

the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

The CrossFit Insurgency

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This is the story of how a small group of soldiers used “unconventional warfare” (UW) to bring CrossFit to 1st Battalion 1st Special Force Group, Torii Station, Japan.

Insurgency is a condition of subversive political activity, civil rebellion, revolt, or insurrection against a duly constituted government or occupying power wherein irregular forces are formed and engage in actions, which may include guerrilla warfare, that are designed to weaken and overthrow that government or occupying power.

Unconventional warfare is a broad spectrum of military and paramilitary operations, normally of long duration and conducted predominantly by indigenous or surrogate forces that are organized, trained, equipped, supported, and directed in varying degrees by an external source. It includes guerrilla warfare and other direct-offensive low-visibility, covert, or clandestine operations, as well as the indirect activities of subversion, sabotage, intelligence activities, and evasion and escape (E&E).

There are three prerequisites that must exist for an insurgency to be successful. The first is a vulnerable population. The second is a leadership element that can direct the frustrations of a dissatisfied populace along the lines drawn by the overall insurgent strategy. And the third is a real or perceived lack of government control. The greater control the government has over the situation, the lower the chances for insurgent success. The opposite is also true: the less control the government has, the greater the likelihood of insurgent success.

In the case of our Special Operations Forces (SOF) unit, the vulnerable population was our own soldiers. The dissatisfaction arose from our desire for a better state

of physical readiness, as well as our frustration with current physical fitness regimens.

Leadership was ready-made and very reactive to the will of the populace. The leadership was not removed from or oblivious to the significant costs and consequences of a feeble workout program; we were all in it together.

The “government” to be overthrown in this case was our prescribed bible for physical training, Army Field Manual (FM) 21-20, as well as the huge bureaucracy of non-elected officials that governs activities within the military.

There are a number of other conditions that must exist or be produced for an insurgent movement to succeed. For our cause, popular support, propaganda, favorable environment, and external support were the additional circumstances. Popular support was derived from the exceptional increases in physical output achieved through CrossFit workouts. Propaganda was easily developed through the injudicious use of trash talking after the overwhelming dominance of CrossFitters over others in physical competition. This in turn was an outstanding recruiting tool. The favorable environment for CrossFit is built into the population, as an average SOF soldier is usually seeking physical excellence. External support has been provided by the CrossFit organization. The massive amount of clinical information that the program is based on provides a ready-made support infrastructure.

CrossFit Guerillas to CrossFit Gorillas

We started in July of 2005 with the Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) plus four additional tests of athletic ability. The APFT consists of three tasks: two minutes

1 of 3

The CrossFit Insurgency (continued...)

of max reps push-ups, two minutes of max reps sit-ups, and a two-mile run. This test is used across the Army, with a passing score of 60 percent of the standard for each event, scaled by sex and age. A Special Operations Forces soldier is required to pass at 70 percent of the standard in the toughest age group in order to try out. That's 55 push-ups in two minutes, 62 sit-ups in two minutes, and the two-mile run in 15:02. In other words, not a very good test by the standards of CrossFit (or the ten general physical skills described in CrossFit's definition of fitness). The four additional tests we added for our experiment were vertical leap, 100-meter shuttle run, max reps strict pull-ups, and body composition.

We started with six individuals and graded according to the strictest standards. In each category of the APFT our low score was just above 80 percent and the high score was 98 percent. Vertical leap was a low of 16 inches and a high of 24 inches; pull-up numbers were 9 and 16; and the shuttle run was 16.5 and 19 seconds. Body composition ranged from 16 percent to 21 percent body fat. The plan was to CrossFit for a nine-week cycle and then retest.

During the nine-week cycle we spent eight weeks deployed to two different countries. We had to come up with creative substitutions for many exercises, but we were always able to preserve the intent of the workout of the day (WOD). When we retested ourselves after the nine-week cycle, the difference was profound. The APFT score increased by 20 percent across the test group. Vertical leap increased by four inches, shuttle run time decreased by more than one second, and pull-ups increased by 8, on average. Body fat decreased by an average of two percentage points. We had just created our hard-core insurgent cadre.

The test results were made public to the rest of the battalion for evaluation. However, this first move was not successful for spreading CrossFit in the unit, in large part because we just published the results and overlooked the active education process. So we took a step back and started smaller by inviting key personnel to our workouts. This approach was much more successful. When we hosted our commander at our workouts, he was able to see firsthand the impact that CrossFit had on our general fitness level. We then proposed a company-level competition that would thoroughly test the fitness of the soldiers of the unit. The workout consisted of 25 pull-ups, 400m run, 25 50-pound ruck-sack thrusters, 400m run, 100m 75-pound duffle bag

toss, 400m run, 400m run with 75-pound duffle bag. For time, of course.

