



## Learning to Breathe Fire: The Rise of CrossFit and the Primal Future of Fitness

*J.C. Herz*

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# Learning to Breathe Fire: The Rise of CrossFit and the Primal Future of Fitness

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**Learning to Breathe Fire: The Rise of CrossFit and the Primal Future of Fitness** J.C. Herz  
**The absorbing, definitive account of CrossFit's origins, its explosive grassroots growth, and its emergence as a global phenomenon.**

One of the most illuminating books ever on a sports subculture, *Learning to Breathe Fire* combines vivid sports writing with a thoughtful meditation on what it means to be human. In the book, veteran journalist J.C. Herz explains the science of maximum effort, why the modern gym fails an obese society, and the psychic rewards of ending up on the floor feeling as though you're about to die.

The story traces CrossFit's rise, from a single underground gym in Santa Cruz to its adoption as the workout of choice for elite special forces, firefighters and cops, to its popularity as the go-to fitness routine for regular Joes and Janes. Especially riveting is Herz's description of The CrossFit Games, which begin as an informal throw-down on a California ranch and evolve into a televised global proving ground for the fittest men and women on Earth, as well as hundreds of thousands of lesser mortals.

In her portrayal of the sport's star athletes, its passionate coaches and its "chief armorer," Rogue Fitness, Herz powerfully evokes the uniqueness of a fitness culture that cultivates primal fierceness in average people. And in the shared ordeal of an all-consuming workout, she unearths the ritual intensity that's been with us since humans invented sports, showing us how, on a deep level, we're all tribal hunters and first responders, waiting for the signal to go all-out.

## Learning to Breathe Fire: The Rise of CrossFit and the Primal Future of Fitness Details

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## From Reader Review Learning to Breathe Fire: The Rise of CrossFit and the Primal Future of Fitness for online ebook

### Darlene Cruz says

Crossfit - rest is not a part of the program, ignore the part of the brain that tells them it's impossible to keep moving. Stopping is not an option, no finish line but to finish what you started. Combination of weightlifting, sprints and gymnastic movements and pull-ups, pushups and unweighted squats as many rounds as possible in 20 minutes. Do you believe that? 20 minutes! Wall ball shots, sumo dead lift high pull, 20-inch box jumps, 75 lbs push press, rowing machines, high intensity regime, Crossfit obvious way to train, duh:) Boy, can you not move so fast! Don't forget the Russian Kettle Bell and those crazy boxes. This book talks about fuel for the body ATP, muscle cell, molecule, phosphates, plus metabolic pathways, fuel production system, etc. Examples for different men in different groups. Crossfit became a hit, helped people achieve what they thought was unachievable. Crossfit overcame the part in your mind when you are physically exhausted, a flash of aggression (as stated) gives you a strange dignity in this last moment, last moment to finish. A fitness cult, yeah... When you see 20% of body weight disappear, change in health habits for the better. Even employers encourages Crossfit because it's a win-win situation. Employees are healthier less burden on health insurance cost for them. What a wonderful read, it's intensity describing the workout was my favorite part. Won this book on Goodreads, First Read Giveaway. Thank you, Darlene Cruz

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### Louis says

My background: once upon a time as an adult I ran marathons, I used to cycle as a commuter, so I was generally fit for someone who was never in competitive sports in my youth. I also hiked, backpacked, and had a combat deployment (as a civilian, but I did use the opportunity to do workouts in body armor. I told my CO that although I was not told to, I wanted to be comfortable in body armor before I needed it.) A few years back, realizing that my running had dropped down, I joined my son in taekwondo, and last year, as I approached black belt, I added dumbbells to my TKD and bodyweight training.

Where is CrossFit in this? It's definition of fitness is constantly varied, functional movements delivered at intensity, with a goal of preparing an athlete for the unknown and the unknowable. And the means to do this are metabolic conditioning, gymnastics, and strength training. And my experiences in the TKD dojang of trying to outdo the teenagers that dominate those venues in bodyweight fitness and conditioning workouts has a hint of this. Also switching from marathon runs, to rucking in body armor, to fitness tests (conditioning) also hints of this. And as I read the book, I realized that this is what I wish I knew many years ago as I pounded out long miles on weekend mornings.

