



# BLOOD SWEAT AND FEAR

STORY MATT ZWARTZ PHOTOGRAPHS ALISTAIR GUTHRIE

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*CrossFit is the fastest-growing sport on the planet. Teaming it with the Paleo diet for a PlayOffs competition at Les Mills may seem like a marriage made in heaven... or maybe hell.*

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MATT ZWARTZ

**L**et's get one thing straight from the start: I have no idea why I thought this would be a good story. I've never done a bungy, jumped out of a plane or been on an obstacle course. My idea of adventure sport is ordering a martini in the provinces. I am eminently unqualified to do 10 weeks of CrossFit, culminating in the PlayOffs competition held at CrossFit HPU (high-performance unit) at Les Mills on April 20. Yet, here I am. The rules are simple — I have to train a minimum of three times a week, I have to adhere to the Paleo diet as much as possible, and I'm not allowed to quit until it's over.

**WEEK ONE/** I start my journey by choosing my box, or cage, which is what CrossFit gyms are called. I'm going to train out of CrossFit HPU, which is based in Les Mills, as it's within crawling distance of home and where I've completed my introductory training. Now I'm here at 8am on a burning-hot Auckland Saturday morning with a large group of very fit-looking people, about to do competition training for the CrossFit Open, a worldwide competition with more than 120,000 participants.

We're here to do the workout of the day, or WOD: nine dead lifts, 12 hand-release press-ups, 15 box jumps. Technique has to be utterly strict — dead lifts must have locked arms, no bouncing; press-ups must have clear daylight under the hands; box jumps must land both feet fully on the box and clear the hips forward. The WOD is for as many sets as possible in 15 minutes, and done in pairs, with one judging the other for the movement standards.

I'm partnered with Janet, who goes first. She weighs 53kg and her bar is set at 50kg. She manages eight full sets in 15 minutes. Watching her, encouraging her to keep going, brings on an increasing sense of dread. Nothing prepares me for the reality of it. My bar is set at 70kg. The first set is over in just under two minutes, and already I'm hurting. The second set takes longer. By the third set I'm just gasping for oxygen, like that scene in *Total Recall* where the villain turns off the air. Fourth set, it's broken into increments to get through. Five reps, four. Six, six. Five, five, five. In my last set, I'm experiencing a kind of out-of-body surreality. I get through it on abstraction, and Janet yelling at me to carry on.

Looking around the cage afterwards, I realise it's totally destroyed. There are bars, weights, collars, boxes, chalk dust and bodies strewn everywhere. It's like a scene from some

kind of exercise apocalypse. "Welcome to CrossFit," Janet says, offering me her best high-five. It's hard to respond, from my position on all fours.

Incredibly, this is the fastest-growing sport on the planet. CrossFit was started by American Greg Glassman in 2000. In 2007, the first CrossFit games attracted 60 competitors and 150 spectators and had \$US500 prize money. In 2013, it will have 100 competitors selected from more than 120,000 worldwide, will be broadcast to a global audience by ESPN, and will offer \$US250,000 each to men and women in prizes.

Glassman's CrossFit Training Guide, a 115-page, open-source PDF bible for CrossFit trainers, says, "The CrossFit prescription is constantly varied, high-intensity, functional movement." Essentially, it's an amalgam of gymnastics, Olympic lifting and aerobic exercises such as skipping, running and rowing, all performed at vomit-inducing intensity. Many of the exercises are technically difficult and require high levels of skill.

"CrossFit is an effort system of training," says Gareth O'Donnell, one of the partners in CrossFit HPU and my coach for the next 10 weeks. "It has the science behind it, and that's really important."

Darren Ellis, who founded New Zealand's first box in 2007, almost agrees. "It's actually maths. Greg likes to make the distinction... Science is hypothesis, maths cannot be disproved, like one plus one equals two no matter what reality you're in. So what we're doing is just work, and work equals force times distance. Lift a weight, do it faster, over distance. Do a full squat rather than a half squat because that adds up to work. If you do more work over less time, then you've got power, and power is the ultimate expression of human movement. That's what we're doing, trying to create power output."

Less time is the reason WODs are always performed against the clock, which sits on the wall, red digits counting the pain up or down. It reminds me of the eye of Mordor. "The clock is the heart and soul of CrossFit," says O'Donnell. "Everyone hates that fucking thing."

**WEEK TWO/** O'Donnell takes a session on the Paleo diet. About 10 of us are there, all hoping it's going to help us gain muscle and free our stomach muscles from the tyranny of fat that enslaves them. It's a simple formula: eat like our Paleolithic ancestors. All processed carbohydrate and grains such as rice, oats or wheat are the enemy. Carbohydrates are to come

from fruit and vegetables. Anything containing sugar is out, especially alcohol. Animal proteins and fats are in, vegetable proteins out. In his book *The Paleo Solution*, American Robb Wolf says the criteria for proteins are, "It needs a face. It needs a soul. You need to kill it, and bring its essence into your being. Really." I've always despised vegetarians, so I'm OK with that.

