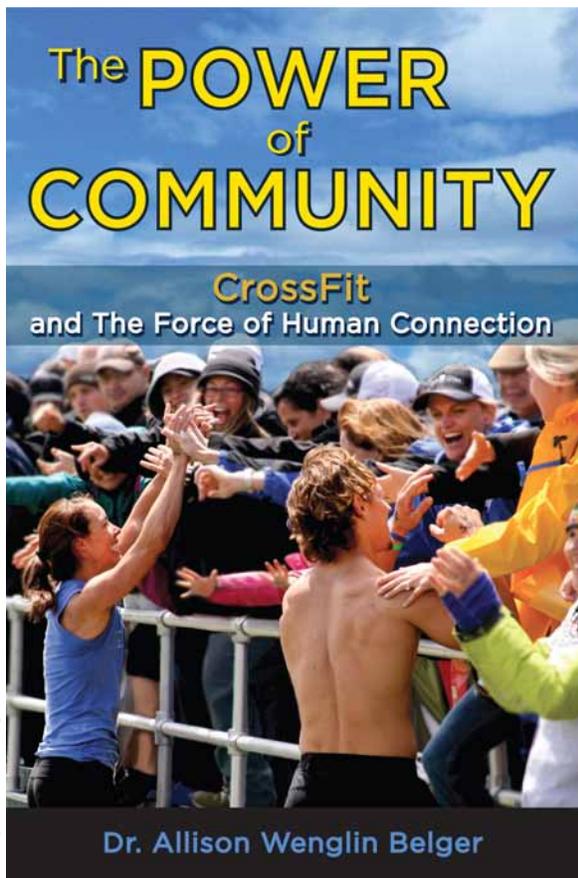

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The Ties That Bind

T.J. Murphy reviews Dr. Allison Belger's new look at the bonds formed in the CrossFit community.

By T.J. Murphy

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The Power of Community: CrossFit and the Force of Human Connection, by Dr. Allison Belger. 272 pp. Victory Belt Publishing. \$24.95.

Saturday morning, April 28, 2012, standing on the gritty blacktop at San Francisco CrossFit (SFCF), I watched a carnivorous-looking row of Cat 330D L Hydraulic Excavators, 79,700 lb. apiece, lowering multi-joint booms with pulverizing hammers into Doyle Drive, an elevated road that formerly connected the Golden Gate Bridge to central San Francisco.

The percussion unleashed into the earth ran up through my skeleton, and it felt like I was under the dentist's drill. Sections of the highway were crushed one at a time, leaving behind chunks of ripped up-rock with vascular metal piping protruding from the gashes. A shower of mist was arced into the air from an orange cylinder to dampen down the steady explosions of concrete dust.

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C.J. Rendic/TJ's Gym

Dr. Belger competing in the 2009 CrossFit Games held at The Ranch in Aromas, Calif.

Separating SFCF from the demolition was a chain-link fence and a few hundred feet. It was sunny, and a burning smell hung in the air. The roar of jackhammers and the grind of the diesel engines drowned out the rap music the gym was playing through outdoor speakers. I was doing burpees next to a SFCF storage container. The demolition didn't scare many off from the morning WODs. The gym was brimming with more than 20 CrossFitters.

***The Power of Community* by
Dr. Allison Belger delivers an
authoritative perspective.**

One of the SFCF coaches, Angel Orozco, a San Francisco native in hooded SFCF sweatshirt and sunglasses, saw me in my moment of awe and joined me to watch.

"This," Angel said with a broad smile, looking at the crew of athletes working out with the visual and sonic backdrop of the demolition, "is what CrossFit is all about."

The Power of Community by Dr. Allison Belger delivers an authoritative perspective on why this is so.

Belger is a psychologist and co-owner of four CrossFit affiliates in Marin, Calif., with her husband, T.J. She was also on the team from T.J.'s Gym that won the 2011 NorCal Regional. In *The Power of Community*, Belger submits her professional perspective on the mechanics underlying the community-building reputation that CrossFit has crafted in the last decade since the template was cut by Greg Glassman's original Santa Cruz gym.

