

THE HEART CROSS FIT

FOR THESE EIGHT ATHLETES,
CROSSFIT IS MORE THAN
A HOBBY. IT'S A MATTER
OF THE HEART. **BY LINDSAY BERRA**

Google “CrossFit and OHS.” You’ve probably done it a hundred times already, like thousands of other CrossFitters worldwide, in an effort to correct the mechanics of your overhead squat.

That search term produces pages and pages of results, but when DJ Forsyth first keyed it in back in 2013, he didn’t find a single site or article or image he could use — because Forsyth wasn’t looking for a way to improve his already rock-solid overhead squat. What was slowing him down was another OHS: open-heart surgery.

Forsyth, now 40, was diagnosed with aortic stenosis — a narrowing of the aortic valve in the heart — in his early 20s and lived with it for nearly 14 years. He began doing CrossFit in 2011 in an effort to stay in shape, which naturally keeps the heart healthier. Forsyth was so fit he made the South Central Regionals in 2012 and 2013, despite his heart condition. “The doctors told me there was no fixing it, that there was nothing I could do other than get ready for surgery,” Forsyth says. “We just watched it like it was a bomb about to go off.”

By December 2013, the fuse was as short as doctors were willing to let it get and Forsyth, father of two and owner of CrossFit PRx in Spring, Texas, was scheduled for surgery. Doctors would crack his chest and replace his faulty aortic valve with a mechanical one. But before he went under the knife, Forsyth had one major question he wanted answered: Would he be able to CrossFit after surgery? “I was freaking out,” he says. “I was scared to death that I’d never be able to do CrossFit again.”

He amended his search terms and found a godsend in the form of an espnW story on Ingrid Kantola, owner of CrossFit Jääkarhu in not-too-far-away Austin. Kantola had also competed in the 2012 and 2013 South Central Regionals. In May 2010, at age 24, Kantola had had open-heart surgery to repair damage done to her heart

by endocarditis, an infection that totally destroyed her mitral valve. But while Forsyth’s zipper scar is visible down the center of his chest each time he tosses his shirt aside during a WOD, Kantola’s runs horizontally and has always hidden under the bottom band of her sports bra. “I knew Ingrid as a competitor, but I had no idea she had had surgery or any kind of heart issue,” Forsyth says. “I was like, no way. I had watched her at Regionals, and she crushes everything.”

Forsyth reached out to Kantola on Facebook, and they were on the phone by the end of the day. Kantola told him the truth. He was going to hurt, but he would get through it. Recovery would be slow, but he would make it. And yes, he could and would return to CrossFit.

Forsyth returned faster than most. He entered the hospital on a Thursday and was home in time to watch *Monday Night Football*. He was doing air squats 10 days post-op. He did 135-pound touch-and-go power cleans at six weeks. And he competed in the 2014 Open, at which point the CrossFit main site ran a story about his comeback from surgery.

Paul Farmiga, a 33-year-old CrossFitter from New Jersey, read the article on Forsyth and immediately reached out to him on Facebook. Farmiga was awaiting open-heart surgery for mitral-valve regurgitation, which he underwent in March 2014, and was desperate for answers and support. Forsyth obliged, and then went one step further. He started a Facebook group called “I Heart CrossFit,” described as a “little group of us that have had or might one day

need to have heart surgery.” Its members are all young, far outside the normal demographic for heart conditions. They are united by their love of CrossFit and their unwillingness to settle for less intense activities like walking and golf and archery. They are bonded by their fear and their strength, and by the slowly fading scars that bisect their chests.



“I WAS SCARED TO DEATH THAT I’D NEVER BE ABLE TO DO CROSSFIT AGAIN.”

