
THE

CrossFit JOURNAL

Work or Work Out?

It's easy to find time to work out if you own a gym—or is it? Dr. Allison Belger talks to affiliate owners about how they find balance in their busy lives.

By Dr. Allison Belger TJ's Gym

June 2011



Courtesy of Allison Belger

Imagine how clean your clothes would be if you owned a dry-cleaning business, or how fancy your meals would be if you ran a catering company. Maybe you would have perfect teeth if you were an orthodontist or immaculate window treatments if you were a decorator. Or, maybe if you were a CrossFit affiliate owner, you would be in awesome shape all the time, because, after all, you would own your gym.

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Busy, Busy

The reality is it takes a lot of time and energy to run a successful CrossFit affiliate that attracts and retains members. As co-owner of TJ's Gym's three affiliates—with a fourth on the way—I know first-hand the demands facing affiliate owners.

Like me, many affiliate owners have other jobs and commitments that demand time and resources, making the venture more challenging. So what happens to the busy affiliate owners' efforts to walk the talk? Is it possible for them to work out with the consistency and intensity that's required? Might it be especially frustrating for the leaders of these large gym communities—who inspire hundreds of athletes every day to make choices that improve their quality of life—to realize they sometimes don't have time in their day or energy in their systems to make those same choices for themselves?

Intrigued by these questions, I sent an informal e-mail questionnaire to owners of some of CrossFit's largest gym communities:

- Andy Petranek of CrossFit LA
- C.J. Martin of CrossFit Invictus
- Kelly Starrett of San Francisco CrossFit
- TJ Belger, also known as my husband, of TJ's Gyms

These men share a passion for their work, a drive for excellence in coaching and customer service, and a commitment to their communities. Three of them are fathers, and together they have more than 25 years of CrossFit experience. Two have competed at the CrossFit Games, and all four have coached Games athletes.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Running an affiliate is a big job. Can you find time to work out when you're always running workouts?

Many affiliate owners have other jobs and commitments that demand time and resources, making the venture more challenging.

Petranek, Starrett and Martin all have an arm of their work that is separate from the gym. Petranek runs The Biz, an interactive business-training module for CrossFit affiliate owners. Starrett is a physical therapist with a private practice and also travels the world teaching CrossFit mobility and injury-prevention seminars, and Martin programs workouts for distance athletes online. Meanwhile, Belger solely focuses on his gyms.

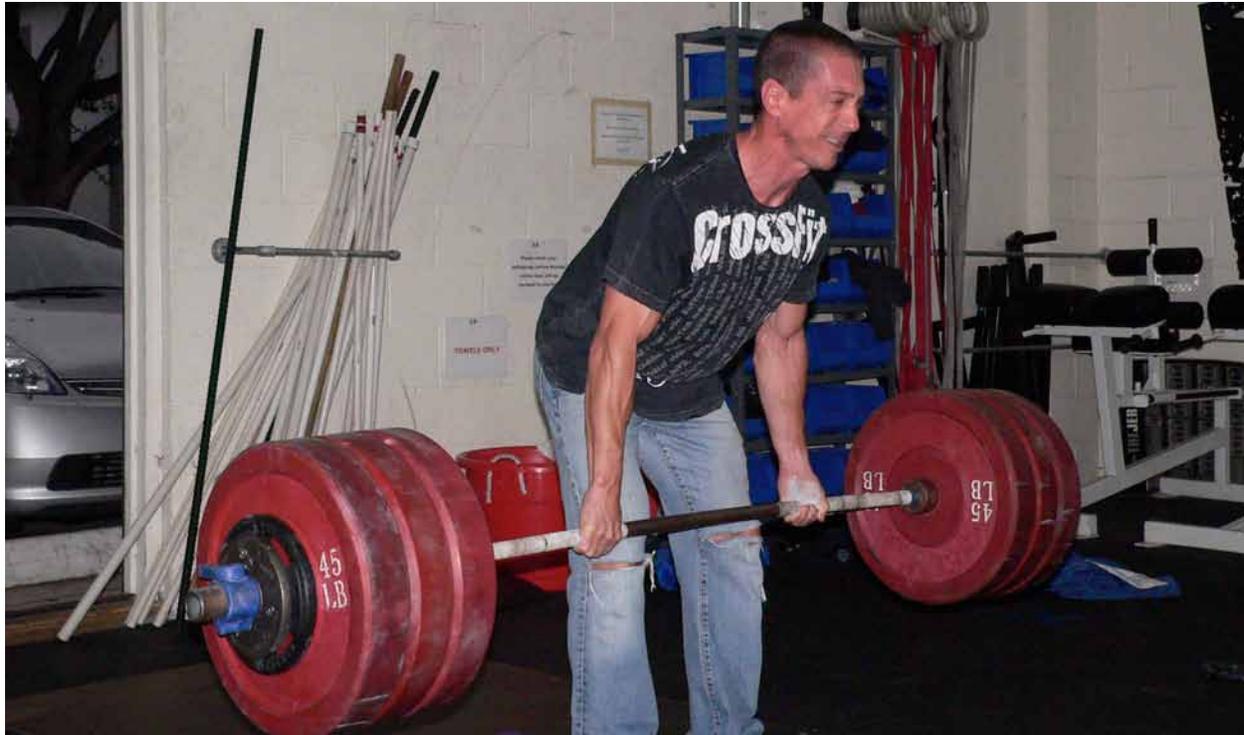
These coaches vary as to how many hours of class coaching they do, with Belger doing the most at 20 hours per week and Martin doing the least at five to six. Belger also spends the most time on personal sessions and other semi-private sessions, while Martin spends the least amount of his time this way. Petranek meets with prospective clients three hours each week. Starrett logs approximately 25 hours per week at San Francisco CrossFit's canopy gym, splitting time between his physical-therapy practice and teaching classes. He travels twice each month to teach CrossFit Mobility Seminars.