"It's very common to get headaches and feel tired for the first few days," O'Donnell tells us. "After that, you will start to feel amazing." I leave with a sheaf of notes and the desire to yell "This is Sparta!" at everyone I see in the street.

By the end of the week, the training isn't getting any easier and I'm not feeling particularly fitter. I suspect the diet is making me feel a bit emo. On the upside, I hit a personal-best dead lift of 120kg.

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**WEEK THREE/** At the end of three weeks of my new monastic lifestyle, I hate CrossFit, and the Paleo diet. I have lost three kilos in 10 days, but I've been tired and sore all week. I talk to O'Donnell, who looks over my diet and exercise diary and tells me I am not eating anywhere near enough carbs for my output.

"Bro, you are eating the right amount of carbs for a 60kg woman. How are you finding the training?" I'm exhausted, I tell him. "You're looking skinny, which means you're also losing muscle. How much weight do you really want to lose? It's a sugar-free diet, not a carb-free diet." He puts me on two large servings of root vegetables every day. Things are looking up.

**WEEK FOUR/** Or they were, until I meet Nate. Like hurricanes, all the CrossFit workouts have their own names, such as Annie, Cindy and Fran. Nate is a workout that normal people simply cannot achieve. Handstand push-ups (I can't do handstands, so O'Donnell makes me do wall walks instead), rope climbs and kettle-bell swings. This 20-minute workout brings me closer to throwing up in a CrossFit class than anything before, and it's very close. After it, I start to feel despondent about my ability at life. Apparently, this kind of humiliation is common among newbies.

"My first workout just left me flat on the floor, and I thought, 'Holy crap,'" Ellis says. "Discovering a place where you are a student again of something you want to be good at... Let's face it. Being able to snatch 60 kilos of weight overhead, you're a frickin' ninja. Do a handstand push-up? That's some crazy shit."

O'Donnell says that what happened to him during his introduction to CrossFit was amazing. "The first time I did an overhead squat, my thumb and fingers went numb and I couldn't achieve the position. There was the shock/horror, I can't do something. I was like, 'Oh shit, I can't actually do this. I'm the guy who can do anything but I can't CrossFit train.'"

I'm comforted to hear that even O'Donnell, who can do 50 unbroken pull-ups, used to be like that. "It's a mental challenge," he says. "A lot of people don't like to fail."

**WEEK FIVE/** I have been doing some additional strength training. It works. I can now do 10 unbroken chin-ups, which is huge for me. My weight, which had dropped from 87.5kg to 83, has come back up to 85kg, which feels like my ideal weight. My emo inclinations are diminishing. I am possibly looking better in the mirror. Clearly that's relative, but I'm having to get all of my suits tailored as none of them fit me any more. My Asian tailor is very pleased about CrossFit. "Best customer," he beams at me every time I go into his shop. "You owe me \$500," I tell O'Donnell.

Jason Sawyer is coming at me like Brian Tamaki — if Tamaki was incredibly fit and pleasant to be around. Sawyer is the reigning masters champion of the Auckland CrossFit Games, New Zealand's premier competition. If ever there was an evangelist for CrossFit, he's it. His box, CrossFit Newmarket, opened in 2010. "CrossFit is just a flawless system. Flawless," he says, drinking water from a vodka bottle. Sawyer is 46 and looks like he stepped off a *Men's Health* cover.

"Most of us start because we want to get trim and muscular.



But over time, those aesthetic goals become secondary. Hey, I don't really care how I look, because I want to row 500 metres under one minute 40. I want to run the museum under four minutes and 50 seconds. I want to squat my bodyweight. The goals become very much performance-based goals, and as you strive to achieve those performances, your body becomes... aesthetically pleasing. I can always tell a CrossFit body on the beach. They're not your big bulky bodybuilder type. They're fluent and balanced."

Alex Porter of CrossFit Auckland, New Zealand's second box to open and the home of the Auckland Games, agrees. I tell him not one of the people I've interviewed for this story puts CrossFit's popularity down to results. "We don't do bodybuilding exercises. We haven't tied it in to how you look in the mirror. We're not concerned with that. We know that our system is superior in being able to deliver a physique that's functional and that's reaching towards your genetic potential. Everyone's got an athletic physique in them. The only way to get an athletic physique is to become an athlete and if you become an athlete you're going to look good naked. Great, OK, tick that box. We don't worry about it. It's not our goal."

"It's not about how big and ugly you are," O'Donnell tells me. "It's about how skilful you are and how much heart you've got for the game."

**WEEK SIX/** Looking around the cage from the corner I've collapsed in, I'm struck by the roughness of it compared with the manicured finish of Les Mills next door. Outside the cage, the walls are still covered in black exhaust condensate from when it was a car park. Inside the cage, there's chalk writing of WOD counts everywhere on the ground and chalk dust on the bars from the heavy lifts we've just been doing. This is not training for people who expect air conditioning, or machines with television screens and USB ports for their iPods. It's not the place for casual posing in front of the mirror. This is training as the army might have it, made hard on purpose, supported by all the cold and unsympathetic logic of modern science. "Owee, go get it!" O'Donnell often yells at the cage. "Leave nothing in the tank." My hands are threatening to bleed, I have bruises and rope burns and scrapes. In CrossFit,

these are small, personal badges of honour. I'm utterly ruined and I feel great.

