



Taking the strain – MF begins his gruelling CrossFit workout

SHOCK AND AWWE

Loved by the American armed forces, hardcore workout craze CrossFit aims to send your fitness through the roof. It's coming to the UK - but could it actually be too intense? ›

Words Drew Price Photography Pete Webb

3-2-1 GO!

screams the trainer. Within 30 seconds, every muscle in my body is burning and my lungs are screaming for air. Sweat stings my eyes, a loaded barbell rests on my shoulders – I've a long, long way to go. This is CrossFit and I am up to my neck in it.

CrossFit is the brainchild of Greg Glassman, a 50-year-old ex-gymnast from the US. It consists of a mixture of Olympic weightlifting, powerlifting, gymnastics, kettlebell moves and cardio, such as running and rowing. With so many 'high intensity' and 'functional' training programs around, it's easy to dismiss it as just another branded workout, but when you learn that it's used by US Marines, Navy SEALs, SWAT teams and other special forces, it starts to look a little more attractive. With CrossFit starting to take off in the UK, *MF* decided we needed to try it for ourselves.

Fitness world

The first CrossFit gym opened in 1995 but things really took off after the website launched in 2001. The system is simple: the first page of crossfit.com is a blog, at the top of which is the 'Workout of the Day' (WOD). This is usually circuit-based, with full-body exercises and often high numbers of reps. But there's also a competitive edge: CrossFitters post their times in the comments section, so resting as little as possible between sets is definitely encouraged.

The site also includes resources such as videos of the exercises, articles on training theory and a busy discussion forum. The WODs often have girls' names but are also named after fallen soldiers. 'Murph' is dedicated to a Navy SEAL named Michael Murphy, who was killed in action. Consisting of hundreds of pull-ups, press-ups and squats bookended by a pair of mile-long runs, it comes with the instruction to 'wear body armour if you have it'.

In WOD we trust

It's here that CrossFit departs from normal workout theory. If you come from a standard training background, the WODs can seem unusual or downright stupid. Similar sessions may be weeks apart and you often won't repeat a workout for months. There is no structured progression – you're simply encouraged to up the weight when you can, or do workouts faster. The exercise selection,

fast execution and random nature of the workouts reflect the underlying ideas of the system: 'Functional exercises, done at high intensity and constantly varying combinations.' Advocates of the system claim that training this way produces massive increases in general fitness levels, preparing the body for any eventuality.

Glassman – who's referred to by CrossFit devotees simply as 'Coach' – says the atmosphere of friendly competition is just as important as the workouts. 'The group element is key. It is simply one of the most effective elements of how we structure these workouts.' Mike Burgener, an elite US Olympic weightlifting coach and CrossFit's chief weightlifting instructor, agrees. 'It doesn't matter who it is, either my kids or a class of adults – when I have a group working as a team it's incredible.'

CrossFit followers are a close-knit

'Advocates of the system say it prepares the body for any eventuality'

bunch. Their attitude to normal chain gyms is hardline. They refer to them as 'Globo-gyms' – a nod to Ben Stiller's chrome-and-spandex wonderland from the movie *Dodgeball* – and suffer them begrudgingly until a CrossFit affiliate opens up close by. CrossFit gyms are affectionately known as 'boxes', and most are just that – stark spaces filled with the tools of the trade, such as kettlebells, gymnastic rings and the all-important pull-up bars. In fact, the only piece of machinery usually present is the unforgiving Concept 2 rower, traditionally used for lung-hammering four-minute bursts of exercise rather than a gentle cardio workout. CrossFitters even have their own mascot, Pukie The Clown, and joke about 'meeting Pukie' after a tough workout.

Fit to drop

Perhaps unsurprisingly, CrossFit has its detractors, and Coach Glassman in particular is the fitness community's



CrossFit workouts are so intense that the organisation's mascot is Pukie the Clown. Devotees joke about 'meeting Pukie' after a particularly tough session



answer to Marmite. CrossFit trainees are accused of lapping up the system without question, and they certainly don't take kindly to criticism. Alwyn Cosgrove, an Olympic coach and strength and conditioning expert, has experience of some CrossFitters taking their devotion too far. 'I was mentioned in passing in a broadcast knocking CrossFit and I've since been receiving hate mail. No one can accuse them of not being passionate, but I have a hard time taking them seriously as a professional organisation.'

There's also concern that the workouts are too tough for beginners, who leap straight in encouraged by the WOD format. 'I'm a big fan of CrossFit because the biggest issue with most people's training is that the intensity just isn't there,' says strength coach and Fitness First manager Dave Peterson, 'But most people progress too fast despite the coaching videos. They see the workouts and just copy it straight away. I have seen things in the gym that would make your eyes water. It's just not something that works well in a commercial gym setting.'