Belger is clearly on the gym floor the most and said he realizes this will need to change soon to manage the rate at which business is growing. While he said he's reluctant to give up time with clients, he looks forward to being able to focus more on developing and implementing various programs that will benefit athletes. Martin seems to already operate from this framework; he admits to spending 40-60 hours per week working on his computer. He tends to work on such things as financials for the gym, programming, blog content and all other aspects of running the business.



Courtesy of C.J. Rendic

Coaching is only one aspect of an affiliate owner's job.



Courtesy of Michael Stanwyck

Andy Petranek is a busy guy who needs to fit in a few deadlifts whenever he can.

"I cannot believe I am saying this and never thought I would, but I spend way more time on the computer as a gym owner than I ever did as an attorney," Martin said.

Coming in at a close second is Petranek, who spends 35 hours looking at his screen, running CFLA and The Biz. Belger spends the least amount of time as a "desk jockey" but still estimates he's there 8-10 hours weekly. He acknowledged he's able to spend less time on operations because I do most of the computer work for the gyms, and we have coaches programming for our adult, teen and children's programs. Starrett and his wife, Juliet, manage San Francisco CrossFit administration and operations for 40 hours per week on the computer.

WOD Time

While the time these owners and coaches spend on assorted tasks varies, their time spent working out is quite similar across the board. All four men aim for about five hours per week of workout time, including stretching and mobility work. But they have various levels of consistency within this framework and differ as to how protective they are of their workout time.

After serving as an officer in the U.S. Marines, Andy is, by far, the most regimented about his training. He strictly adheres to a schedule of three days on, one off followed by two on, one off. He works out only in classes and does not stray from the CFLA programming.

"One of the things I love about CrossFit is that I really don't have to think about it," he said. "When I do the programming or supervise the programming, I just think about what the ultimate CFLA CrossFitter would need to get in their training to make them the best CrossFit athlete they can be. And then I forget about it."

He added: "I really don't like thinking day in and day out about what my training is going to include or look like. I'd much rather show up for class and really not know what's going to happen."

Andy is so religious about his workout times that he said he will even make potential new members wait.

"I might motion to them or wave to them and say, 'Hey, I'm in the middle of this, and I'll be with you in a few minutes.'"

Less likely to work out through distractions are the other owners. Martin struggled so much for so long he decided to put his training in someone else's hands.

"I have outsourced all thought about my workouts and have handed the reins to James (OPT) FitzGerald," he said.

