

CROSSFIT

Ryan Meester's "before-and-after" pictures are a marketer's dream. The 29-year-old financial software consultant from Chicago was 60 pounds overweight just more than a year ago. Now, he's dropped the weight, completed his first triathlon and has a chiseled physique that would inspire just about anyone to jump up off the couch and buy whatever he's selling.

But you won't find his pictures on a late-night infomercial. They're not part of a slick advertising campaign for a high-end health club or a new diet plan.

They're the result of training with CrossFit, a high-intensity functional fitness program that's exploded across the country. And while you can see Meester's pictures and inspirational story on the CrossFit Chicago blog, that's the only place you'll find it. Instead of using traditional advertising, CrossFit has relied almost exclusively on word of mouth, the Internet, social media and the enthusiasm of its members to create a groundswell of support for its every-increasing number of affiliates.

"It becomes such a part of your life that you just want to tell people about it," Meester says. "You find out about it through someone, and then you spread the word to someone else."

People are starting to take notice. Reebok has just signed an exclusive 10-year deal to make CrossFit shoes and apparel. This year's CrossFit Games – a competition looking to find the world's fittest men and women – aired on ESPN3. And more and more companies are filling unique niches created by this unorthodox fitness program. CrossFit has created a huge demand for both old-school staples like kettle bells and weightlifting shoes while also embracing high-tech compression fabrics and yoga apparel.

While the workout regimen may have its roots in training police, firefighters and the military, it now features a broader appeal to a wider population of all

ages who want to focus on whole-body, "functional" fitness. CrossFit endurance coaches have branched out to include marathon and triathlon training as part of their services. And some affiliates are reaching out to mothers and pregnant women to emphasize that CrossFit isn't just the domain of elite athletes.

Not bad for a company that started as a small-town gym that couldn't get the money to expand.

The CrossFit Story

CrossFit began as a single facility in Santa Cruz, CA, founded by Greg Glassman, a former high school gymnast. He created a broad and inclusive fitness program to prepare police trainees for the physical demands of the job. He eschewed traditional exercise machines in favor of movements from gymnastics, weightlifting and plyometrics. Endurance exercises – basically running and some time on a rowing machine – are incorporated into the workouts rather than treated separately.

The traditional means of expanding his business – large amounts of venture capital – weren't working for Glassman, who instead started posting his unique workouts on the Internet. Using things like gymnastics rings, kettle bells, chin-up bars, jump rope and other equipment in his gym, he created gravity-focused workouts that eventually developed a following across the country.

More importantly, the concept of functional whole-body fitness – using real-life movements, free weights and untraditional equipment (tractor tires are a CrossFit favorite) – started to develop zealous converts, who began blogging about CrossFit themselves and posting their own workouts to the Internet.

CrossFit affiliates started to pop up across the country and overseas. By 2001, there were nearly 50. In 2008, the number reached 500, and this year it's up to 2800 affiliates. Nearly all of them seem to revel in the garage-gym origins and



APPEAL



**THE GRASSROOTS
APPROACH TO
FUNCTIONAL FITNESS
HAS A DEVOTED AND
GROWING FOLLOWING
THAT IS ABOUT TO HIT
THE MAINSTREAM**
BY JEFF BANOWETZ

no-frills industrial space that's the opposite of most health clubs. "You won't find any plush couches in a CrossFit gym," laughs Josh Courage, who runs an affiliate in Bethesda, MD. He's had so much success that he needs to expand but would like to maintain the industrial atmosphere. "I need more space, but I still want that feel of the garage. That's just CrossFit."