This book is a book of stories of different ways people came into CrossFit. While there are a number of the alpha-male military and first responder types, the pride and joy of the book comes in the stories of the non-testosterone pumped types who were part of CrossFit. Women, and the not-so-macho who came into this because they were looking for a way to be fit because of a scare or a desire to change their life. And they get hooked on something that had the benefits of team sport (camaraderie, competition, cheering), without the downsides (sidelines, put downs). And a culture where people were equally setup to struggle and succeed, and cheered when they struggled with integrity and grew with it. The book has many stories that are variations on "that which does not kill me makes me stronger" as the stories of workouts that left people knocked out on their backs and realizing that this is the kind of push they want and this is where they could

get it. In particular, attention is paid to women in CrossFit. How the focus on effort and encouragement to be strong over looks makes CrossFit atmosphere more attractive than other sporting environments. And how even from the beginning, the philosophy of strength and intensity to the limit of the athlete applied to the women involved, so that they could use women as exemplars when introducing CrossFit to alpha males in military or law enforcement who were surprised that they were left on the ground. And the book also has a chapter on the pressures society puts on women, to not have strength as a goal and how those who stay in CrossFit have to fight those types of pressure.

The book is a cheerleading of CrossFit. And although I am not in CrossFit myself, I definitely see how this is both different and probably a better view of fitness than any other. It is very different than sports biographies that focus on the superstars (although there are plenty) as CrossFit is really geared at the street level fitness, of individuals who want to be a little better than they are now, in every dimension of physical activity. A very good inspirational read for anyone with those types of goals.

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### **Timon says**

THere's some good stuff in here on how crossfit runs its game and business, but mainly it's just an over glorification of crossfit.

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### **Jim Stogdill says**

If you're a Crossfitter and want to learn more about the origins of your favorite cult, read this book.

If you're not a Crossfitter and you want to understand what the hell we Crossfitters are up to, don't read this book, go start crossfitting and then come back later and read this book to shake the mosaic pieces into place.

Either way you probably won't be able to put it down. JC mixes history, science, and participant narratives into a great read that makes you want to set it down only long enough to go hit your next WOD even harder.

I love the description of the experience o fa WOD from page 16 (of the hardback): "By round five, the depletion of every metabolic pathway, muscle fiber, and neural circuit has all internal diagnostics on the blink. There isn't even an abstract notion of heroic effort, or any abstract notion -- the part of your brain that tells stories is off line. There is only the raw impetus to finish somehow..."

This book is destined to find its way into every Crossfitter's library, and perhaps some cultural anthropologist's reading lists too.

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### **A.L. Chittur says**

Though I've been an amateur, mostly self-taught 'CrossFitter' for several years, I am only recently meeting this larger community halfway. I found Herz' book a long time ago yet have only now read it, and I find myself wondering what took me so long.

I waffled between a four and five-star rating, not because of the writing quality but because as the book

progress, Herz progressively shorter chapters to introduce one of the community's more famous "firebreathers" then quickly launch into a commentary on modern medicine, "globo-gym" membership models, or the food industry. I struggled through these editorials at first, then came to expect and appreciate them as Herz focused on elements of the massive fitness industry that have proven counterproductive yet remain effective in their twisted incentives.

Ultimately the book is fun, enlightening for anyone who is a CrossFitter or who is interested; it's also entertaining for anyone interested in personal sports stories. Recommended all around.

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### **Dan Schwent says**

From the ages of 19 to 34, I worked out religiously 3-5 times a week. The last couple years, however, I let myself gradually slip out of the habit. After all, that's 3-5 more hours a week I could be reading. However, my girlfriend read up on CrossFit and told me we were going to start going a few times a week.

Since I was still reasonably fit for a couch potato, I figured I could handle it. I could not. It kicked my ass in less than 20 minutes and I was sore for three days, something that never happened to me in over a decade of lifting weights nearly every day. After that, I was more than a little intrigued about the torture we were paying for. Then this book popped up on Netgalley.

*Learning to Breathe Fire* tells the story of CrossFit and the science behind how it works. It talks about key figures in CrossFit history and explains why health clubs nerf everything and why they are largely ineffective at getting results. It also covers the CrossFit games.

It was pretty enlightening. I thought the people at CrossFit Warrior RX were just torturing me for fun the first couple of times. The science behind it sounds accurate. It made sense to me that we were doing workouts that blended cardio and strength training to spend maximum energy in a relatively short amount of time. The 20-30 minute workouts of the day (WODs) sure seem more efficient than lifting weights and doing cardio for a hour.

One thing I found interesting/terrifying were some of the workouts I might have to endure at some point. Like Fran, 21-15-9 reps of thrusters and pullups, which frequently makes people puke. Or Karen, which is 150 wall balls.

If I had to gripe about something in the book, it's that maybe it went a little too deep into the stories of the notable figures in CrossFit history. They were inspirational but I felt like I was watching a CrossFit infomercial after a while.