The two work together to create a program flexible enough to account for Martin's travel and other commitments. Although Martin does put his workouts in his schedule a week ahead of time, he said he doesn't always stick to his own itinerary.

"I'd be lying if I told you that I actually complete my workouts at the scheduled times all the time," he said. "I try really hard to do so, but I often get caught up when I walk into the gym with a bunch of questions from members and coaches, so my workout time is often delayed."

"I really don't like thinking day in and day out about what my training is going to include or look like. I'd much rather show up for class and really not know what's going to happen."

—Andy Petranek



Courtesy of Becca Borowski

Petranek might be running to the bank with the day's deposits, or he might be working out. Tough call.

Staff/CrossFit Journal



Being a coach doesn't mean you have to give up on your own goals, but you do need to focus much of your energy on your athletes.

Belger is similar to Martin when it comes to his workouts.

While he does try to schedule workouts a week in advance, he's hardly protective of those times. They often become filled by operational needs, member questions or new-client intro requests. As the gatekeeper of his schedule, I'm guilty of rescheduling workouts to accommodate client needs. TJ's biggest constraint when it comes to working out is putting down the various balls he's juggling at any given moment long enough to fit in a workout. Ballet/soccer dad, gym owner, pro bono physical-education teacher, mentor—each role requires time and energy. There is simply not always enough time to devote to a workout. And when there is, the unexpected often arises.

"I have gotten extremely frustrated in the past with my 'training.' I put that in quotation marks because regularly it falls into the category of exercise. I would love to bring the intensity and capacity to my workouts that our higher-end competitors do, but it's just not possible right now," he said.

TJ would focus on "broad and general" goals, such as a 1-rep-max back squat or a better Fran time, he said, but something always came up.

"I would then start putting huge pressure on myself to get back to that goal, and typically I would end up hurting myself," he said. "I would get angry or bitter about the whole process and then just walk away from my own training. Obviously, this is a terrible situation, especially being an affiliate owner."

TJ said he's still in the process of figuring out how to be comfortable with his sub-optimal efforts and training results. His goal is to keep his workouts inside an hour on weekdays and to do mobility work whenever possible at home, he said. For now, he said he's OK with simply working out when he can.

"Shockingly," he joked, "I have found that functional movements performed at a high intensity improve my overall fitness. I still get the bumps in the road that all affiliate owners have, but I now know that it isn't the end of the world, training-wise."

Starrett, meanwhile, has two young daughters and knows about interrupted plans.

His attitude is that parenting forces you to be more flexible. And for him, this has translated into being comfortable with last-minute workouts or late-night WODs in his home gym. While he tries to train at his outdoor affiliate as often as possible, “the timing is always compressed and of poor quality,” he said.

“My training is brutalized by travel/job, etc. Yes, my workouts often get canned. I invented the 10x5: 10 thrusters, 10 pull-ups, 10 burpees for 10 minutes at 10 p.m. Try it. You won’t feel sorry for yourself for long,” he continued. “The bottom line is ‘suck it up.’ I’m living the dream surrounded by an amazing family, community, athletes, coaches, etc.”

If Kelly is working out at San Francisco CrossFit and is interrupted by a prospective client or member need, he said he’s usually all right with that.

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—TJ Belger



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Kelly Starrett is incredibly busy but still finds time to hit a WOD, even if it’s at 10 p.m. in his garage.

"It's only a workout. I'm training with a much bigger goal in mind," he said. "So if I'm tired and jet-lagged and have a terrible workout, it's OK because I'm coming back tomorrow."

Training for a Higher Purpose

All four men acknowledge they are motivated to train, at least in part, because they realize they are leaders for the athletes in their gyms.

Indeed, Martin cites his main motivations for working out as being "my own health and the ability to live up to my personal mission. One of my missions for Invictus and myself is to inspire and empower others to achieve their full potential. If I am not fulfilling mine, my ability to inspire others will be blunted."

Martin has been forced to reckon with this pressure over time and has only recently found ways to prioritize his own workouts. He tends to put the needs and wants of those around him before his own, he said, and he thus hit a burnout point a few months back.

Now, he said he's "more aware that if I don't take care of myself and prioritize my own workouts and fitness, I will not be able to help and inspire others as effectively."

