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The P-Word

“Constant variation” does not mean “random.” Chris Moore proposes some ideas on CrossFit-style periodization.

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“To see things in the seed, that is genius.”

—Lao Tzu

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Have you ever heard of a “kluge?”

It’s a computing term for an inelegant, inefficient and clumsy solution to a problem.

In his book *Kluge: The Haphazard Construction of the Human Mind*, Gary Marcus uses our own brains as an example. Think of an old house. It grows with the needs of the homeowner. With time, new additions are stacked on top of the old. Wood, wiring and pipe are added as needed, tying the structure together. If you could look behind those walls, you’d see a tangled mess. But a little fresh paint hides all that. The end result is something functional but rarely optimal.

Your mind works the same way. Primordial, impulsive structures are surrounded by late additions enabling language, planning, reason and restraint. Fresh wiring allows each part of the brain to communicate, but it’s not a perfect solution. Despite our intelligence, we remain susceptible to compulsion, obsession, delusion—all consequence of a confederate mind. As you can imagine, this metaphor applies to more than just computers and brains.

Periodization: Planned Variation?

The power behind CrossFit is community.

Every day, hundreds of gyms and thousands of athletes are communicating and experimenting. They’re combining old training methods with new and raw ideas. Weak athletes are learning to incorporate powerlifting, weightlifting and strongman methods. Those with relatively poor endurance may look to the Olympic sports for guidance. But with every new addition, as more methods are wired end to end, it gets harder and harder to program.

Symptoms of the training kluge are insidious. Progress and recovery slow as fatigue accumulates. Training objectives become muddled. There’s a growing dread each time you approach a barbell. It happens to us all from time to time. We train to be great, so we try to incorporate all the greatest ideas. But sometimes we bite off more than we can chew. We rush. We fail to plan.

So what’s the solution? I want you to go back and think of how you would build the perfect house. You might start small, with only the rooms you need. But that won’t stop



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Many CrossFitters have fallen in love with Oly lifting, and most have found themselves wondering how to fit it into a packed training plan.

you from thinking ahead. You may eventually want a family, so you plan and budget for those necessary additions. The foundation will always come first, then you'll frame and finish. Wood and concrete are most important. Later on you can worry about the details, like whether or not you really need that granite backsplash. Programming should follow the same exact logic.

CrossFit is effective because it exposes athletes to scalable, constantly varied and intense training. But how much variation is necessary? When should more be added? As performance improves, how often can we train with high intensity? How can we train optimally?

As we get better and better, I think we must learn to plan beyond the WOD. We must carefully manage the cumulative demands of competing and increasingly varied fitness domains. We must master the basic movements, only adding additional variety as needed. We must learn when to push and when to back off. In other words, we need to start thinking about periodization in CrossFit.



Mindy Bush

Brita Foti puts variation to the test at the Stone Fran 2010 Faction Games.

First, What Periodization Is Not

I was a copycat for years. I would look up workouts in magazines and websites, mimicking the training of my favorite athletes. I was naïve to think it could be that simple, but come to think of it, I was naïve about everything back then.

I wasn't exposed to the idea of periodization until college. During my first strength-and-conditioning class ever, the instructor gave us a brief course summary. We would be learning about sets, reps, volume load, frequency, exercise selection, nutrition, supplementation, microcycles, mesocycles, macrocycles By the end of class everyone's head was spinning.

Wasn't it enough to just work hard?

Well, apparently not.

I did the math. If you multiplied all the variables together, there were literally millions of theoretical programs to choose from. That's pretty damn intimidating, but I took it as a challenge. I thought there must be a "best" way to train. I spend the next five years trying to find it.

I studied every book, document and so-called secret Soviet training program I could find. I familiarized myself with linear, undulating, conjugate and concurrent training models. I went to every seminar, trained at every gym, and pestered every lifter I could find with a barrage of questions. It didn't take long for me to feel confident in my knowledge. With 20/20 hindsight, I can laugh about that now.

Do you want to know the great secret behind periodization? Well, here it is: Despite the technical nature of the word itself, despite all the variables at play, all the self-proclaimed gurus and trainers pushing groundbreaking e-book programs and cutting-edge equipment, there is no secret.

Have you ever seen *Kung Fu Panda*? At the end of that movie, the main characters all discover there is no secret scroll. The key to becoming a true master actually comes from the journey itself. Isn't it fitting to find such an elegant answer in a children's movie?

With time, toil and great training partners, you'll eventually become your own master. In the meantime, here are four simple periodization ideas to help guide you as you put together your plan.

