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Get functional

By Louis Hayes, Director

Before getting started, please accept the following assumptions: You have read the fitness articles in the previous issue of *ITOA News*. They have piqued your interest in accepting a functional fitness program into your life. Finally, I assume you are medically healthy enough to begin such a regimen.

Functional fitness is the present and future of physical workout methodologies. This article is not designed to sell you a program, but to help you smoothly transition into such a program.

TJ Cooper from Jacksonville (FL), Sheriff's Office SWAT, contributed Tactical Fitness and Retraining the Tactical Athlete to the last issue of *ITOA News*. Perhaps those articles (or other recent fitness talk) caused you to check out the CrossFit website. And, quite possibly, you were as intimidated and turned off by it as I was at first. This is a normal response. Now, I'm authoring this article as

just another guy-next-door. I'm not a personal trainer, a coach, or on The Zone diet. I put sugar in my coffee, eat pizza, and have far from a beach body. I'm going to share stories about my two-year transition into a functional fitness program. Then I'll offer some advice on how to make your own switch, with the help of a laundry list of webpages.

24 months ago

Looking back, it started with some trash-talk in a police locker room. Three officers were discussing their pull-up abilities. I guessed I could do two or three. Another officer said he could do seven or eight. Still another said he could do over 20. Into the workout room we went. I watched the first officer hang there, unable to kick his way up to a single pull-up—far from the seven or eight he predicted. I watched the second officer rip out 28 as fast as he could and stop before any single repetition looked even slightly

difficult. Then I jumped up and, after some ugly twists and convoluted turns, finally managed to get my chin over the bar. It was pretty embarrassing for me, the police department's physical fitness coordinator. ONE pull-up!

18-24 months ago

As a SWAT competition veteran, I continued to be baffled as to why my performance on obstacle courses was so poor. I lifted weights in a circuit program two to three times per week on average. A typical circuit might have included exercises such as bench press, leg extensions, cable rows, seated dumbbell shoulder press, bicep curls, and sit-ups. I ran a half-marathon every spring. I climbed stairs in a local high-rise. I did adventure races that lasted six to ten hours. But I could not figure out why my performances on those O-courses did not match the effort I put into my rag-tag fitness regimen. How can this course be so difficult for someone in

Photos courtesy of Louis Hayes



Brian Melvin at the bottom of a thruster.



Brian stands up with the weight, and prepares to press upwards.



Brian completes the thruster with an overhead press and shrug.

such good shape?! I just wrote off such elements as the rope climb as being “not my thing.” At 230 pounds, I told myself these O-courses were skewed towards the little guys.

Then, for several months before a regional competition, I decided to focus heavily on several of the O-course elements: the rope climb, the wall climb (with the hanging knotted rope to help pull yourself up), and the attic entry (a hole in a raised deck that required the competitor to jump up, grab inside of the attic hole, kick his legs up into the hole, and eventually get into the “attic”). I knew that a team consisting of members who each could complete the course solo would fare considerably better than a team bogged down by a few “assists” along the way. I added a few extra abdominal exercises to help me in the attic entry and did more cable lat-pulldowns and machine rows for the rope and wall climbs. I knew my “one pull-up” performance was not going to help my program.

The competition came, and I did noticeably better at the elements that I traditionally struggled through. My plan worked! Resistance exercises that mimicked reality had pushed my performance to a new level.

14 months ago

For the past 10 years, I’ve worked out in a village gym shared by police officers and firefighters. One day I stumbled across what looked like a cannonball with a handle. I came to learn the 35-pound thing was called a “kettlebell” and belonged to a firefighter. I asked him what you do with it. He showed me two or three exercises that blended weightlifting and anaerobics. My interest was piqued. I looked up kettlebell on the internet and began watching YouTube videos to get kettlebell (KB) exercise advice. By way of trainers such as Anthony DiLuglio (Minute of Strength) and Jeff Martone (Tactical Athlete), I was introduced to the mindset of complete, functional, practical fitness—the type needed by cops and firemen.

I committed to abandoning all other resistance training (except abdominal exercises) for that single KB at the firehouse. No more dumbbells, barbells, machines, or cables. I promised myself I would spend a 12-week shift rotation doing the KB exercises I learned. I did them about 3-4 times per week, as the winter cold kept me from running and biking outside. Our gym was (and still is) outfitted with every conceivable piece of healthclub grade equipment. Thanks to the fire department, our joint fitness room leaves little to be desired. Yet here I was, using one \$50 iron ball in a room filled with thousands of dollars worth of top-notch equipment! Those that saw my new routine thought I had gone insane, as the dynamic movements look somewhat silly to a casual observer.