He added: "They still take a back seat to certain events, and admittedly, when things get really busy, my workouts get trimmed. For things like regionals and (the) Games, my own training is out the window. I worked out up until two days before the 2010 Games but then took most of the next week off. I coached our team and two individuals, which meant I was running from one event to another all day. I didn't realize how exhausted I was until it was over. I could barely stay awake until mid-afternoon for the next couple of days, and it wasn't until a few days after that when I started feeling back to normal."

"I think your athletes need to see you suffer. ... Our athletes know we do the same kind of training they do, and we share our suffering."

—Kelly Starrett



C.J. Martin lists health as one of the main factors that sends him from the office to the squat rack.

Martin said he has also learned to lighten up and not put as much pressure on himself as he used to when working out.

"My workouts are not always too intense. I am not competing at anything, and I put a lot of pressure on myself in other aspects of my life. It's led to me overdoing it in the past and having to combat some nasty adrenal-fatigue issues. Working with James FitzGerald has helped me get back to a healthy place where I enjoy my workouts. I also do some Olympic-lifting technique work with Sage (Burgener) and a bunch of my friends and members. That's a very fun, relaxing time, where I can hang out with folks and get a little bit of skill work done."

Although he is grateful for his job, friends and rewards that come with helping others, Martin said there are things he can't experience in the same ways as his athletes.

"My coaches and I absolutely give 100 percent of ourselves. I do it because I love helping others," he said. "But there are certainly times where I am jealous of their progress and ability to focus on being an athlete."

Starrett notes that he doesn't need a coach because he has access to people like Adrian Bozman, Diane Fu, Angel Orozco and his wife.

"The only reason I can do a single thruster is this gang. They inspire me," he said.

The mobility expert said he's motivated to show his athletes what it's like to struggle with workouts, so he saves heavy lifting for times when he can be at the gym.

"I think your athletes need to see you suffer," he said. "I need to be fit for me. I train no matter what because it's just as hard for my traveling executive athletes to train. Our athletes know we do the same kind of training they do, and we share our suffering."

Petranek said he's aware he has purposefully crafted a lifestyle that enables him to do something extremely important to him: work out with regularity and intensity. He appears to be more driven in this regard than the others, and his self-direction is apparent.

"I'm not a person that needs a whole heck of a lot of assistance with motivation," he said.

For Petranek, gone are the days of working out for aesthetics or even competing with others. What drives him most days is maintaining the authenticity of his position as a coach, much as he once was driven to be a leader in the Marine Corps.

"As a Marine officer, I felt that I needed to be able to lead the way. And I would be inauthentic as an officer and as a leader if I wasn't able to physically do the things that my men could do," he said. "I have a hard time being a coach when I'm not actively engaged in what I'm doing."

While Belger also tries to lead by example, he gives himself more leeway when it comes to life interfering with workouts.

"I have come to realize that I am no different from many of the athletes who come to our program. I work long hours and have family demands just like they do. I have aches and pains as well as goals and aspirations," he said.



Courtesy of Jeremy Jones

Most affiliate owners will tell you it's important to work out with the members to build community.

“I have a hard time being a coach when I’m not actively engaged in what I’m doing.”

—Andy Petranek

When TJ does find time to work out, he said he enjoys it most when he can train with clients.

“I love the camaraderie and spirit. I goof around, throw in some false bravado, yelling at people in jest, challenging them to beat me at something that I know they can,” he said. “Plus, I love being coached. I have absolutely no ego about this stuff. I soak up the attention and always walk away from a class with something great to hold onto.”

To Train or Compete?

But what about the possibility of competing at a higher level? What about being vulnerable in front of the athletes who come to the gym expecting to be inspired by a fire-breathing gym owner? On the flip side, what about posting results when performances are strong and potentially off-putting to less skilled athletes? It seems that each man is comfortable with his status as an athlete within his community.

Andy used to work out to improve aesthetics, and he competed at the 2009 CrossFit Games as the oldest individual competitor. Now, he said, he trains to be in shape and finds the competitive drive internally.

“It’s really a competition within myself—a physical test of myself,” he said. “One of the things I love about CrossFit is that I’m constantly confronted by people who can do more than I can.”



