

Forging Mental Fitness

Jim Decker

At the recent CrossFit certification seminar in Boston, someone asked a question that really got me thinking. I paraphrase: *I think I understand the theory behind most of the workouts—that is, strength training, metabolic conditioning, form or technique practice—but what about “Linda”?* [Linda is 10,9,8,7,6,5,4,3,2,1 reps each of dead lift at 1.5 x bodyweight, bench-press at 1 x bodyweight, clean at .75 x bodyweight, for time.] *Is that a strength workout, but with a metabolic conditioning benefit? What is the real goal?*

In his response, Coach Glassman said something about how “Linda” seemed like a good workout when it was created, but it has become the most hated workout of the day (WOD). Apparently, one of every three complaints about workouts is reserved just for Linda, an impressive number since it is one of thousands of WODs created since CrossFit went online in 2001. According to Coach, anything that gets that kind of reaction has to be effective, thus worthy of repeat. I began to think about that question from a different perspective, and how I had been thinking of a different answer based on my experience as a Cross-Fitter and a soldier.

I believe the WODs that become significant emotional events, the real suck-fests, have a far greater benefit than the physical improvements they inflict. They require *and reinforce* mental strength. All WODs, when performed “as Rx’ed,” require these attributes. But Linda, Murph, Fight Gone Bad, and some of their cousins really require you to dig deep to get through them. Whether you are feeling strong and are headed to a personal record (round 1), or you are supporting a big fat boo lip and are in the middle of your own pity party (round 3), the clock continues to run. It is only over when you finish that last quarter-mile, the last pull on the rowing machine, the last clean. You must find a way to get from start to finish, as best you can, solo. No one can give you a cup of fortitude or a neatly packaged perseverance bar. It must come from within. I am endlessly fascinated and impressed by civilians who CrossFit. All military, law enforcement, firefighters, MMA champions and the like train CrossFit to survive. Train hard = fight hard = come home safe. Got it, no ambiguity there. But what about the teachers, the businesswomen, the engineers, website designers, and all the rest who don’t (on a literal level) engage in mortal combat? What drives them to put themselves through the grueling events?

It seems to me that no external stimulus could be the answer. CrossFit is hard. People quit (some even before they try) every day because it is hard. I think the drive must be internal, a competition with oneself, a continual test of one’s own limitations. This is where mental strength is born. External competition, while good and healthy, will only make you work just hard enough to beat the competitor to your left and right. Internal competition will push you farther, faster, and harder than any opponent ever will. As the man says, “Men will die for points.” Even more so, it seems, when the score to beat is one’s own. In the past two years, I have had the opportunity to watch most of the elite CF athletes in action. In all of those workouts, I can’t think of a single time, not once, that they looked to the studs working beside them to do anything but cheer for their “opponents.” Even when gasping for breath like a fish out of water they will use that precious air for words of encouragement. But don’t be fooled: there is competition going on. You can see it when the eyes glaze over, when they stop talking, hearing, even feeling. You can *see* them internalize. They are looking inside, calculating, strategizing, trying to control their breathing, and going to their happy place... whatever you want to call it. They are forging mental fitness. I recognize this only because I have used these same techniques, and seen them used by others throughout my career, in peace and in war. In trying to explain this process to another person, I would break it down into four parts.

The first would be to prepare yourself mentally for the upcoming challenge. Some of mankind’s biggest fears (behind public speaking, of course) are fear of the unknown, fear of embarrassment, fear of humiliation. I suspect this is why so many people won’t try CrossFit. They are afraid that they will fail, that they won’t measure up. But measure up to what? If you’ve never done “Fran,” then when you do decide to try it, will it not be your best time ever? Is it reasonable to think you could give Michael Jordan a run for his money at HORSE? Then why would you ever compare your “Helen” time to Kelly Moore’s? Sure, read the WOD posts of someone like Matt G. with admiration, but don’t compare yourself to him. I believe that when people are prepared mentally, everything else will start to sort itself out.

Second, set small goals within the event. Don’t just think of the start and finish; make up several sub-goals and focus on those. In round one of “Linda,” for example, don’t think of the ten dead lifts. Visualize completing four

reps, then three, then two, then one. Or one set of four and two sets of three. Break it up. As you do this, these mini-sets will all accumulate and you will be on the road to the next round. Think about it this way: “Helen” is not one race, but three consecutive races, each with three components. How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time!

Third, learn to forgive yourself. If you have a bad set, or a bad round, or even a bad workout, forgive yourself and move on. Don’t dwell on it. The more you agonize over screwing up your Tabata score in the sixth round or dropping the medicine ball during Fight Gone Bad, the more energy you will waste on additional stress. If the problem was preventable, note it for additional practice later and move on. If it is something out of your control, let it go and just concentrate on doing the best you can.

Last and maybe most important, keep your sense of humor. Laughter releases stress, relaxes your body, helps lower blood pressure, and all kinds of other good things. It can make very unpleasant situations tolerable. Joking also shows you don’t take yourself too seriously, which most people find pretty obnoxious. I humbly submit that all of these techniques also apply outside the CrossFit realm; try them and see how it works. So, if I could be so bold as to add my answer to Coach Glassman’s, I would say, yes, “Linda” does have a great strength building benefit. But the most important body part being exercised is actually between your ears.

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