The Golden Rule

The only thing that matters is progress. If you cannot adapt and improve, then you need to make a change. On the other hand, if you are improving, then you shouldn't change a damn thing.

Let's use the squat as an example. When you first learn the exercise, you are nowhere near your strength potential. Every single time you touch the bar, you should be able to lift more weight. So why shouldn't that be your goal? Also, because you're not nearly as strong as you could be, each session will result in very little cumulative stress. This will allow you to squat frequently. So do it! The gains will come fast and easy, so take advantage.

Slowly, month by month, you'll reach a point where you can no longer keep up that pace. You're much stronger now, so it gets harder to recover from each session. The only thing you need is a little more rest. That's it. Instead of increasing the intensity every session, try every week, then every two weeks, then every three. Just make sure you pick all the fruit within arm's reach before you go get your ladder, understand?

Keep this up for long enough and you're going to have to get very creative to get stronger. Now would be the time to try pause squats, box squats, specialty barbells, bands, chains, etc. Just keep in mind that these are advanced methods for advanced athletes. Is that you? Or, is there still more fruit within your reach?

So far this is a pretty simple progression. But there's a twist. You can be an advanced squatter but be absolutely terrible at running, rowing, double-unders, pull-ups, etc. So how should you program? Even though the nature of the movements may vary, the same progression rule applies. Program the squat like you are advanced, and everything else as a beginner. That means starting over at the bottom branch. Work on reducing your times, getting more reps and rowing more meters each session.

Just remember, patience really is a virtue. Don't sacrifice long-term success for quick, fleeting gains.

Building Blocks

As you advance, planning WOD to WOD is just not good enough. But at the same time, thinking way into the future has limited practical value. It's good to know where you want to be in one, two or three years, but that leaves a whole lot of programming that needs to be done in between. So, how far ahead should you plan?



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Kevin Lowe competes at the Stone Fran 2010 Faction Games.

Four-week blocks seem to work the best. But to be honest, I'm not exactly sure why. My best explanation would be from the field of chronobiology. All animals, humans included, live according to various biological rhythms, many of which are measured in days, weeks and months. It seems that four weeks, give or take a few, is just the right amount of time for your body to accumulate and recover from training fatigue.

There are a few ways to incorporate blocks into CrossFit. First, use them to manage variation. Build the intensity of your WODs across weeks, hopefully matching or beating your records by Week 3. Week 4 can be reserved for a much-needed rest. As you get stronger and stronger, fitter and fitter, try going hard only on the first and third week.

The overall pattern remains. As you get better and better, spread out the intensity just a little bit, session to session and week to week.

The second way to utilize training blocks is to alternate training focus. Whenever I have discussed CrossFit with coaches outside the community, there's always the same critique: how can you train everything hard all the time? Well, the answer is that you don't have to. You can rotate the focus.

Let's use the conjugate Westside system as an example.

The basic idea is that lifters need to be conditioned, explosive and strong year round. However, those domains are not trained maximally all at once. Early in the training year, a lifter may choose to focus on conditioning. This usually means adding assistance exercises and increasing the frequency of sled dragging. Dynamic and max-effort training are still performed, but the intensity is controlled.

The next block of training may be devoted to explosive strength. As conditioning work is dialed back a bit, the intensity of dynamic work increases. In addition, the lifter may push for more record attempts on max-effort day.

Finally, as the meet approaches, the lifter enters a very intense phase of training. The loads on dynamic effort day become much heavier, while max-effort work is largely eliminated to support recovery. After a brief unloading period, the lifter is prepared for the platform.



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Mike McGoldrick was frustrated with his weightlifting progress until he began experimenting with his training.

Once the meet is done and new PRs are set, the cycle repeats.

The same approach can be used to prepare for a CrossFit competition. A good CrossFit athlete needs to be fit, strong and capable on a wide array of movements. But you don't have to try and improve everything at the same time.

The first several blocks may be devoted to increasing maximal strength. All other domains are maintained during that time, but records are not pursued (remember, "sub-maximal doesn't mean "easy"). Once you've given yourself the chance to truly get stronger, you can change the focus.

As you maintain your strength, start increasing the amount of speed training. Also, utilize your new strength to ramp up the intensity of your WODs. As the competition approaches, the WOD gains more and more focus.

The end effect is similar to spinning plates. Spin the first plate hard, then move on to the next, then the next. This is the only way to keep any one plate from falling.

