

CrossFit is fast and furious

A new brand of workout that packs weight-swinging, sprints and pull-ups into a punishing 20 minutes has some observers calling it extreme. But are a triathlete's weekly miles any more moderate?

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Triathlete Jacques Caron sweats through 10 workouts a week, logging five to eight kilometres in the pool, between 20 and 40 kilometres on the run and, over the course of a year, 6,000 to 7,000 kilometres on a bike. He also cross-country skis in the winter and has been known to race in long-distance events on back-to-back days during the summer months.

With all that exercise, you'd think it would be safe to say Caron is in great shape. Not so, claims Greg Glassman, founder of CrossFit, a California-based exercise program that is gaining momentum in the United States and Canada.

"The general public ... holds endurance athletes as exemplars of fitness. We do not," writes Glassman in an online edition of the CrossFit Journal.

Glassman states that endurance athletes sacrifice speed, power, co-ordination, agility, balance, accuracy and flexibility in their pursuit of stamina. His idea of an effective training regime is short, high-octane workouts that combine weight training, gymnastics and sprints. Performed on a three-days-on, one-day-off cycle, CrossFit's training regime aims to create the quintessential athlete, whom Glassman describes as "equal parts gymnast, Olympic weightlifter and sprinter."

Here's the formula for a typical CrossFit workout: a warm-up, followed by three to five sets of three to five repetitions of a multi-joint exercise like squats, pull-ups, push-ups, dead lifts or bench presses. Next, a 10-minute circuit of gymnastic-type moves performed as quickly as possible. And finally, two to 10 minutes of high-intensity sprint training. Incorporated into the mix is jump training, obstacle courses and lifting and swinging various heavy objects like kettlebells (weighted balls with handles). The whole thing takes about 20 minutes.

Using this basic structure, devotees are encouraged to build their own workouts, which has sparked a Web-based following who post their workouts for all to see and try (the site is at www.crossfit.com).



CREDIT: PHIL CARPENTER, THE GAZETTE

Are endurance athletes, like triathlete Jacques Caron, the exemplars of fitness? Not according to the founder of CrossFit, a California-based exercise program. His regime's quintessential athlete is "equal parts gymnast, Olympic weightlifter and sprinter."

One such workout calls for exercisers to perform the following five times: 400-metre run, 15 handstand push-ups followed by 15 pull-ups.

According to the CrossFit website, the workout is popular with firefighters, soldiers, U.S. navy seals and regular Joes and Jills.

Sylvain Randier is one such regular Joe. A 27-year-old Toronto resident, he joined Toronto's only gym devoted to CrossFit.

"I like the fact that the workout is efficient, functional and doesn't take much time," Randier said. He also likes the sense of achievement he gets.

But CrossFit has also had some bad press.

In an article titled "Getting fit, even if it kills you," the New York Times recounted the experience of a CrossFit novice who attempted to swing a 20-kilogram steel ball over his head and between his legs 50 times, then rest and repeat. After 30 minutes, he left the gym with back pain so severe he had to lie in the driveway before climbing into his car. That night, he went to the hospital emergency room, where he was diagnosed with rhabdomyolysis, a condition in which the muscles break down and release a toxic substance in the bloodstream that damages the kidneys. He was in intensive care for six days.

Even if the story reported in the New York Times is atypical, you have to wonder how safe it is to follow workouts posted on the CrossFit website - programs created by individuals with no training in exercise design or safety.

Even if do you work out at an official CrossFit facility (there are two in Canada - Toronto's plus one in Vancouver), there is no guarantee you're getting appropriate training or supervision. John Vivian, owner of CrossFit Toronto, was certified as an instructor after taking a three-day seminar given by Glassman in California. Formerly employed in the information technology field, he now leads workouts so intense the average participant "has enough energy to curse my name and that's about it."

"This isn't a workout where you can jog on a treadmill, talk on the cellphone and watch TV," said Vivian.

And while he admits that CrossFit workouts need to be scaled down to suit less-experienced exercisers, Vivian says the program is designed for those who are "willing to put in the effort required."

To be fair, CrossFit isn't the only workout that borders on the extreme. Triathlete Caron's weekly exercise regime would be regarded by most as excessive, yet he refers to himself as "dedicated." Four years ago that dedication led to a herniated disc, which he attributes to overuse. And while the injury slowed him down temporarily, he's back up to speed, albeit with a new preventative stretching program.

And who is in better shape - an athlete like Caron, who has the stamina to endure long bouts of exercise, or the CrossFit participant, who can tolerate short, punishing workouts that focus on speed, strength, power and agility?

The question is moot. Both improve fitness and have the potential to get you in the best shape of your life. That is if you can realize your goals without putting yourself in the hospital.

So think twice before swinging a 20-kilogram steel ball over your head or putting in so many miles you find yourself nursing a sore back. Exercise doesn't have to be

done to the extreme to be effective.

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