For someone who wants to see immediate results with the minimum time spent at the gym, CrossFit is the way to go and if you want to learn all about CrossFit, this is the book to read. Four sweaty stars!

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### **Agn? says**

In a nutshell, *Learning to Breathe Fire* is an ode to CrossFit.

I'm an avid CrossFitter myself, so I did find this book entertaining, inspiring, and motivating. I loved the first third of the book, especially the chapters on the science behind the maximum effort and CrossFit's origins.

However, after the first few informative and well-organized chapters, *Learning to Breathe Fire* becomes extremely repetitive, a bit pointless, and way over the top. In fact, I'm a bit surprised that J.C. Herz is an accomplished journalist, because her book is sorely lacking in journalistic objectivity: every prominent CrossFit figure in her book is basically deified and any opposing views or concerns regarding CrossFit are brushed off rather than objectively explored. I get it, I love CrossFit too, but nothing is THAT perfect. It looks like J.C. Herz has been paid to write a propaganda or something.

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### **Michelle Garcia says**

**EXCELLENT BOOK.** Very well written. Whether you're a CrossFitter or not, this book will take you into the depths of how it all began and why CrossFitters continue to multiply year after year. An incredibly wonderful asset to any CrossFitter's library, but an even more educational eye-opening thought-provoking piece for anyone in the fitness industry and/or just anyone curious enough to want to learn the truths and finally put the assumptions behind.

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### **Irwin says**

I just won this book free as a goodreads giveaway! I am waiting to read it. Thanks.

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### **Kimberly says**

We read to see things differently, to explore worlds that, for whatever reason, we can't get to right at the moment. I've been doing CrossFit for over 3 and a half years now, and the past year I haven't been CrossFitting much - work and life have had louder (and sometimes more attractive) priorities. A friend who's been CrossFitting for a year or two now because I got him into it (despite his stubborn bullheadedness), he mentioned the Art of Manliness podcast to me recently that had J.C. Herz as the guest. I listened to it, and immediately loved it. Other AoM podcasts are fabulous too, I quickly discovered. Mainly, I loved J.C. Herz's voice in the matter - she's not an idiot any more than I am, she's not a firebreather type (or at least not by default), but what she was saying reminded me of some of the reasons why I fell in love with this crazy thing called CrossFit.

So I picked up her book, and the first chapter opened my eyes to something new. Hunh, here I thought I was doing the right thing by taking it easy when I go in to the gym sporadically, afraid of how much I know it'll hurt if I work too hard at it, afraid of how sore I might be the next days afterwards if I push too hard. (However, listening to one's body is important and in general, I firmly believe in "do what works" - both short-term and long-term). I've been avoiding the gym because I know I've gotten out of the rhythm, out of the habit, and each metcon WOD will suck that much more, I know. I know how much it can hurt, and that knowledge is crippling. However, I've also known the joy and pride that comes from accomplishing

something that you didn't think that you could do, and I've known what it feels like to triumph over oneself, and to watch others do the same. Those last parts, I haven't seen much in my sporadic attendance - I have to show up, first of all. (When I started CrossFit, I was 41 and mostly able to walk after a crippling lumbar disc herniation the prior year and have never considered myself to be an athlete-- when I attend CrossFit regularly, I'm often the strongest girl at the gym.)

But it seems that I've been missing an essential point - the intensity of working really hard for a little while is the point, and doing it in the company of others makes the pain and suffering not as bad. The scientific benefits to the body of working out really hard for a short amount of time are, frankly, amazing, particularly when compared to slogging things out for hours over some medium-energy workout. I love that I can get better results in shorter time, if I'm just willing to work hard and endure some unpleasantness. It's not all that bad, but it can look bad and crazy when you watch it from afar.

Learning to Breathe Fire reminded me of why I love CrossFit - the challenge, the inspiration, the power of community, the seeming insanity of it, how bonding it is and how it can break down walls between people, and how powerful simple acknowledgement and positive feedback can be. Reading the book has got me re-fired up to get back into working out, and I've gone as many times to the gym in the past week as I have in the past number of months (yes, really.)

I've heard about Glassman and Amundson and Khalipa before (I go to Khalipa's NorCal CrossFit - Khalipa taught my on-ramp class in fact\*), and it was engaging to hear more of their backstories. I watched the CrossFit Games in person in 2011, despite not really knowing anyone at my gym and feeling incredibly insecure because I didn't yet look like a CrossFitter. Not sure if I look like one now, although I've managed to drop some extra pounds since then. Along the way I've consulted with a sports psychologist, because I wanted to know what it's like to think like an athlete so that I can be more like them. I've worked on my goats (running, ugh), and improved them some.