The core of CrossFit is the Workout of the Day (or WOD, rhymes with pod, to the CrossFit crowd). It's a unique workout created by local affiliates that incorporates many elements from the CrossFit repertoire into a single workout. Think of taking weightlifting exercises from Column A, flexibility from Column B and endurance from Column C, and you can see how many variations become available. But even that description oversimplifies the creativity that goes into the workout. CrossFitters (as they affectionately describe themselves) lift unwieldy objects, incorporate climbing ropes and exercise rings,

CrossFit, which has expanded to 2,800 affiliates this year, attracts both everyday athletes looking for overall fitness and fierce competitors who've turned the discipline into a sport. This year's CrossFit Games, which aired on ESPN3, brought some of the fittest people in the world to California to compete for a \$1 million in total prizes.

and cycle through dozens of calisthenics to make sure all parts of the body are being used in a functional way.

"In my year of doing CrossFit, I think I only repeated a workout five or six times," Meester says. "And those were just benchmark workouts, so I could see how far I've come."

The workouts lead to exceptional results for those who put in the time (usually four to six workouts a week). They are also scalable, enabling athletes of any ability to do the same workout at the same time. The Navy SEAL in the room will lift heavier weights and do more repetitions, but it allows anyone to participate

and develop a sense of camaraderie with the group. That social element becomes a big draw for people.

"I think a big part of the appeal is the community," says Jonny Vu, an instructor and marketing director of CrossFit Chicago. "People are out to get in the best shape of their lives, and they get support from the group. We hang out. We get to know each other by name. We do events together."

That camaraderie, enforced by a heavy emphasis on blogging, social media and friendly competition, has meant that products that work well for CrossFit can quickly develop an intense following.

Equipment Challenges

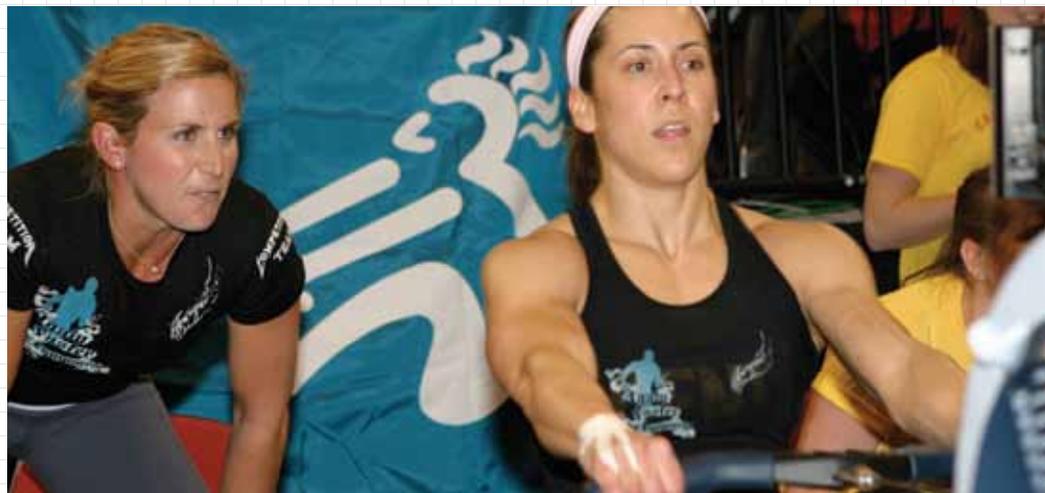
"I found this minimalist trail running shoe by New Balance and I loved it," Courage says. "And within a few weeks, half of my gym was wearing them. There aren't a lot of products designed for CrossFit, so when you find one that works, word spreads fast."

The demands of Crossfitters on footwear are particularly difficult. In theory, they'd like to be able to wear the same shoe for an Olympic-style dead lift as for a mile sprint — since the workouts are without pause.

"It's very uncommon to have a shoe that's stable enough for overhead lift and then cushioned enough to run in," says Chris Froio, the head of fitness for Reebok. "And then you have to make it lightweight."

Reebok spent nine months studying the movements of CrossFit before even beginning to design a shoe. Then they took the shoe out of their traditional development timeline to ensure that they had a product that worked in real life before launching it. What they ended up with was a CrossFit training shoe and a weightlifting shoe, which are both available in small quantities via e-commerce sites. They'll launch to specialty retailers early next year.

