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Eschewing the Fat

Many trainers avoid addressing the topic of nutrition with clients. Top CrossFit coaches think that's a mistake and explain how and why they broach the subject with athletes.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

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Dave Re / CrossFit Journal

Alyssa Guenther thought her coach was crazy.

A vegetarian of four years at the time, Guenther often felt sick—upset stomach, headaches, general lethargy.

"I was feeling the downward slope," she recently explained.

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In the CrossFit's Theoretical Hierarchy of Development, nutrition is the foundation of athletic performance. Every other component—metabolic conditioning, gymnastics, weightlifting and throwing, and sport—relies on that foundation.

Still, when CrossFit Roots owner Nicole Christensen asked Guenther about her diet and suggested she consider adding meat—specifically via a Paleo challenge—she was met with skepticism.

"I was kind of like, 'Ugh. Yikes. I'm going to get sick,'" Guenther remembered. "I felt like being a vegetarian (was) part of my personal identity. I felt like it was going to be changing a lot. It definitely gave me pause for a while."

But Christensen was thoughtful about her approach.

"It's important to first find out why the person is eating the way they are. Are they eating vegetarian because of religious or moral reasons in regards to animals, or do they want to be lean and think that eating a vegetarian diet will get them there? If it's the latter, it's an easy point to start a discussion," she said.

Christensen knew Guenther's goals included being a lean and strong CrossFit athlete. Armed with information and support, Christensen felt Guenther could start to consider making the switch.

She was right. And Guenther added meat back into her diet.

"I'll do almost anything that you tell me if eventually it's going to help me be healthier and fitter," she explained.

Christensen—a member of CrossFit's Level 1 and Level 2 seminar staffs—said she started with the goal and worked backward.

CrossFit coaches often ignore nutrition or deem it too sensitive a topic to broach. Therein lies the mistake, Christensen said.

"I posed the question as, 'If you could be leaner and stronger and better at CrossFit by eating meat, would you consider it?'"

Nutrition is the base of CrossFit Inc. Founder and CEO Greg Glassman's Theoretical Hierarchy of Development pyramid. Yet, CrossFit coaches often ignore nutrition or deem it too sensitive a topic to broach. Therein lies the mistake, Christensen said.

"A lot of affiliates are doing their members a disservice (by) selling them CrossFit as a stand-alone thing and not giving their athletes, as a starting point, (education about nutrition)."

CrossFit coaches must go beyond only concerning themselves with how much an athlete can deadlift, said Maggie Tincher (formerly Dabe), of CrossFit Fairfax and CrossFit Reston in Virginia.

"We wouldn't be actually giving them all the services that we can," explained Tincher, a member of CrossFit's Level 1 Seminar Staff. Coaches must help clients understand that "whatever they eat affects their performance, and if they want to become better athletes, they need to change the eating habits."

Politics, Religion and Nutrition

In October 2002, Glassman explained the pyramid in the CrossFit Journal article "What Is Fitness? Less than two years later, in May 2004, the Journal published "CFJ Issue 21: Zone Meal Plans." It included an explanation of the Zone Diet, as well as sample meals. The article, reproduced in its entirety, became a key part of the "CrossFit Level 1 Training Guide."

"It's easier to change people's religion than it is their nutrition."

—Ben Bergeron

"Finely tuned, a good diet will increase energy, sense of well being and acumen, while simultaneously flensing fat and packing on muscle. When properly composed the right diet can nudge every important quantifiable marker for health in the right direction," Glassman wrote. "Diet is critical to optimizing human function."



Agust Sigurjonsson / CrossFit Journal

In addition to coaching physical performance, CrossFit coaches have a responsibility to educate clients about nutrition as well.

So why the trepidation to address it?

"Everyone is an expert on nutrition because everyone's been eating since they were babies," explained Ben Bergeron, owner of CrossFit New England in Massachusetts and a former member of CrossFit's Level 1 Seminar Staff.

Nutrition is woven into tradition, heritage, culture, even religion.

"It's really ingrained in people," he continued. "It's easier to change people's religion than it is their nutrition."

At CrossFit Fairfax and CrossFit Reston, the boxes' diverse membership means trainers must be cognizant of foreign customs and, therefore, different ways of eating. Athletes at those boxes are from Asia, the Middle East and South America, to name a few regions.

And over the years talking about nutrition has gotten intense, Tincher said.

"We've had clients come to the office just crying (about whatever issues they have with food.)"

Austin Malleolo—a four-time CrossFit Games competitor, Level 1 and Level 2 seminar staff member and head coach at Reebok CrossFit One in Massachusetts—said he understands why nutrition can be a touchy subject.

"Eating is a social thing, and it's tied to fun, it's tied to letting loose, it's tied to excitement. I think that's why it's so hard," said Malleolo, who in October 2014 opened his own affiliate, CrossFit One Nation.

Malleolo likened changing someone's eating habits to trying to convince a 30-year powerlifter to do CrossFit. It's an uphill battle.

"I think it's one of the most difficult things to do consistently and get change," he said, "because you have no control over what people do outside the gym."



Brian Sullivan/CrossFit Journal

CrossFit Roots owner Nicole Christensen said coaches have to be invested in their clients' nutrition if they want to see them succeed.

The Approach

Once a person walks through the doors, the goal is simply to get him or her to focus on CrossFit for the first few weeks, Tincher said.

"Once I establish a relationship with them, then I start asking them questions about their nutrition."

She continued: "If that client doesn't have any type of connection, if they don't feel like you care, they won't be sharing the way that they eat."