After the 12 weeks, I felt great! I learned a few more advanced movements. I felt much stronger through my shoulders and core (abs and lower back). I had more spring in my step. I felt as if I had been working muscles

that had been completely neglected by the isolated and singular movements of my circuit training. My body felt like a complete package, not groups of muscles separated by joints. So I continued with the KB, running, climbing stairs and hills, and I stayed away from the cables and weight machines. Even my running times were starting to drop. This whetted my appetite for still more information about KB training. I even bought a heavier one to challenge myself.

10 months ago

On a firearm competition trip, my friend and SWAT teammate Brian Melvin had me read an article called *What is Fitness?* published in the online *CrossFit Journal*, a publication of CrossFit (a free online workout resource with affiliate gyms all over the country). In a nutshell, the author claims (against popular opinion) that decathletes and gymnasts are some of the fittest people on the globe—not endurance event participants. The article caused me to study CrossFit. The pieces of my puzzle were starting to fit together. I began to understand how my recent use of KBs had really affected my body and more importantly, my performance.

I then started to browse CrossFit’s sample workouts of the day (WODs) and benchmarks (devilishly named after girls, “Fran,” “Helen,” “Barbara,” and “Linda”). I was incredibly intimidated by the workouts. Many of the workouts had multiple circuits or sets of dips on gymnastics rings or 10 to 15 pull-ups. Fifty pull-ups? No way! I was now up to three, a long way from where I needed to be to complete the online posted CrossFit WODs. I began watching videos of each of the separate exercise movements with names such as “thrusters,” “wallball,” and “air squats.”

I picked a handful of movements that didn’t require specialized equipment and added these exercises to my KB routine. This picking and choosing is affectionately referred to as “cherry-picking” by CrossFit purists, those dedicated militants who strictly adhere to the prescribed WODs. I decided that simply completing benchmarks like “Fran,” “Elizabeth,” and “Helen” would be my goal.

6 months ago

My pseudo-CrossFit workouts were still scaled back from the website postings. I bought a set of gym rings, added a few KBs to my collection, and made mock-parallel bars

Advertising removed

called parallettes from PVC piping. My kettlebell repertoire was pretty inclusive, especially when coupled with lifts like snatches, power cleans, clean and presses, and deadlifts. I was still trail-running, but nothing over six miles anymore. My running pace was faster. My stair-climbing was more intense. I researched plyometric drills such as box jumps and medicine ball throws. And I found the famed “300 Workout” done by the actors in preparation for the movie about the Spartan-Persian war in 480BC.

I met with friend George Demetriou of Spartan Performance (www.spartanperformance.com). He and his wife had recently retired from the NYPD and were about to open a CrossFit gym in New York. My conversation with him was tremendously motivating and encouraging, especially for a novice like me. Even 1,000 miles away, George proves to be a constant source of inspiration. Again, I found another person driving me to a functional program.

My concentration on pull-ups was paying off. I could do seven pull-ups in a single set. The scaled-back or modified workouts I was doing were beginning to resemble the actual WODs as prescribed. My friends and family took notice of the difference in my body, and people I saw at the gym were surprised at the dramatic gains in such a short time.

Today

The timeline brings me to the present. With my work schedule, I’m still forced to develop my own workouts. I can now complete more than a couple of the benchmark exercises. One such benchmark, “Fran,” was once unattainable. Now, I not only can complete it, but I knocked over nine minutes off my time in five weeks, down to less than 14 minutes. This is still far from a respectable score in the CrossFit community, but it is an accomplishment nonetheless.

I’m still enjoying the journey to what I see as my full potential. If, during that humbling ONE pull-up effort two years ago, you’d have said I could do 100 pull-ups in a single workout, I’d have never believed it. Today, I know it as fact. Average men can do great things...with effort.

What you can do

I write this chronology to share my two-year transition into a functional and practical exercise regimen. I find it hard to believe I am the only one to have been dejected by the CrossFit workouts of the day. If a beginner does not scale down the workouts based on skill and ability, they can seem downright sadistic. These natural movements not only should be modified, but must be. You do not have to do the prescribed weight or repetitions or time limits to be a CrossFitter. All that is required is that you accept a change from what most of us saw as the ultimate truth of weightlifting and cardio. Even small changes will give results. Here are some suggestions for these changes:

Build a solid foundation of the “prison workout,” those exercises that can be performed in the confines of a jail cell. These include abdominal drills, pushups, pull-ups, dips, air squats (squatting with no weight), and burpees. If pure pull-ups aren’t your thing, get a rubber assist band, a partner to help you out, or do jumping

pull-ups by focusing on holding your chin over the bar. With a few pieces of equipment, you can add medicine ball core twisting drills, back extensions, jumping rope, and standing overhead shoulder presses (with dumbbells, kettlebells, or barbell). Don’t rest between exercises. Instead, lump them together in a cycle with 400M runs, jumping rope, or heavy bag punches.