TRENDS



“If you had told me a year ago that we’d be doing a new weightlifting shoe, I’d have said ‘no way,’” Froio says. “But when we studied the sport, we saw it was needed.”

Until now, many CrossFitters took advantage of the minimalist running movement to find shoes without thick cushioning, which becomes compressed and possibly unstable lifting free weights. The Vibram Five Fingers is a common sight in CrossFit gyms, as is Inov8, a British shoe company focusing mostly on trail running with a U.S. headquarters in Southborough, MA.

“CrossFitters are looking for a shoe with a flat differential from heel to toe,” says Gina Lucrezi, Inov8’s U.S. marketing manager. “They want stability and a sticky rubber bottom that grips extremely well.”

So Inov8 removed the midsole and added a rope guard on its Bare XF-210 model, which will be launching in early 2012.

“It’s a demographic that’s a lot like trail running,” Lucrezi says. “They’re very dedicated and they’re pretty exact on what they want a shoe to do.”

On the apparel side, Under Armour and Lululemon have made inroads into the market, with tight-fitting clothes that offer plenty of flexibility for movement. Reebok will launch CrossFit licensed apparel along with the shoes early next year. And like many sports, compression is a growing category with elements designed both for performance and recovery gaining hold in the CrossFit world.

“CrossFit is a perfect application for compression,” says Richard Verney, who heads the U.S. distribution of 2XU. The compression apparel company launched its PWX fabric this fall and is targeting the CrossFit market. “They can use the garment (during exercise) to insure, first and foremost, the control and protection of the muscle. And then, like other athletes, they can use it to help aid recovery.”

Manufacturers of traditional gym equipment such as jump ropes and kettle bells are benefitting from the attention CrossFit brings. As is Concept2, the rowing machine manufacturer, which is about the only piece of machinery you’ll find in a CrossFit gym.

“It’s one of the first groups outside of the rowing community to really be interested in the sport,” says Tracy Desrocher, manager of commercial and government sales for Concept2. “They want to know how to use the equipment and how to train effectively. They’re serious about technique.”

Plus, there’s been some noticeable overlap. “It’s great to see CrossFitters moving into the rowing community, and rowers moving to the CrossFit community,” she says.

That’s not the only product to gravitate to the CrossFit universe: The Paleo diet, which focuses on lots of protein and is usually recommended at CrossFit affiliates, is getting more attention, as is the Pose Method of running, another CrossFit favorite.

Despite its fantastic growth, CrossFit is still primarily a word-of-mouth business. But with a big player like Reebok on board – as well as the exposure that the CrossFit Games received on ESPN this summer – you can expect more people discovering what all the fuss is about.

“This morning at 9 a.m., I taught a group of 18 housewives from age 25 to 55,” says CrossFit Chicago’s Vu. “Yesterday I had an 81-year-old woman who did CrossFit for the first time. Don’t get me wrong — we have some phenomenal athletes. But the general population is here to get fit and live a better life.” ●

CrossFit uses lots of free weights to help build strength, but it’s also known for taking unusual objects into exercise equipment. Tractor tires and heavy ropes are popular training tools. Yoga-based stretching helps with flexibility and rowing machines develop cardio.

Photos courtesy of Josh Courage (tire shot), CrossFit, Inc. (man on hand), CrossFit Chicago (rope, yoga) and Concept2 (lower)



CROSSFIT FOOTWEAR



INOV8

Inov8, which focuses mostly on trail running shoes, has found that CrossFit athletes were drawn to their minimalist designs. The Bare XF-210, which features a rope guard and no midsole, is designed specifically for CrossFitters.



REEBOK

This year, Reebok is launching a line of CrossFit branded shoes and apparel designed specifically for the unique rigors of the sport. Athletes can lift weights, run, row and complete any other CrossFit movement without changing shoes.