Belger's perspective though, is not that of the outside-looking-in academic. Rather, to illustrate her points, Belger weaves in stories she's witnessed firsthand as an affiliate owner or from the CrossFit world:

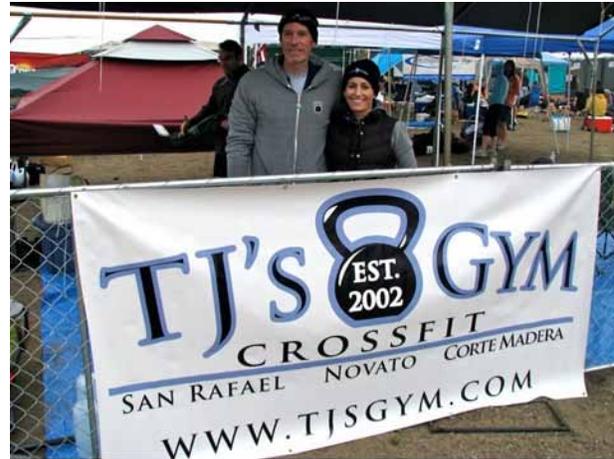
- Margie, a distraught woman in the midst of a family emergency, does something completely out of the ordinary for her and reaches out to her new CrossFit community for help. She receives an outpouring of support even from members she hasn't met.
- Olivia, 16 years old and 227 lb., joins a CrossFit community and transforms her body, becomes an athlete and recharges her self-esteem. She now helps coach a CrossFit Kids program.
- Matt, a father of two, fell 60 feet from a cliff when mountain biking and suffered a shattered pelvis, myriad broken bones and a punctured lung. During Matt's unsurprisingly difficult rehab period, the members of his gym were there in full support, helping his family at home, delivering dinners, helping move furniture, constantly checking in on him.

Belger reports stories from a variety of worlds CrossFit has affected, from the military to the corporate to the addiction-rehabilitation communities.

“It's got to be something that ordinarily would be too hard to do alone.”

—Dr. Allison Belger

With contrasting research that suggests communities in the United States have suffered immense decline in the last half-century, Belger describes why CrossFit is seemingly moving against the stream. Writes Belger, “Life in the trenches involves intense situations at physical, emotional, hormonal, and interpersonal levels so life-altering, even life threatening, that they are the natural building blocks for bonding with others.”



CJ, Render/TJ's Gym

“Having a pal at your side makes it possible.”—Dr. Allison Belger

At a speech delivered to a group of designers interested in the correlation between community and habitats, Belger talked about how the direct relationship between “levels of suffering” fuels community cohesiveness.

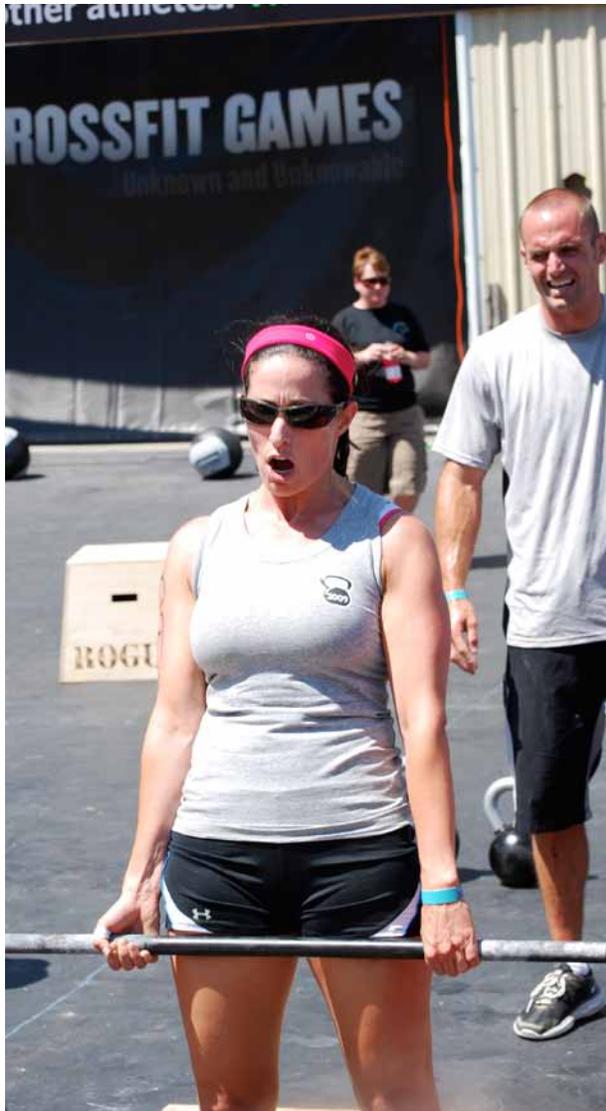
“It's got to be a little gritty,” she said.