Even the results are called into question. As muscle guru Charles Poliquin puts it, 'CrossFit reminds me of a Hungarian proverb: "If you only have one ass, you can't sit on two horses." If you try to do everything in your workout, you get nothing.' Cosgrove has a different perspective: 'I'm a fan. For the weekend warrior I think there is definitely something there, although there's very little for a specialised athlete.'

However, this arguably misses the point. CrossFit isn't designed to make you brilliant at anything, but rather very

MEET FRAN

Considered a benchmark for overall fitness, 'Fran' has all the hallmarks of a classic CrossFit workout. It's made up of full-body exercises that you won't see elsewhere, it's done as fast as possible, it seems easy on paper and it'll absolutely wreck you when you try it for the first time.

1 Barbell Thrusters

'The Thruster is like a front squat teamed with an explosive overhead press,' says Phil. 'You squat down, then push the bar up as you stand. It trains you to be powerful and explosive.' Do 21 of these – CrossFit suggests using a 42kg bar – then move straight on to No2.



2 Kipping Pull-ups

'The CrossFit version of the classic pull-up uses the legs to build momentum,' says Phil. 'So you can do more of them faster.' It's still knacker, though. Essentially, you push your shoulders and chest forward, then do the pull-up as you swing back. Check out tinyurl.com/6dc6lh for a much more detailed breakdown of the move, then do 21 of them.

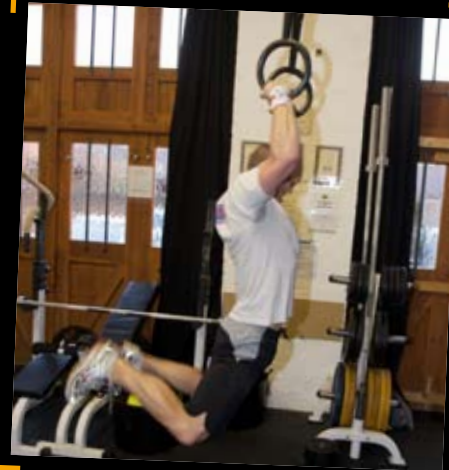
3 And repeat

After doing 21 reps of each exercise, go back and do 15 of each, and then do nine – with no rest. The aim is to get through the whole lot as fast as you can, preferably without puking. Seven minutes is fairly respectable once you've got the hang of both exercises. The CrossFit record is 1min 53sec.





MF attempts a 'muscle up' on the gymnastic rings, while CrossFit instructor Phil Oliver shows how it should be done (right)



good at everything. As the website puts it, 'Our speciality is not specialising. Combat, survival, many sports, and life reward this kind of fitness and, on average, punish the specialist.'

Classman is unapologetic. 'If you come to us with a four-minute mile, six months into it you are going to be 30 seconds slower but a whole hell of a lot fitter. Similarly, if you come to us with a 900lb [408kg] squat, in six months it's going to be 750lb [340kg] but you, too, will be much fitter. A four-minute mile and a 900lb squat are both clear and compelling evidence of a lack of balance in your program.'

Getting cross

Knowing the theory is one thing, but with CrossFit expanding in the UK, MF was keen to have a go. CrossFit has affiliated gyms up and down the country, from Motherwell to Worthing, but the newest is CrossFit Wyre Forest, near Birmingham, which opened in May 2008. It's owned and run by Phil Oliver, a 12-year veteran of personal training. Oliver, taking the role of my instructor for the day, shows me around the 'box' and carefully goes through my medical history and fitness levels. Smiling, he tells me the only rule of the gym: 'Don't puke in the chalk bucket!' I get the feeling he is only half joking.

Oliver discovered CrossFit 18 months ago and has since completely changed the way he trains his clients. 'When I saw

'Our speciality is not specialising. Many sports, and life, reward this kind of fitness'

the results I was getting, I booked myself on the certification course, then opened the gym. It's the best results I've ever had.'

The class I take is made up of seven people, a mixed group of men and women of all ages, all with a slight look of trepidation on their faces. After the official CrossFit warm-up involving bodyweight exercises – press-ups, squats, sit-ups and back extensions – we do the WOD called 'Fran' (see p59 for details). It's some of the hardest work I have ever done, and just knowing when to breathe is a challenge.

I struggle through the first circuit in seven minutes – fast enough to beat one of the stars of crossfit.com by some way, but only because he is wearing full fireman's kit and air tank and breathing through a respirator. As we lie on the floor, gasping for breath, Ryan, a member of my group, tells me, 'My friends think I'm crazy when I tell them what I've been >

doing. But the results are like nothing I have ever tried before. I love it!

