

The Problem With Cross-Fit!

By Brooke Ross

The Dark Side

Uncle Rhabdo represents a character in the CrossFit community and is short for rhabdomyolysis, a kidney condition most commonly induced by excessive exercise, according to Heather Gillespie, a sports medicine physician from UCLA. The potentially life-threatening state, which can also be caused by underlying genetics, occurs when muscle breaks down and myoglobin, the byproduct of muscle fibers, is released into the blood stream, essentially clogging up the kidneys and poisoning them.

“If you’re dehydrated, which sort of goes along with rhabdo, you can’t clear these toxins, the kidney can’t filter the byproduct,” Gillespie says. It can lead to kidney failure and electrolyte imbalances that can ultimately affect your heart.

Uncle Rhabdo was originally invented to shed light on “the inappropriate use of intensity,” according to CrossFit’s Training Guide. The haunting image of Uncle Rhabdo is a cartoon of a blue-haired-red-nosed clown with face paint, panting from exhaustion with organs and blood spilling from its body, a set of weights in the background.

Some in CrossFit use these clowns as a humorous way to prove that they’ve worked hard. But problems arise when CrossFit athletes and their trainers simply don’t know when—or choose not—to pull the plug.

“I do give them a little sticker [if they puke],” says Hollis Molloy, a trainer at CrossFit Santa Cruz, one of the first CrossFit gyms in the country. “Back in the day, we used to give them shirts and the availability of the shirt ran out.”

If most gyms struggle to have their patrons work hard enough, CrossFit gyms struggle on the opposite end of the spectrum. Searching for the words “pain” and “CrossFit” on Twitter yields hundreds of results, nearly every one praising the sting the workout provides. “There’s pushing an athlete to the point of discomfort that is challenging,” says Joe Dowdell, founder and CEO of Peak Performance in New York City. “But then we pull the reins back. Vomiting is a sign that you’ve hit a point when it’s just too much.”

“CrossFitters put up with burning muscles and overall strain so they’re used to 'bring it on, gimme more gimme more.' It gets hard to say oh, that’s pain, I need to stop” says David Geier, Jr., an orthopedic surgeon and the director of sports medicine at the Medical University of South Carolina. “I think the benefits of CrossFit outweigh the risks—but the risks are real.”

While all exercise can create injury, Geier sees more injuries with CrossFit because of the high-speed, high-impact approach. Certain exercises implemented by CrossFit (Olympic lifts, specifically) are meant to be done in moderation. But CrossFit preaches pushing to the edge of every set, every rep, until there’s nothing left in the tank. And while training to muscular failure is notoriously debatable, one thing is certain: Regularly pushing your body to failure can lead to serious health risks, like rhabdomyolysis.

“I have always taken the stance that training to failure causes useless fatigue,” says Mark Peterson, an exercise physiologist from the University of Michigan’s department of physical medicine. “Whereas

fatigue is a normal side effect of certain types of metabolic training, I do not believe it has a time or place in training for strength and power.”

The real danger is to new athletes, like those who flock to the thousands of CrossFit facilities looking for a great workout. Word of mouth is powerful in the CrossFit community, and maybe the most dangerous element. While the workouts can be performed by beginners, their immature muscles can't tell the difference between training to failure and simply getting a good workout. In fact, most beginners don't know when “too much is too much” and don't understand the unique demand of an exercise session, says Eric Cressey, C.S.C.S., a shoulder and injury prevention expert and owner of Cressey Performance in Hudson, Mass.

Since many explosive movements require technical skill, he says, it is not advisable for Olympic lifts be completed in a fatigued state. CrossFit, and other popular workout schemes like boot camps, rely on training to excessive exhaustion and failure, and thereby create an artificial perception of effectiveness. “These people might be doing a crazy workout and feel great because their endorphins are flowing, but then they wake up with their shoulder pounding with pain,” Cressey says.

His biggest concern is the technique that goes along with the workout. “When you see a 20-minute circuit of really ugly cleans and ring dips, those are exercises that don't jive well,” he says.

The Fitness Solution?

This much is certain: When done correctly, CrossFit is not inherently bad or ineffective. Like other training methodologies before it, CrossFit is a form of high intensity exercise, an efficient model of exercise that has helped many people lose weight while improving strength and endurance. But due to its extensive popularity, many CrossFit gyms have diluted the system. Just as some first-time CrossFit athletes rush into overdoing exercises in a fatigued state and, thus, falter in form, CrossFit coaches and affiliates are rushing into setting up CrossFit gyms and are, thus, faltering in form.

The problems stem from inexperienced trainers. CrossFit level-1 trainers are certified after completing a two-day seminar and 50-multiple-choice-question exam. That's all you need to open up a CrossFit gym and start training as many athletes as you want.

Zach Even-Esh, a CrossFit trainer at New Jersey's Underground Strength Coach, says the trainers at level-1 are just scratching the tip of the iceberg. “They tell you at level-1 that this is an introduction to understanding the basis of what CrossFit is about and that you need to take it to the next level,” he says. But the reality is, someone with two days of education could be leading your next CrossFit class.

That's not to say there aren't well-experienced trainers coaching CrossFit across the country, but with a certification and affiliation so simple to attain, the program's becoming diluted with inexperienced trainers who are hurting people. Cressey suggests those who want to be trainers should wait one year before getting a certification. “If you have it without any experience, it makes you a liability, not a professional,” he says.

The real question is: Can the growing CrossFit industry slow down to make sure its trainers are adequately prepared to train their clients? According to CrossFit headquarters, 150 applications arrive every month, which amounts to about five CrossFit affiliated gyms per day, assuming all applications are accepted. To put in perspective, in 2006, Starbucks set up an average of six stores per day.

CrossFit trainers and affiliates simply sign up to affiliate after receiving their level-1 certification and pay a monthly fee from then on out. There are never calls from headquarters pushing for further education or refresher courses.

“It does hurt the community because some people don’t go out and educate themselves,” Even-Esh says. And there is no lack of furthering education in the CrossFit community. The program offers level-2 training and specialty seminars in areas like kettle bell, mobility, power lifting, running and more. The classes are offered all over the country; CrossFit comes to the coaches, making it overly accessible. Even-Esh says he thinks CrossFit headquarters should even go as far as requiring coaches to get a specialty certification every once in a while to keep their affiliation.

The presiding hope among the CrossFit community is that this exercise movement can help reverse the growing obesity trend by creating a more active society. “I remember in the early days, Greg [Glassman] saying that CrossFit athletes aren’t found, they’re made,” says CrossFit Santa Cruz’s Molloy. And while CrossFit motivates its followers to exercise, the growing fear is that the current model and lack of monitoring is more likely to build broken bodies than create a healthier nation.