combine 20 seconds of all out exercise followed by 10 seconds of rest, repeated over 8 sets. It's only 4 minutes. It sounds easy to those who haven't done it. But, your readers should just try doing push-ups or squats like that. By the way, your score is the **lowest** number of repetitions on any interval. We always keep score!

MC: What's your background? How did you get started on CrossFit and how did you come to start CrossFit Boston?

NT: I'm a big guy with a strength and power background from my football days. But, I also wrestled in school, so I have a fair amount of flexibility and agility. (By the way, both gymnasts and wrestlers tend to "get" the **CrossFit** program very quickly). I taught an outdoor bootcamp fitness program and I was training clients in a regular gym, but I felt something was missing.

A friend introduced me to **The CrossFit Journal**, which was published by a gym in Santa Cruz with just three affiliates, and I was hooked immediately. From looking at their web site (and **The CrossFit Journal**) I knew that this was a program that would help me achieve real fitness.

Within two weeks I had traveled to California and completed my Level I certification and within the year I had returned to complete Level II and Level III certification. Once I had mastered the skills and philosophy I opened the doors on **CrossFit Boston**.

MC: What was the hardest part of **CrossFit** for you? You were already a USA Weightlifting Club Coach so that part must have been easy.

NT: You're right. I had a leg up on many folks because I had over 15 years experience in lifting. For me, the most difficult part of the program was the gymnastics. There's a huge skill component that I needed to learn, plus a lot of it is strength-to-weight ratio, where absolute strength is less relevant.

For example, one of the signature **CrossFit** gymnastics moves is the "muscle-up". This involves starting from a dead hang on a set of gymnastics rings and doing a pull-up to get your shoulders up to the rings. Then you need to "muscle up" and get your shoulders above the rings and from there press your arms straight rising up from the dip position.

Pull ups are easy enough if you train them. And dips are also easy enough with training. But, linking the two is magically difficult. The transition beyond the end of a regular pull-up and before the start of a regular dip is very hard.

But, this is exactly the kind of skill that a fireman, a policeman, or a special forces operator needs

to succeed in a life or death situation. It also comes in handy for athletes as well.

MC: What role does conditioning play? What about endurance training in **CrossFit**? I'm primarily a runner—I ran three marathons last year—and I started **CrossFit** to build leg strength and work on upper body conditioning during my rest days from running.

NT: **CrossFit** sees endurance training as a very specialized extreme on the athletic spectrum. **CrossFit** is all about balancing strength, power, flexibility, coordination, balance agility, and cardiovascular/respiratory endurance. So we don't see marathon/endurance sport training as the epitome of fitness.

In fact, endurance training tends to break the body down. Marathon training can give you the ability to run aerobically for several hours, but it does not produce a balanced fitness. Even elite marathoners and triathletes typically have vertical jumps that are not that impressive compared to similar-sized athletes in other sports.

That said, a large part of the **CrossFit Boston** client base has a distance running background. It's an accessible sport, easy to train for and there are an abundance of races, which is a great combination. Runners start with a good aerobic metabolic base, so we can focus more on strength, skills and anaerobic conditioning.

MC: How do you determine what the workout of the day (WOD) will be? It seems like each **CrossFit** affiliate has a different program each day.

NT: That's exactly right. Each facility puts together a different WOD each day. The routine of **CrossFit** is to avoid routine. I'll generally work to provide a balance of complimentary functional movements and skills over the course of any week of two week period.

CrossFit has a set of about two dozen named workouts (most are named for girl's names beginning with the letters A-N, and then there are a handful of "Hero" workouts named for CrossFitters who have been killed in action during the War on Terror). Each WOD provides between 5-30 minutes of high intensity work.

Depending on your fitness level the workouts will take different amounts of time.

We measure performance by time or number of repetitions completed. The named workouts make it possible to look across the entire **CrossFit** community and see how you perform. It also allows you to track your personal fitness over the course of time.

A typical **CrossFit** class begins with our standard warm-up (3 rounds of stretches, squats, sit-ups, back extensions, pull-ups and dips), this is followed by a skill/strength session (which would generally focus on an Olympic lifting or gymnastics technique) and then finally the WOD (which is always a high intensity anaerobic challenge).

The workouts are scalable, so someone who can't complete the required WOD can substitute in lower weights or alternate exercises (eg, inverted rows or inclined rows for pull-ups).

MC: You mentioned the **CrossFit** community. What is it?

NT: **CrossFit** really is a community. Each affiliate is independently owned. The thing that unites us is a common commitment to train at the highest levels in the continually evolving **CrossFit** methods. The **CrossFit** community provides a tremendous wealth of expertise in the various training disciplines that we utilize.

The founders of **CrossFit**, Greg and Lauren Glassman, have developed a unique open source model for fitness training. Each month they publish **The CrossFit Journal**, which provides state of the art information on training and provides a forum where members of the **CrossFit** community can share expertise. A blog provides a complementary virtual community on a daily basis. In addition, the certification seminars and other training seminars provide an opportunity for face to face interaction.

Beyond the walls of the **CrossFit** affiliates, **CrossFit** methods have been adopted by numerous organizations that have the need for real world functional fitness. Many police and fire departments, military and special operations forces, and major athletic teams have adopted

CrossFit as their fitness and conditioning program. The US Marine Corps just announced their new conditioning program based on functional fitness, which was conceived utilizing **CrossFit** as the model.