One of the key factors that has helped drive the exponential growth of CrossFit is the sense of community and belonging you feel with the people around you. You have all just endured hell, but you've endured it together. This feeling is real, powerful and addictive.

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Porter: "You get to work out with a bunch of like-minded people that you can at times be competitive with. Support that with the camaraderie of a team sport, where everybody is enduring the same struggle and then overcoming it. At the end it's just celebrations. That's a fantastic feeling that's pretty hard to replicate in a normal fitness environment, when you're herded into a group fitness class, being led through a choreographed routine, or when you're trying to one-out it in the middle of the gym with your headphones on listening to your iPod."

Sawyer goes further. "There's an incredible change in people in every way. You're talking about a physiological change, you're talking about a change in their belief systems. Spiritually they change, they really start to become a lot more positive. They go to work and they're energised; people feed off them."

I suggest to Ellis that it's precisely this kind of enthusiasm that has led to people labelling CrossFit a cult. "To borrow someone else's saying, yes we're a cult, but we're a good cult. We've got this leader [Glassman] that we all respect. We've got our own kind of

language, talking AMRAPs (As Many Rounds As Possible) and WODs and kettle bells and thrusters, that sort of thing. Then we have a uniform; we've got T-shirts that proclaim the stuff we do.

"But the main thing is people have a life-changing experience, so they're going to talk about it. If I find something that gets me back into the shape I was in when I was 18, gives me so much energy that I've got a promotion at work and I'm jumping on my wife like we just got married, I'm being admired on the beach or whatever, I'm going to rave about it."

**WEEK SEVEN/** I'm sick for the first time in four years with some kind of virus and can't train. "Why do you think you got sick?" O'Donnell asks me. "Lack of sleep? Alcohol? Toxicity?" I don't know, I tell him. Maybe I'm over-trained. I'm waiting for him to tell me I don't train hard enough to be over-trained, but he doesn't. "Listen to your body," he says instead.

**WEEK EIGHT/** With only three weeks to the PlayOffs, I shake off my illness and train at the Victoria Park play area. I practise kipping pull-ups, before I go into a WOD of 50 double unders, 30 chest-to-bars and 15 box jumps. It's a 12-minute AMRAP. In the eighth minute, I'm at the fringe of the park, my hands on my knees, coughing green bile into the dead leaves. All the parents and children are staring at me, fascinated.

The next day, I go to the 6am class. The warm-ups are Turkish get-ups and rope climbs. Then it's heavy Fran, a workout of pull-ups and thrusters. O'Donnell can do this in under three minutes. I can't do heavy, which is 60kg. I can only manage 30kg. The coach gives me a 10kg support band for the pull-ups. In the first round of 21, I get really close to losing my guts on the cage floor. Strangely, I feel much better afterwards.

**WEEKS NINE & TEN/** The competition WODs are announced and I concentrate on the comp-specific movements. That, and trying to lift my fitness to a level that might immunise me against death on the day.

**COMPETITION DAY/** It's 5.30am and we're at Diocesan School pool in Epsom for the first WOD. It's three rounds of 10 burpees and a 50-metre swim. I can't remember feeling this terrified since losing my virginity. I feel sorry for the other members of my team, having me in it. In the fifth length I calm down a little, even though I feel like I could still drown at any time. I think it's only my failure to drown that gets me to the second WOD.

This takes place back at the cage, and starts at 9am. It's a five-minute AMRAP of 30kg snatches, with a rope climb buy-in and rope climb penalty for every failure. Five minutes is enough to almost break my arms, shoulders and heart.

At 10.30, we're into the final WOD. The next 12 minutes are the endgame of all the training, the diet, the sacrifices. There is light at the end of this tunnel, I tell myself, and it's not just an oncoming train. It's 10 pull-ups, 50 double unders, 40 wall balls with a 9kg medicine ball, a 30-calorie row, 20 press-ups and 15 squat cleans. My team partner and I get to the end of the rowing, and time is up. DNF. Did not finish.

My team, made up of three people over 40 and a 15-year-old girl roped in because of injuries, places last in the Masters and Juniors category. "There's no such thing as last," Sawyer tells me as we share the sweetest beer of my life in the car park. "In CrossFit, last is the biggest cheer."

Ellis has a saying. "We do CrossFit so we don't suck at life." I might suck at CrossFit, but I can't help feeling maybe I suck at life just a little bit less. I'm much fitter, with lower body fat and increased muscle. I can do new things like kipping pull-ups, which seemed impossible back in February. Mentally, I'm a little bit stronger too. If you're wondering if it's for you, this is what Gareth O'Donnell says: "We believe CrossFit is for everyone. But it isn't for just anyone." **M**