The unit competition was hugely successful and had the desired effect. The best time was close to 14:30 and the worst was around 30 minutes. The competition was set up to test anaerobic and cardio thresholds, power, and skill in several different military-oriented activities. After compiling the scores, we separated the results into three categories and published them in a very public place in the unit. An individual was deemed reasonably fit if he finished the event in less than 16 minutes (15 percent of the unit scored under 16 minutes). A time of 16 minutes to 20 minutes (50 percent) meant the individual's workout program was substandard and missing some essential components of fitness. Anything over 20 minutes (35 percent) we labeled f__ked up and the soldier a potential liability on a mission. This was not well received, but it elicited the response we were looking for: anger.

We attributed the poor outcome for most of the soldiers to lack of true cardio training—i.e., insufficient metabolic conditioning. Overnight we doubled our numbers of CrossFit trainees. This was only a problem because we then suddenly had twelve guys who needed training, on two different teams, with different schedules. At the time, Jim Decker and I were still educating ourselves on the CrossFit methodology. We had not had any formal training yet, and when confronted with the more in-depth questions, we had difficulty explaining the program. The one thing we could always use to support the training was our progress, which after six months was really taking off.

Soon after that event we convinced our command to let some of us go to a certification seminar in Santa Cruz. At this point the command was hooked so we were able to get permission without much trouble. Before getting on the airplane to fly across the Pacific I was able to secure a verbal agreement to bring the CrossFit staff out to Okinawa for additional training. This is where we are to date (as of July 2006).

The process of testing and measuring our progress was incidental to the program itself but critical to the success of the effort. Now we had huge measurable improvements in physical fitness that supported propagation of the program. We could show records and results in a form that both CrossFitters and old Army types could understand.

The CrossFit Insurgency (continued...)

The SOF community can be resistant to change. In order for any insurgency to be effective, it needs a plan. The plan needs to start by finding or creating vulnerabilities in the target population. This is especially true with a free populace. We had to create a vulnerability—an unmistakable need for the results CrossFit produces—by getting ourselves into a state of better fitness than the rest of the men in the unit, and then finding a venue for displaying their weaknesses. As of this writing, we have conducted approximately six separate events with each one providing increasing reinforcement of the efficacy of the program. It has taken eleven months, but we have created a vulnerable population.

In our case, the leadership of the unit is cyclical, so developing relationships quickly is critical. Maintaining a very high standard of conduct among the CrossFitters (especially in contrast with the non-CrossFitters) is very important, but also very easy to do. It seems that one of the intangible benefits of CrossFit as a fitness program is its tendency to appeal to those who seek virtuosity in all aspects of life.

Most SOF soldiers are likely to resist adopting CrossFit initially. At first the resistance will probably come from their not knowing what the workout is until the WOD is posted. Our answer to that is to direct them to go to any previous month in the WOD archives and print. Sooner or later, they tend to accept the fact that the Kool-Aid is not laced with poison.

It is a tripartite “government” that we set out to depose and replace: 1) Field Manual (FM) 21-20, 2) the practice of training specifically for the APFT, and 3) the current command climate of risk aversion, wherein commanders are sometimes reluctant to commit to anything new for fear of career suicide.

The end state of our little insurgency is to propagate CrossFit to the rest of the battalion. An individual soldier’s time on Okinawa is limited to 36 months, after which he is reassigned to another unit within SOF, or to a regular Army unit, anywhere in the world. The potential for infiltration and viral spread of the CrossFit insurgency is endless. One of my young soldiers may someday end up the Sergeant Major of the Army, or one of my officers may become the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. You never know.

Conclusions

I hope that other potential “insurgents” out there can draw on our experience to use CrossFit to unseat and supplant inadequate physical training regimes in institutions of all variety of sizes and missions. A few key elements will get you on your way:

- **Educate yourself.** Be able to talk clearly and convincingly about CrossFit methodology. Have a working knowledge of physiology. Do an Internet search on “high-intensity interval training,” “Olympic lifts,” and “high-repetition Olympic lifts,” and read all 12,000,000 pages in the results list.

- **Start small, and be visible.** Start with a small group of peers, share knowledge, and keep track of your progress. Always explain the workout and the intent behind it to anyone who is interested, especially post-workout, when they are feeling the effect the most. To gain momentum for your insurgency movement, you will need hard and fast data to support your program; “I just feel better” will not get the job done. Post your workout times and loads and rankings in a public place. Word will spread, and people will get interested.

- **Be the example.** Get yourself and your core group into shape. This will give your movement credibility. Get the form right first, and then turn up the intensity. Take the long view. Injured people will set back your cause, so be smart, and be patient.

- **Be persistent.** ‘Nuff said