Getting athletes to make significant changes to their diet requires care and consideration, Christensen said.

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Christensen added: "You have to really care about their success because it really is a 24/7 thing."

The nutrition challenges at CrossFit Roots, for example, involve groups of athletes being assigned to the affiliate's coaches. Those athletes must keep a food log and may email, text or call the coaches regardless of the time—day or night.

"It's exhausting, I'm not gonna lie," said Christensen in early November 2014, shortly after her affiliate started a nutrition challenge. "I've been looking at food logs every day."

Most CrossFit Roots members who participate in the recurring nutrition challenges—which last anywhere from four weeks to eight—continue eating in the same fashion

once the challenge ends. Any affiliate owner will tell you that's an impressive success rate.

"Maybe one out of 40 people will just fail," Christensen said.

At the get-go, coaches email participants a 17-page packet that outlines the challenge's rules, information about which foods and beverages are off limits, as well as sample meals.

But before all that, new members receive an introduction to nutrition via CrossFit Roots' Foundations Course. After both the fifth and sixth classes—out of nine—coaches email reading material explaining how people get fat, the importance of quality of food and the CrossFit Inc.-recommended Zone Diet. In the final 15 minutes of each of those Foundations classes, coaches discuss CrossFit Roots' approach to nutrition.

"About 50 percent of our intro session is on nutrition," Christensen explained. "We don't talk about hormones or the body's response to food. We go one level higher as a start point."

Sometimes, the affiliate's blog will focus on nutrition and coaches will informally chat with athletes about the post during warm-up. Also, members can always sign up for a month to work with a coach on their nutrition.

"If you really want them to make a change, you have to care enough," Christensen emphasized.

At Reebok CrossFit One, coaches bring up the topic of nutrition once a month and ask members if they're interested in sitting down with a coach for further discussion. If they're agreeable, athletes meet individually with a coach and bring a five-day food log so they can discuss what would be best going forward, Malleolo explained.

Contrary to CrossFit Fairfax, CrossFit Reston and CrossFit Roots, where regular nutrition challenges draw upward of 50 participants, similar efforts were not met with similar outcomes at Reebok CrossFit One. The affiliate has gone so far as to track triglyceride levels before and after a nutrition challenge, but most members simply didn't stick with that way of eating, Malleolo said.

"It doesn't become an impetus to a life challenge. It just becomes a challenge," he said. "I want to be able to see a life challenge."



Michael Brian / CrossFit Journal

Once solid nutrition is in place, athletes find more success in the gym.

Malleolo said he also wants such challenges to inspire people.

"But the reality is people who are inspired by (nutrition) challenges are going to seek me out. They will be the ones raising their hand and saying, 'I want to sit with coach and talk about nutrition.'"

In other words: They must be ready to change.

"You'll come to me when you're ready," Malleolo said.

Still, he expressed frustration at the number of athletes who simply don't care about nutrition. Out of Reebok CrossFit One's 500 members, roughly 10 religiously follow the Zone Diet, and more than 50 regularly eat whole foods.

"I have a hard time giving people everything I have (who) don't care. If you come up to me, I will give you everything I have," he said. "I'm also not going to drag you by your ear into the gym."

Measurable, Observable, Repeatable

After her conversation with Christensen, Guenther, the vegetarian, started the six-week Paleo challenge—with meat—at CrossFit Roots. Four weeks in, she applied the Zone Diet to her regimen. The difference was profound.

"I just started noticing my energy levels changing, my body composition changing, hitting a lot of PRs at the gym really, really fast," she said. "I started feeling better than I really ever had."

Guenther lost about 2 percent body fat, gained 2 lb. of lean muscle mass and improved her front squat by a whopping 50 lb.

"My legs took a different shape, my waist got so much smaller, the bloat was just gone, my stomach felt so much flatter and smaller," Guenther continued.

And, best of all, she shed her standard feeling that she was going to crash during the workout.

Guenther went from thinking Christensen was crazy to singing her praises.

"If you're going to ask someone to potentially make a life change when it comes to nutrition, then you better be doing it or have done it yourself."

—Austin Malleolo

"She's such a good teacher and such a good example."

For her part, Christensen credited her affiliate's attention to detail as the reason so many CrossFit Roots members find nutritional success long after a challenge has ended.

"I think the leading reason is the thoroughness of the accountability and the example of the coaches," she said.

Being a good example is key, Malleolo said.



Head coach at CrossFit Reebok One, Austin Malleolo said an athlete has to be ready to make a change in his or her nutrition in order to be truly successful.

Dave Re / CrossFit Journal



Athletes will thrive in CrossFit if they pair hard training with great nutrition. Trying to fuel top performance with a poor diet is a recipe for failure.

"If you're going to ask someone to potentially make a life change when it comes to nutrition, then you better be doing it or have done it yourself. It's the demonstration of the program. I live what I ask people to do. And my coaches do as well," he said.

"I can tell you exactly what you're going to feel like two weeks into the Zone. You're gonna feel like shit—not because it's bad for you but because your body's changing."

Malleolo emphasized: "You have to do it. You have to actually do it."

Then it becomes easier to explain how athletes will thrive in CrossFit if they pair it with weighing and measuring their food, he said. One without the other misses an important component.

"It's the same as constantly varied functional movement—at low intensity. No. You need all three variables," Malleolo said. "When you do it, cool shit happens. It works."



About the Author

Andréa Maria Cecil is a CrossFit Journal staff writer and editor.