

Facing Down the Gila Monsters The CrossFit workout converts a reluctant newbie.

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I have always wanted to be bigger than I am. Husky-size jeans were the Holy Grail of my scrawny adolescence. When my classmates shot above me in high school, I compensated by wearing bright Hawaiian-print shirts and developing a quick wit—thinking, I suppose, that a big personality would suffice for my physical limits. Not surprisingly, I began nurturing a lifelong aversion to all things athletic.

Just as Greek tragedies have warned us, you can run but you can't hide. After successfully avoiding gyms for almost two decades, time and circumstance have brought me to an ironic end. I'm now the lead producer for MSN Health & Fitness and my jeans are two or three sizes larger than they ought to be. (Yeah, bite me, Sophocles.)

Dashing my eyes out, in this analogy, takes the form of CrossFit—a training program that has been adopted by Navy SEALs, firefighters, and most importantly, my wife. She's been attending classes for about eight weeks and the boost in her self-image, energy and outlook—not to mention her physique—has been inspiring. That, and overhearing her using the word "hot" in a phone conversation with a girlfriend—which was clearly not in reference to me. So one recent Saturday morning, I agreed to join her to see what the buzz was about.

In the parking lot, I saw a guy with a belly about like mine, wearing Clark Kent glasses and black dress socks with his sneakers. Not so hot, in my estimation. I figured I could make a respectable showing.

And then I entered the gym and saw the Gila Monsters.

Two shirtless guys were completing their workouts from the previous session, doing clean jerks with massive amounts of weight. They had the kind of musculature that's popular in comic book animation and underwear ads—bulbous, sculpted and lean. Each time these guys brought the weight above their heads, their mouths stretched open and they bared their teeth like lizards.

This is exactly why I don't like gyms—the raw intensity and displays of brute power are intimidating. And as other members filed in, peeled off their outer layers and started warming up, I felt no confidence that I belonged. But before I could bolt, a trainer asked my name and scribbled it on the whiteboard.

The workout that day (modified for beginners) was straightforward: in 1 minute or less, complete 10 jumping pull-ups, 10 pushups and 10 squats. If you finished before time was up, you could rest until the next set began. Every

complete set would be counted and you continued doing as many sets as you could complete within a minute. If you couldn't complete a set in time, your count stopped and you'd rest during the next minute. These 1-minute cycles would last for 20 minutes (so if you completed every set, your count would be 20).

I finished my first two sets without much difficulty and on my third set decided that I would modify my pushups and use my knees. Normally, I'd consider that cheating, but I was losing ground to the 50-something-year-old woman next to me, and *that* was a greater humiliation than modified pushups. That buoyed me for a couple more sets, but by set seven—with no rest period and no upper-arm stamina left, I crumbled during the pushups, dripping sweat and lungs heaving, and had to wait for the remainder of the minute to count down. I looked up and saw the trainer write a "6" next to my name on the whiteboard—along with several others. I took some solace in that and focused on my luxurious minute of breathing. Forty-five seconds into my rest, I was feeling much better and stood up for the next punishing round.

"3-2-1, GO!" the trainer shouted, and I jumped into action. I lasted another 2 sets, barely, and started set 11 fully expecting to not make it past the pushups. Resting, working, working, resting—I no longer cared about who was ahead of me or behind me, only that it had to end soon. In the end, I fully completed 12 sets. And I was exhausted.

The Gila Monsters, however, persevered. As I sucked air, I watched them doing their non-modified workout: 5 reps of pull-ups (with no box below their feet to support them), 10 pushups (without knees on the ground) and 15 squats (fast and clean). I won't say that they made it look easy—their grimaces gave lie to that—but they didn't pause and they didn't falter. They worked with the steady rhythm of an engine. More sets came and went and they kept on. It was unbelievable. And then, just out of my line of vision, I saw those black socks—free of their sneakers—float into view. Clark Kent was keeping up with the Gila Monsters. He was pulling himself up to the chin-up bar for the umpteenth time, and though he didn't have the same grace as the bare-chested acrobats, he showed undeniable will.

Keeping up with a 50-something-year-old woman had gotten the best of me, but watching this guy, I could see what was possible—and it had nothing to do with "hot."

I'm still a newbie and have only been back a few times since. But I intend to keep going, and maybe one of these days, if I work hard, I'll be able to keep up with black-socked Clark.