That's just like the scene at SFCF with CrossFitters working out at high intensity alongside a major road-demolition project.

“It's got to be something that ordinarily would be too hard to do alone, and that having a pal at your side makes it possible,” Belger added.

Belger asked the audience to consider the most powerful experiences of their lives and asked if they were enabled by a group dynamic. Everyone raised hands. This is the key, Belger says, to CrossFit's life-changing dynamic.

According to Greg Amundson, who joined Glassman's CrossFit gym in December of 2001 and saw the community aspect of CrossFit develop before his eyes, Belger's point was as true then as it is now.



Matt Barnes/TJ's Gym

Dr. Belger knows CrossFit because she does CrossFit.

"It was a magic place," Amundson says of the facility—the size of a one-car garage—that lived at 2851 Research Park Dr. in Santa Cruz. "With the WOD, in the gym, you had an honest-to-goodness fight on your hands. You finished the WOD, and you really accomplished something. You're sweating, your throat's burning, you have calluses."

But what earned you status within the gym was not whether you finished first or last, and your status outside the gym had no bearing on the degree of your belonging.

"The only thing that mattered was effort. That's what drove the community. That's how you earned status."

Jim Baker, who was in his 50s at the time and one of the founding members of the gym, recalls the unique effect of this brand of inclusiveness.

"I was 30 years older than the others, like Mike Weaver, who were doing the workout," Baker recalls. "They finished the WOD and could have gone out and got coffee and come back before I was finished. But there they were, clapping for me and helping me finish."

Now a co-owner and coach at CrossFit Santa Cruz Central, Baker says their new T-shirts are inscribed with the phrase, "Victory is in the Effort."

A personal moment that caught me off guard illuminated the power Belger, Amundson and Baker speak of. I recently moved from San Diego, and on Feb. 28, my last day at CrossFit Elysium, I sat near the workout area with coach Paul Estrada and a few of my gym mates after the WOD. We spoke a bit about perfunctory things, but it was mostly quiet in a sad way. A month before, I had told everyone I was leaving, and through to that moment I had a strange feeling I'd never come close to experiencing in terms of a gym: grief.

I felt grief in leaving behind the band of brothers and sisters I'd become a part of. Sitting there with Coach Paul and the others, the distinct feeling in the air was loss. Belger helped me understand that the reason I felt the way I did is that the glue that binds people together—the work, pain and shared sense of accomplishment—is especially acute in the CrossFit world.

For CrossFitters reading Belger's book, they'll see stories and patterns that will remind them of their own experience at their affiliates, and the book will lend a historical perspective and analysis from a psychologist who knows CrossFit inside out. She also offers insight on why community is a dangerous thing to lose in our world.

What I found the book wanting was more critical analysis from her unique position. With CrossFit growing at such an exponential pace, what are the keys for affiliate owners to keep in mind in balancing growth and the retention of the community energy? What are the threats? When a box begins to boom and class sizes go from 5 to 25, can the community power she speaks of be sustained? Because we can assume that CrossFitters consider their local affiliate as they would a church, retaining these qualities is an emotionally charged issue.

In the chapter "Team, Competition and Community," Belger has nothing but positive things to say about the rise of the Reebok CrossFit Games and the increase in the number of small competitions, like local throwdowns, that can be assumed to be affecting the programming and atmospheres of at least some affiliates. But how will these relatively new forces in the CrossFit world impact the spirit Amundson and Baker talk about? How do we ensure the drive for competition results never erodes the simple and essential respect for effort that has been a part of the DNA of CrossFit since the beginning?

In the epilogue, Belger cites one of her reasons for writing the book: "My hope is that you've been inspired by the narratives of ordinary people doing extraordinary things," and that you may be fired up to "take in the power of community and make positive changes in your life."

Belger absolutely achieves this mission. I hope we can look forward to further writings by Belger where she can further develop this important discussion.



Courtesy of Dr. Allison Belger

The Belger family.

About the Author

T.J. Murphy is the editor-at-large for Competitor Magazine. His writing has appeared in Outside Magazine, Triathlete and Inside Triathlon.