

The CrossFit Community

An intense workout of can-do attitude

Matt Hannum, the owner of Crossfit Corsair in Medford.

TEXT BY KEITH GILLOGLY • PHOTOS BY DAVID GIBB

CrossFit gyms often have garage doors, which allow for more easily lugging equipment like kettlebells or barbells outside for a workout. They make for faster, easier egress when a whole class of athletes wants to charge into the day's run — they're also one of the features that make CrossFit gyms different, even unfamiliar and intimidating, at first.



A class underway at CrossFit Corsair where athletes are warming up with a round of burpees.

When Kelly Williams approached his first CrossFit gym in Medford, he lingered outside the garage doors looking for an office entrance or just somewhere to get some information. Feeling out of place, he started back toward his car before finally making his way inside amid the clamor of stereo music and a workout in progress. Williams saw gym members performing inverted handstand pushups against the wall — I could never do that, he reasoned. During his first CrossFit workout, he surprised himself by just how many he could do

after pushing himself. Six years later, Williams is a CrossFit coach with Rogue Valley CrossFit in Medford.

CrossFit's methodology

CrossFit has surged in popularity within the past decade — yet it can be fraught with misconceptions surrounding who should be doing CrossFit and how it's actually done.

CrossFit began gaining traction in the mid-2000s, says Matt Hannum, a trainer and owner of CrossFit Corsair in Medford. It boosted in popularity when the CrossFit Games, an international competition, premiered in 2007. Workouts focus on constantly varied, high intensity and functional movements that mimic everyday motions like jumping or picking up a weighted object, Hannum says. The result is a workout that is rigorous yet comprehensive in its combination of cardio-, strength- and endurance-building techniques.

Workouts incorporate simple and universal exercises, such as pushups or box jumps or running, and focus on completing them in timed sets or within a timed or defined limit. A CrossFit routine could comprise five pull-ups, 10 pushups and 15 air squats as one set, and the goal would be to perform as many sets as you can in 12 minutes. Such a continuous workout gets intense, but Williams says that it isn't intended to reduce you to muscular failure, where you're unable physically to continue. Trainers teach

breathing techniques and how to maintain a solid pace to avoid exhaustion within the first minutes. "It's not necessarily about breaking you down as much as it is pushing your limits," Hannum says.

Starting or switching to CrossFit

Most people begin CrossFit training because they want to see a change in themselves, Hannum says. That doesn't mean they aspire to a Hulk-like physique. Rather, they want to be

“You can do CrossFit. It doesn’t matter who you are.”

— Kelly Williams

stronger overall. Some are tired of their regular workout routine or find that it’s not getting results, especially if they don’t push themselves hard enough on their own.

Others know of CrossFit’s rigor and seek that challenge. Yet even novice gym goers opt for CrossFit, Williams says. At regular gyms, there is a learning curve to using machines and equipment properly, safely and effectively; it’s easy to feel outsmarted by the myriad moving parts and infinite settings of some overly complex exercise equipment. CrossFit workouts instead rely more on bodyweight exercises and simple tools like kettlebells and medicine balls. The “programming,” Williams says, for a safe, effective workout is already done for you, and workouts are highly structured.

CrossFit gyms focus closely on the training process. Small groups of two or three new athletes work separately with trainers in order to get acclimated to the new workout style and technique. Williams recalls new members feeling surprised by the level of attention paid to proper movements and weight adjustments. Such formative attention helps to ensure safety, and athletes aren’t permitted to increase any exercise’s weight load or difficulty unless they demonstrate good form, Hannum says.

While any sport carries injury risk — and Hannum admits CrossFit athletes often feel sore — coaching

A WORKOUT APPLICABLE TO ALL

Hannum quickly scoffs at the notion that you have to already be an elite athlete to start doing CrossFit. But Williams admits that he previously believed that CrossFit was mainly for Navy SEALs and college athletes. The misconception arises so readily, perhaps, because, after years of CrossFit, most participants look, well, in shape. “The most common CrossFit athlete is the person who’s the fittest they’ve ever been, and they’re 40 years old,” Williams says. “You can do CrossFit. It doesn’t matter who you are.”

CrossFit workouts are scaled and tailored to each person’s physical ability and body type. Those who are recovering from an injury or are overweight or not accustomed to cardio workouts, for example, will do the same workout as other athletes but with reduced weights or easier motions, Williams says. Beginners will typically use no added weight or much less weight during any sort of lift or thrust exercises. Such measures ensure that all participants receive an equally intense and effective workout regardless of fitness and experience level.



Kelly Williams, at left, coaching. Photos courtesy of Rogue Valley CrossFit in Medford.



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that instills proper technique from the start mitigates injuries. "I broke a bone in my body every single year I played high

school football," Hannum says. "I've been doing CrossFit for years, and I haven't gotten injured once."



Each gym is "tribal," Hannum describes, even familial. He adds that building personal relationships amid trainers and other members helps make the gym session itself akin to a recess with friends, instead of a chore that is attended after a long, tiring workday.

And what of newcomers feeling intimidated? "I think intimidation dissolves within the first five minutes you walk into a CrossFit gym," Hannum says.

A CrossFit community at each gym

Hannum estimates that CrossFit is actually more popular with women than with men. Membership at his gym is comprised of equal parts men and women, he says. He believes CrossFit has been so popular with women because it gets results, and also because it introduces some women to

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Athletes work on their squat mobility at CrossFit Corsair, coached by Matt Hannum, center and below.



exercises more traditionally done by men, which can be empowering. CrossFit athletes use barbells and perform Olympic lifts. They climb ropes and do pull-ups. It's an inspiring feeling, Williams says, to see athletes complete their first pull-up or achieve some other physical task they once believed to be impossible. "It is so empowering. It's so healthy for a person to figure out what they're capable of. It creates a level of purpose that you didn't know could be exercise," Williams says.

It's common for members of the same CrossFit gym to head out on a camping trip together or maybe get together for a barbecue. They might play on rec sports teams with each other, Williams says. Members don't just take classes together; they sweat, grunt and help motivate and drive each other through workouts, becoming more physically and mentally resolute together. As for

competitive spirit, you compete more with yourself than anyone else, Hannum says. ■

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