If you still cannot completely abandon a schedule that calls for the dreaded “chest and back day,” I don’t expect you to drop it cold turkey. Instead, substitute more functional, complex exercises and drills for your existing program. One functionality test I use is this: If it requires me to brace my back, sit down, or use a cable, it is not functional! Stop these exercises and find suitable alternatives. Also, some exercises that isolate a muscle or muscle group can be eliminated for the sake of other more complex ones. Aside from the exercises listed in the “prison workout,” the table below provides useful substitutions.

As for bringing kettlebell exercises into your routine, try these for starters: bottoms-up squats, swings, high pulls, clean and press, figure-8 lunges, turkish getups.

Some of the above exercises have odd names that do not reflect what the movements actually stress. One of the beauties of CrossFit is the user-friendliness of the website. It’s completely free of charge, and has an

Exercise Substitutions

Exercise	Substitute with
Cable triceps pushdowns	Dips
Military press	Standing overhead presses (push press, jerk, snatch)
Upright rows	Hang (power) cleans
Leg extensions/curls	Dumbbell lunges
Lat pull-downs	Pull-ups and inverted rows (AKA body ups)
Curls or any bicep exercise	Can pretty much quit
Bench press or flys	Dips and pushups on near ground-level gymnastics rings



The author coiled for either a front kettlebell squat, or kettlebell thruster.

incredible database of exercise videos and journal articles. YouTube also has a variety of video clips, but must be filtered through to get sound safe advice. Here is a list of some websites that I have found useful in my studies (see Table 1).

Summary

Take the story of my adoption of a functional fitness program as a testament. For me, it was not a definitive line in the sand, but rather a gradual process over time. Ask any purist CrossFitter and nearly every one has a story similar to mine. None of them woke up one morning and ripped out a “Murph” (go surf the CrossFit website and see for yourself what a “Murph” is). The story of my progress is one of a thousand repeated over and over again. I began as most of you are right now: intimidated, uncomfortable, fearful, and anxious. My hesitancy has been replaced with motivation. I am one of functional fitness poster children. I wish you all the same success.

Functional fitness is bigger than just kettlebells and CrossFit. It’s about replicating reality, and preparing for it. I use the CrossFit system/name for several reasons: it’s free, it’s got plenty of online resources, it’s got hundreds of affiliate gyms around the world, and it speaks for itself. When you mention CrossFit, folks in-the-know understand. But there are other systems out there that are just as practical, just not as

Internet Resources

Table 1

Art of Strength	www.artofstrength.com	Anthony DiLuglio’s videos
CrossFit	www.crossfit.com	
Drills and Skills	www.drillsandskills.com/article/15	Paralette training
Gym Jones	www.gymjones.com	Interesting site, to say the least
Iron Guard Fitness	www.ironguardfitness.com	Another functional fitness site
Sport Fitness Advisor	www.sport-fitness-advisor.com/plyometric.html	Plyometric exercises
Tactical Athlete	www.tacticalathlete.com	Jeff Martone’s KB training

popular. Find what suits your needs. This is not a rigid program for elitist athletes! It’s for people just like you and me, who kick their way up for that ONE pull-up, or struggle through 20 pushups. Tweak your own program to fit your strengths, weaknesses, abilities, and goals into a complete all-inclusive package. It doesn’t have to fall under the CrossFit banner. Kick up the intensity. Get some kettlebells. Do pull-ups. Make a commitment to train outside of your comfort zone (and call me when you finish “Murph”).

Note: A special thanks to the guys at CrossFit Tri-Cities in St. Charles, Illinois. Owners (and military veterans) Mark Reinke and Jason Homesly have been extremely supportive of the LE and tactical community. CFTC is one of three active affiliates in Illinois. Mark and Jason are great coaching resources and two phenomenal motivators—getting you to reach down for that extra

bit of effort. We’re lucky to have them within reach. Even if St. Charles is as inconvenient for you to get to as it is for me, it’s worth the trip. Pay the drop-in rate and get some top-notch coaching. All the photos in this submission were taken at their new facility along the Fox River. They can be found online at <http://tricitescrossfit.blogspot.com>. ☺

About the author

Louis Hayes is a Police Officer for the Hinsdale (IL) Police Department. He is assigned to the FIAT SWAT Taskforce as Team Leader and Primary Firearms Instructor. Louis sits on the Board of Directors for the Illinois Tactical Officers Association. He also contributes to a for-the-good-of-mankind website called Trinity Training Group at <http://trinitytraining.blogspot.com>. Louis can be reached at louis.hayes@comcast.net.



Mark Reinke demonstrating an overhead squat.