Courtesy of Don Ricci

Working out in a group is great motivation for clients and owners alike.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Busy as he is, K-Starr can still find time for “short” workouts including the Quad Dipsea trail run.

TJ also posts his workout results.

“I have been told hundreds of times how great it is for our community to see someone who has 24-hour access to a gym struggle to get solid, consistent, training sessions done,” he said.

“One of the things I love about CrossFit is that I’m constantly confronted by people who can do more than I can.”

—Andy Petranek

Martin said he grapples with his desire for training on a consistent basis. Clearly rewarded by his work as a coach and teacher, he has a difficult time accessing internal inspiration for himself and his own training. He learned this while competing in the 2007 Games.

“I was there to have fun and see some of these monsters in person. It was phenomenal. By the time 2008 came around, I was doing a lot of coaching and realized I enjoyed and was much better at that,” he said.

Starrett is also familiar with putting athletes ahead of his own competition goals. Having coached his affiliate team for some time now, he is considering competing this year alongside his wife and friends. His attitude about training might seem a bit lax to some, but it seems to work for him.

“Training is training,” he said. “Getting overly psyched doesn’t work for me.”

As for holding onto the idea that he, as an affiliate owner, should be the top performer, Starrett said, “Maintaining some idea that you are the best in your gym is unrealistic. We attract monsters.”

Another Perspective

My own experience resonates with that of these four men.

Most days, I’m pressed for time at the gym and struggle to get enough sleep, be a good enough mother, give enough focus and attention to my work as a psychologist, and maintain my sanity.

Still, for me, working out is not something that ever gets put on the back burner. It’s like eating and sleeping: I need to do it to function. That said, maintaining the intensity of CrossFit training is often a challenge, especially as I hold onto the hope of competing. There are more and more days when I find myself in the middle of a workout wondering how I can expect to push myself to such limits when I’ve been working for hours on end answering e-mails, setting up memberships, developing new programs—the list goes on.

Yes, it’s a wonderful life and a job with incredible rewards and countless opportunities to change lives for the better. No, I wouldn’t trade it for the world, nor would any of the guys whose stories I’ve told. But it is, I think, important to monitor one’s training in light of the sometimes-excessive demands in this life, and that’s part of the equation which is often overlooked.

Martin is especially passionate about this topic. Here is what he had to say:

Owning an affiliate is not a hobby. This should be a professional career if you want to be successful as a coach and business owner. For folks that love working out and find themselves owning a CrossFit affiliate, the demands of business can be a rude awakening and it can rob them of the passion that led them into this field in the first place . . . I found myself in a really bad place after coaching and helping to run CrossFit San Diego while still working as an attorney, and in the first year of opening Invictus and spending every waking hour at the gym. Three years of running non-stop and then tossing in some high-intensity exercise completely smashed me. I felt tired and my workouts were terrible. The more I tried to push through it, the worse I felt.

It wasn't until earlier this year that I realized the need to get better control of my schedule, health and fitness (thanks in large part to James FitzGerald). I am on the road back, but it is a long and frustrating road. It's frustrating to be building back up to fitness levels that you had achieved years ago. I sincerely hope that this article might be able to help some folks out there avoid what I went through, and what I have been helping some other affiliate owners get through. Or at the very least, I hope they are inspired to hook up with a coach, mentor or friend who can hold up a mirror and help them see that they're doing nobody any favors if they're not prioritizing their own health and fitness.



Courtesy of Dr. Allison Belger

About the Author

Allison Belger lives with her husband, TJ, and their two young daughters in Marin County, Calif. They own and operate *TJ's Gym*, with three CrossFit affiliates: CrossFit San Rafael, CrossFit Corte Madera and CrossFit Novato. Allison is a clinical psychologist specializing in assessments of children, adolescents and young adults. She juggles management of the family business, her private psychology practice and her role as mom. Although Allison recently began fitness coaching after finding CrossFit in 2008, she has a long history of involvement in athletics, as both a player and a coach. Allison played soccer at the Division 1 level in college and has since coached a number of youth soccer teams in the Bay Area. Allison has a bachelor's degree from Dartmouth College, a master's in learning disabilities from Northwestern University, and a doctorate in clinical psychology from the Wright Institute in Berkeley, Calif.