

Crossfit for Athletes

Brett Klika

Cross Fit is the latest rage in fitness. Millions tune in to watch Cross-Fit athletes display herculean strength, endurance, and physical adaptability on ESPN. Thousands of Cross Fit gyms are springing up all over the world serving every demographic from beginning exercisers to professional athletes. While this exercise and training approach has exploded with popularity in recent years, it's random, undefined, and often outright dangerous training methods have drawn just as much criticism as fanaticism, particularly for competitive athletes.

The Cross-Fit "program" is based on combining a variety of movement and strength based disciplines including power lifting, gymnastics, martial arts, Olympic Lifting, kettlebells, and other forms of physical overload into a short, intense workout. The program design is intentionally non-specific and random with the argument that they want their participants to "be ready for any challenge" life or sports may throw their way. Each day, the goal is complete physical exhaustion either through maximal reps, maximal weight, maximal speed, or some combination of all three components during the involved exercises.

I'm am often asked what I think about Cross Fit for athletes. My answer? Let me illustrate. I watch an athlete get knocked around at high intensity day after day on the field, diamond, court, or other playing arena for an entire season. They come to me in various states of disarray; injured, immobile, overused, in pain, etc. They also have a bevy of specific physical skills they need to improve to heighten their performance. I also know as an educated professional that there are certain pre-dispositions for injury in their specific sport. I am familiar with protocols that are widely used to aid in prevention of these injuries. After analyzing all of the specific needs above, why would I support a non-specific program to "do hard stuff till you're really tired". In other words, a great way to an injury shortened athletic career is through a Cross-Fit style program.

Now, I'm not completely jumping on the anti Cross- Fit bandwagon. This brand has gotten thousands worldwide to get excited about exercise. They have created a brand and an exercise culture second to none. I will actually be putting out an article in support of this culture later this month. As in any arena, there are good practitioners and bad practitioners. When it comes to actual exercise protocols for athletes, however, I just can't agree with the "train wreck" approach. Actually I would challenge anyone to find an educated, experienced, sports performance specialist who would agree with this model as a long-term approach to athletic development.

It's important to note that Cross-Fit is not actually a program, it's a group exercise class. There is no central program design theory other than to use exercises involving large muscle groups for maximal reps, weight, and speed. There is no consideration for individual need, level, or circumstance. Good class instructors take time to teach technique, etc. Bad ones don't. The problem is, both get their certification from a weekend seminar. When a patron walks through the doors of a Cross-Fit, they don't know which one they are getting.

The above argument could be made for many other personal training certifications, and I agree, weekend certifications are not a good method of educating "professionals" and giving them license to do wreak whatever physical havoc they want to on a client. However, the Cross- Fit brand of max weight, reps, and speed can cause a lot of damage very quickly to an ill-suited participant.

Cross-Fit has gotten the attention of athletes because well, it's really hard. They figure if it's really hard, it must be good. However, after millions of dollars in research and hundreds of thousands of hours of application, our knowledge and understanding of athletic performance and injury prevention goes well beyond "doing a lot of hard stuff until you're tired". If Rocky were to come work with me, I'd have to tell

him we've moved on from punching beef cadavers in a meat locker. In the real world, better training gets better results.

Sports are dangerous. The inherent dangers of an unpredictable environment and unrelenting maximal physical output are what make athletic careers short. Why would you want to maximize these during training? Remember, you train more hours than you compete. If your training program focuses on things that shorten your career, you have a problem.

It comes down to physiological vs. biomechanical costs of training. Random "hard" programs can create a considerable physiological cost. That means they burn a lot of calories, fat, etc. While this can be good, these programs can also create a considerably high biomechanical and structural cost as well. That means repeated, unbalanced, excessive loads on joints, tendons, and ligaments. When these biomechanical costs are controlled through proper program design with varying intensities and volumes with balanced exercise selection, long term negative ramifications are minimized. When they aren't controlled, favoring an unrelenting increase in biomechanical cost in order to slightly increase physiological costs, it's a formula for injury.

Athletes need to train hard, but athletes that want successful long term careers need to train smart. Training hard and training smart don't have to be mutually exclusive. Before entering a Cross-Fit class, or any other exercise program for that matter, athletes should educate themselves as to what they are getting into from a programming and instructor experience and knowledge standpoint. They must consider their specific needs and assess if the program and instructor are going to accommodate those specific needs. We now know a lot more about training athletes than just "doing a lot of hard stuff".

Athletes need to do hard stuff, but the right hard stuff at the right time is what improves performance and decreases injury, giving way to a long, healthy, successful athletic career.

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