The other day, I did a hero wod (Barraza) that involved my favorite movement (deadlifts) and two of my least liked movements (running and burpees). I scaled the Rx weight a bit to 165, and I thought I'd have to remove some weight during the wod, because I haven't been working out much this year - but I didn't, and I did solid sets of three deadlifts the whole wod (an 18 min AMRAP: 200m run, 9 deadlifts, 6 burpee bar muscle ups (ok, so they were just burpees for me, another scaling)). I was the strongest girl in class, although the slowest too (my metcon needs work). I used the running and burpees as recovery time (hah! I laughed at that mental triumph, how I never would've thought that running time could be my downtime). Never mind the numbers, doing that workout made my body feel so good through and through - it was refreshing to feel so in tune with the deadlifts, to realize yet again that my body areas that I've frequently thought of as my worst (thighs, butt, and wounded back) are indeed assets of considerable strength and ability. (Back in grade school, they teased me and called me Bubble Butt -- which I now know is a fabulous thing, but I didn't know that back then.)

This may all sound stupid and lame and boring to you, but the experience of doing more than I thought I could and doing well at something that I never dreamed I could do well at is more inspiring and amazing to me than any words on a page or screen can ever fully communicate. Doing all of that while being in my 40's, holding a stressful job at a startup, being a homeowner, grieving over my Dad who passed away last year, and enjoying my first boyfriend in ten years (a triumph in and of itself) - it's hard to describe. One of the things I love about CrossFit is how it redefines what's possible for people in general, and particularly it redefines what's possible as we age and as we deal with stressors and challenges. CrossFit isn't the only game in town that redefines what's possible, but it's one of the few that do that and can fully engage you and get you fit and feeling good in your body.

p.s. It was comforting to learn why it can be so hard to count how much weight is on a bar during a workout, despite having an affinity and ability with math. Page 13 explains why (thank you! I thought it was just me being silly or stupid).

\* I fell down when I tried a deep squat, and Jason pulled me up - I was mortified (I was not small), but he had nothing going on about it at all. It turns out that the ability to do a deep squat is a muscle-based, strength thing, a technique - I always had thought I couldn't do it because my butt was too big. hah! go figure.

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### **Deane Barker says**

Good overview of the history of CrossFit. This is not a practical book -- it will not teach you how to burpee better. But it will explain where CrossFit came from and hopefully get you to understand the culture a little more. Extremely well-done.

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### **Audrey says**

3.5 stars. Interesting origin story about Crossfit but too rah rah for me. Genesis of Rogue and their manufacturing was particularly fascinating. The author totally drank the kool aid.

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### **Joe says**

I would recommend this book to anyone interested in the history of CrossFit and some of the key names from games gone by.

It really does sound as though it was never intended to be the huge global industry that it has become and that is more due to the success of the techniques and effects of training which spread by word of mouth and not due to clever marketing.

It also makes most of the people involved sound very genuine. There is clearly an interest for those at the top in ensuring that everyone gets results. To sit there and collect their money and focus on the games while neglecting the grass routes would be a very short term strategy.

As someone who has been aware of CrossFit for a few years and been training off and on for about a year, with more intensive training in the last 2 months I was sometimes sucked in by the negativity and scepticism towards those at the top, something I now believe is unfounded. A number of elite athletes, special forces soldiers, firemen, police, swat, DEA, recreational athletes, executives, housewives have all been among those to derive huge benefits from CrossFit with some branches of the military adapting their training to focus on CrossFit with less lengthy endurance. CrossFit makes people stronger and faster and results in far fewer injuries and longer terms issues than lengthy endurance marches/runs.

I do believe that those who compete and go on to win the CrossFit games are blessed with excellent genetics, dedication to training and clearly have the time (or make the time) to train. I don't believe that I will ever be as good as them, but I can still be the fittest version of myself as right now I am not reaching anything like my genetic potential. An ordinary person could still find themselves among the top 5% or perhaps even 2% of the population gaining in strength, power, skills, mobility, speed and short term endurance. Throw in some longer runs and they could be one of those people excellent at everything.

The book has nothing that I could easily identify as training tips, it is really just an interesting story of CrossFit, its history and some of the key people involved with HQ or as competitors.

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### **Ericayo says**

Reading this book made me want to run straight to the nearest Crossfit box, or at least go bust out a set of burpees. A very evocative description of the spirit and drive of Crossfit.

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