Breaking it down

So is CrossFit for everyone? The site claims so, but the combination of tough workouts and competition mean things can go wrong. In 2005 a former naval technician, Makimba Mimms, was rushed into hospital with a life-threatening condition called rhabdomyolysis. He had trained so hard his muscle had broken down, leaking fibres into the bloodstream and causing his kidneys to fail. CrossFit – which hadn't certified Mimms' trainer and wasn't named as a defendant in the ensuing lawsuit – responded by nicknaming his workout 'the Makimba' and filming a group of children doing it with no ill effect. They also created a new mascot, Uncle Rhabdo, a clown connected to a life support machine with his guts hanging out.

'Makimba Mimms trained so hard his muscle fibre broke down'

However, they've since taken rhabdomyolysis more seriously, alerting adherents to its dangers via the CrossFit journal and reminding beginners to scale down the exercises and start slow. 'Check the beginners' guide on the site,' says Glassman, 'and start small by buying a pull-up bar and a little weight. But train hard.'

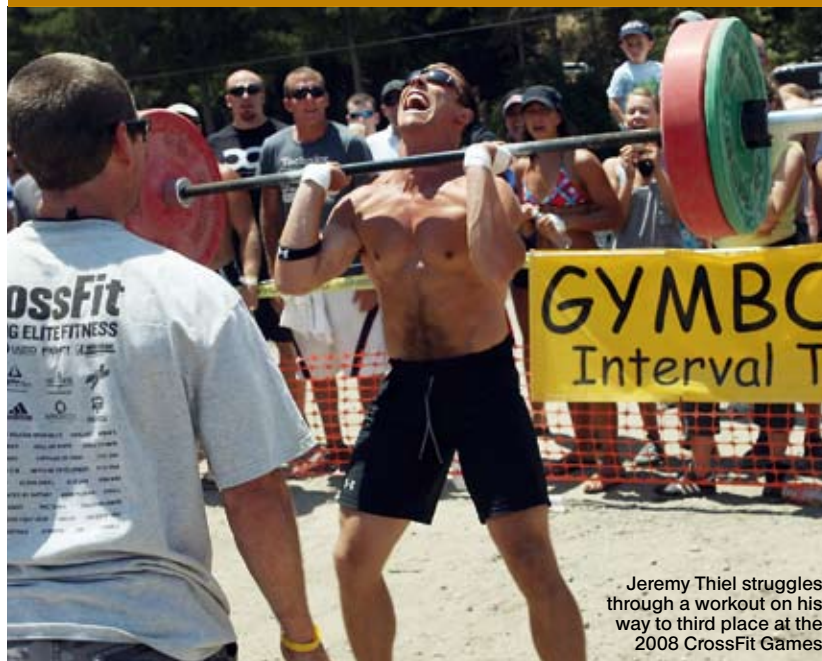
Throwing up

Fortunately quality coaching reduces risk, and even after nearly 100 pull-ups I still feel fresh enough to attempt 'Karen'. One of the simpler WODs, it involves quickly squatting down, then jumping up and throwing a 10kg medicine ball at a target three metres up. And then doing it again. One hundred and forty-nine times. Simple and brutal.

By the end my group are yelling at each other as they struggle through. 'I didn't encourage the way they egg each other on and push each other,' Oliver tells me. 'They just started doing it by themselves – but it works.' In fact, CrossFit seems to work all around, and it's fast growing in popularity. It might not be ideal for people who need high-level sport-specific fitness, but for anyone else it's an excellent way of getting, and staying, in shape. Would I train the CrossFit way exclusively? No. Would I go back to a CrossFit gym? Definitely. Just give me some time to recover first. ■

Thanks to crossfitwvreforest.com

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CROSSFIT



Jeremy Thiel struggles through a workout on his way to third place at the 2008 CrossFit Games

1980s

Greg Glassman, who first tried a workout similar to Fran (see p59) aged 16, starts coaching people in the ways of CrossFit in his gym.



1995

Glassman is hired to train the Santa Cruz police department. The first official CrossFit gym opens in Santa Cruz.



2001

Crossfit.com goes online. It starts with less than 50 comments a day but numbers quickly rocket, encouraged by Coach Glassman posting topics for discussion on 'rest days'. Recent titles include 'The War Within Islam' and 'Chronicling The Horror Of Saddam's Tyranny'.



2005

Website gymjones.com incurs the wrath of Glassman after posting videos of the cast of 300 working out with CrossFit-like exercises. 'Gym Jones is an excellent programme,' says Glassman, a former mentor of Gym Jones founder Mark Twight. 'I invented it.'



2007

The first CrossFit games take place in Aromas, California. Events include a trail run, the CrossFit Total (a combined score on the deadlift, squat and shoulder press), and a timed workout including 50 burpees and 25 deadlifts.



2008

Makimba Mimms, a former all-Navy wrestler, is awarded \$300,000 in damages after a CrossFit-like workout leaves him with permanent leg injuries. CrossFit is not named as a defendant. CrossFit posts his workout on CrossFit Kids.



To see a CrossFit workout in action, go to mensfitnessmagazine.co.uk/crossfit