

TRAINING WITH TIM

16 Minutes of Agony

Tips from local trainer Tim Cigelske.

by Tim Cigelske | Monday 11/24/2008

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My arms will not stop quivering.

I'm still feeling the effects of a mere 16 minute workout, even though it was more than two hours ago. It rushed past in a blur of grunting, groaning and total muscle failure that comes back in flashes. But afterward I clearly remember my friend Graham sprawled out on his back saying he didn't feel well.

How did it come to this? How could such a short workout cause such...devastation?

It started when a friend sent me a photo of a guy drinking a beer while doing a pull-up at a place called CrossFit Milwaukee. The more I read about CrossFit the more I was intrigued, since they proclaimed to combine principles of gymnastics, powerlifting, yoga and occasionally, it appeared, drinking.

Out of sheer curiosity I had to try this out, so Graham and I met with owner Ryan Atkins and tried one of his free Saturday classes.

About six years ago, Ryan was a stay-at-home dad and former mixed martial artist who was gaining weight and having trouble sticking to his "monotonous bodybuilding routines." Then he discovered CrossFit.

CrossFit appealed to him for its full-body functional movements. In other words, it mimics real life as close as possible.

CrossFit's goal is improving fitness across the board – hence the name – from flexibility to stamina to strength. As one of their sayings goes: "Nature punishes the specialist." To get there, they throw a huge variety of workouts in a blender and hit the mix button. You never know what you're going to get.

Ryan found that he achieved the best shape of his life following these guidelines. So he became a certified trainer and opened his own facility a year ago.

The little place hidden away off Howell Avenue in Oak Creek is as no-frills as it gets. No weight machines, no background music, no TVs, no front desk. Just a few mats, PVC pipes for stretching, some kettle bell weights, a couple of rower machines and a few other pieces of equipment.

About 10 of us showed up for Ryan's workout, which sounded simple enough: Eight 20-second rounds of pull-ups, push-ups, sit-ups and squats, which could all be modified if needed. A strict 10 seconds of rest separated every round. This CrossFit principle is based off research that suggests short bursts of high-intensity activity produces more results than low-intensity, longer-duration workouts.

By the time it was over, we all stood or laid in a daze.

I remember feeling disembodied during the effort. It was almost as if the physical intensity was so great that it overloaded my conscious brain and the primal side took over. All I could think about was overcoming the apparent limitations of my own body.

"I'll give out a free t-shirt to anyone that throws up from this," Ryan says. "From a nutritional standpoint that's not the smartest. But you can't tell that person they weren't trying."

This probably sounds like it's only for elite athletes, but that's the weird thing. The class's diversity frankly surprised me: Men and women, ages in the 20s to maybe 50s, super fit and overweight, a jujutsu fighter and someone styled more for a Pilates studio, and not a single stereotypical gym rat musclehead in the bunch.

"You could be the fittest person and I'll find something you're *not* good at," Ryan says. "If you have an ego, this isn't the place for you. But if you're committed to confronting your weaknesses, you can make some real gains."

Even though we were pushing our bodies to their max, it was our *own* max. Instead of shooting for a number of reps, we did the most we could with our own body weight. Even if that meant collapsing on the floor because we couldn't do a single more push-up, no matter how modified.

At one point I noticed I was making agonizing noises. For a half a second I realized everyone else was too, as if the entire room was going into labor. Then I stopped paying attention. Self-consciousness was not a luxury any of us could afford.

For 16 minutes, we were all equal in our agony.

Training with Tim is arguably Milwaukee's third most underrated fitness blog. It's updated semi-daily at trainingwithtim.com.