Learning to Experiment

Simple progression can take you all the way from on-ramp neophyte to certified firebreather. But what about when training doesn't go as planned? A reasonable, well-thought-out approach can still leave you feeling stale. In this case, it's the time to reach into your bag of tricks.

At Faction Strength and Conditioning, Mike McGoldrick is our best competitive CrossFit athlete. In October 2010, Mike competed in the first annual CrossFit/USAW Open in Colorado Springs, Colo. Leading up to the meet, he put together a very good six-week weightlifting block. Everything seemed to be going just as planned. His jerk increased from 145 kg to 155 kg, his front squat from 152 kg to 162 kg. Those gains would surely transfer to PRs on the platform, right?

He did do very well at the meet, hitting a 108-kg snatch and a 139-kg clean and jerk. This set him up for an eventual third-place finish in the 94-kg weight class. However, these were not PRs. In the end, he felt drained and stale from too much specialized programming. It was time for a change, something completely different.

Mike decided to train with my strength crew for a few weeks. We introduced him to some new lifts, many of them a bit odd. These included box squats, axle fat-bar clean and jerks, and one-arm circus dumbbell jerks. However, I think the greatest addition was heavy atlas-stone training. Starting at a max of just 250 lb., Mike has since loaded a 340-lb. stone to a 50-inch platform. As I write this, he probably has his sights set on my 380-lb. stone.

So what were the results?

After one three-week block of training, which included no serious weightlifting, Mike power-snatched 112 kg and squat-cleaned 143 kg, both of which were 5-kg PRs. Not too bad. He had quickly learned how to fight and be aggressive and confident, no matter the implement. Perhaps lifting barbells began to feel easy in comparison. Like Patches O'Houlihan once said, "If you can dodge a wrench, you can dodge a ball!"

That's not the advice a good weightlifting coach would have provided. But hey, it was damn effective. What experiments should you try?

The Last PR

How long can you keep making progress? How much can you achieve?

There is a limit. In the end, we cannot master all the variables. No matter how much we train, study and experiment, we will eventually run out of time. Some records will always remain just outside our reach. It's inevitable. We'll look back and see what we could have done differently. We'll cringe at the thought of lost opportunity ... of what we could have been. But ultimately, that's just an illusion.

In the book *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*, Jonathan Haidt discusses the psychological principles of progress and adaptation. Consider a few questions. First, if winning the lottery is so great, why are winners no happier than the rest of us? Second, if being a quadriplegic is so bad, why are the paralyzed just as happy, or happier, than the rest of us? Jon answers with the words of Shakespeare, who said, "Things won are done; joy's soul lies in the doing."

The lottery winner enjoys an intense—yet brief—change in circumstance. With time, no matter the riches, winners start to see their lives as boring again. If you've ever bought a new car, you know the feeling. For the first few weeks, you can't wait to get up and drive to work. But before you know it, you're back to cursing your way through the slow morning traffic. Worse yet, once you get that first bill, you start to reconsider that 72-month payment plan. Welcome to the cliché.

So, what about the quadriplegic? Without a doubt, the days and weeks following catastrophic injury can be filled with despair. But, as always, the pain eventually passes; the paralyzed show extraordinary resilience in the face of injury. What's more, they are forced to focus on the small things in life. With every therapy session, as simple skills are relearned and eventually mastered, patients are filled with incredible joy.

The last idea is this: if money cannot buy happiness, neither will PR after PR. The joy is in the doing.

If you plan well, you'll look back to the beginning and be amazed at how far you've come. You'll cherish the journey, the lessons learned, the friends you've gained. You'll share your knowledge with younger athletes, hopefully allowing them to be better than you ever were. Of course, that doesn't mean you won't still kick their asses from time to time!

Yeah, I think that's something worth planning for.



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About the Author

Chris Moore is a writer and powerlifting Coach at [CrossFit Memphis](#). Prior to his lifting career, Chris played Division 1 football at the University of Memphis. During this time, he began his study of human performance, eventually obtaining a master's degree in exercise and sport science. In 2007, Chris joined Mike Bledsoe, Doug Larson and Rob Conner to found Memphis' first CrossFit gym. Today, CrossFit Memphis has grown to include powerlifters, weightlifters, strongmen and mixed martial artists, all training and competing under the banner of Faction Strength & Conditioning. As a drug-free powerlifter, Chris' best competitive lifts include a 975-lb. squat, a 675-lb. bench press and 675-lb. deadlift. He has also competed in submission wrestling and strongman. You can reach him at christophermoore57@gmail.com, or visit FactionSC.com.