DJ FORSYTH



PAUL FARMIGA



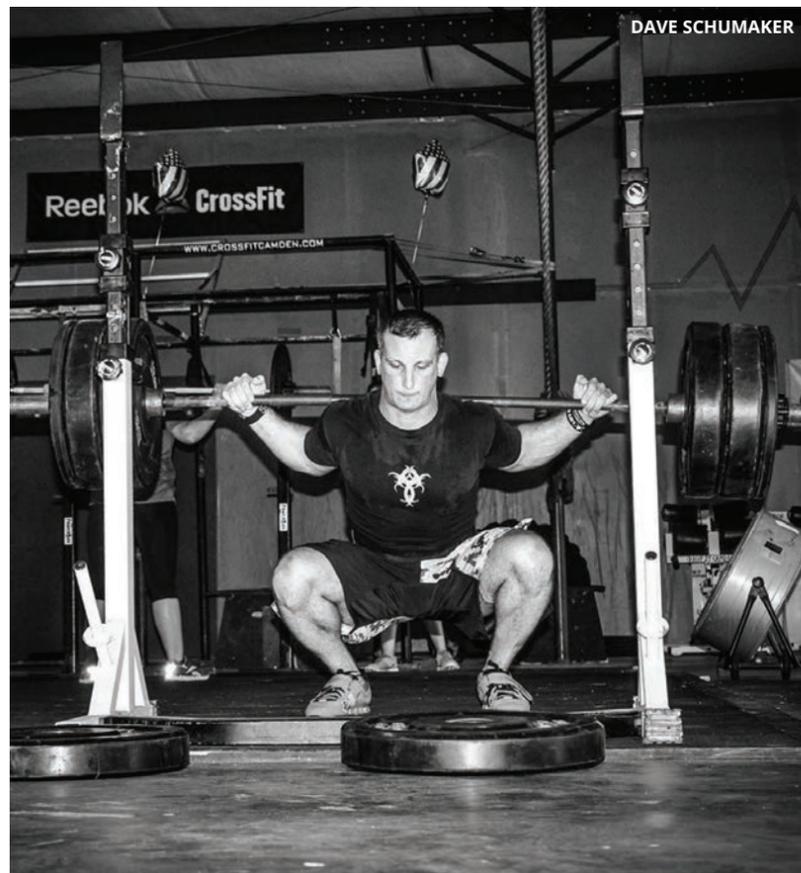
SHANNON GALLO

DJ Forsyth Illustration by Taurvilas Povilonis • Paul Farmiga Photo by Brandon Doherty, Photography • Shannon Gallo Photo by Hannah Charlap

“Everybody who has something like this has slightly different procedures and slightly different experiences, but even having something in common is better than nothing,” Kantola says. “It’s very cool the way our little Facebook group works. We’re all strangers, really, but we have this scary surgical issue and CrossFit in common. It’s amazing. Anyone who does CrossFit is automatically in the club, but this is an even more exclusive club.”

The group currently has eight members, including Forsyth, Kantola and Farmiga. While they are all indeed CrossFitters, they come from all walks of life. Shannon Gallo, 28, is an administrator at the University of Binghamton in New York. Sarah Denney, 36, is a mother of four from Branson, Missouri. Alyssa Dazet, 35, is an acupuncturist from Los Angeles. Dave Schumaker, 44, is a retired Marine sniper and box owner from Kingsland, Georgia. Tim Henriksen, 29, is a massage therapist from Brisbane, Australia.

Henriksen, the group’s most recent member, underwent surgery on February 6 to repair his aorta,



DAVE SCHUMAKER



SARAH DENNEY



TIM HENRIKSEN



which had been damaged from birth by bicuspid aortic valve disease. Gallo had surgery to repair mitral-valve stenosis in May 2014. Forsyth sent a cookie platter to the hospital. Two weeks later, Schumaker had his mitral valve replaced with one taken from a pig. Gallo and Schumaker had contacted each other through the group, then talked regularly throughout their rehab to compare notes on their progress. “Dave reached out to me about five days after my surgery,” Gallo recalls. “Here I was, barely able to move, telling him everything was going to be OK, and we have become good friends.”

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Denney is the only member of the group who has not yet had open-heart surgery. Like Henriksen, Denney has bicuspid aortic valve disease. Her situation is being closely monitored by doctors, and she is in close touch with everyone in the group, which discusses everything from the pros and cons of mechanical and pig valves to the side effects of blood thinners and what to do when you take a spill while on them. “Circle the bruise with a Sharpie,” Forsyth told Farmiga. “That way you know it’s not getting bigger.”

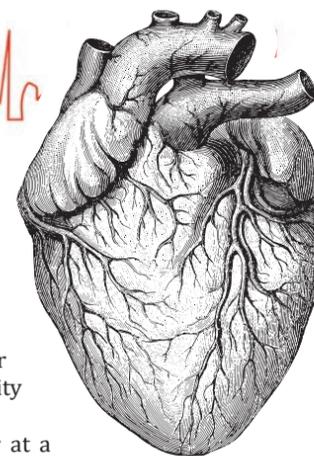
Kantola posted surgical pictures of the wires holding her repaired heart together when Henriksen, just

Dave Schumaker Photo by Debra Thompson

Tim Henriksen Photo by Dean McEwan, Huzzah Photography

two weeks post-op, expressed concern about doing movements like chest-to-bar pull-ups and bar muscle-ups. Forsyth posted a video of those touch-and-go cleans, just for inspiration. And all the members of the group post the results of their medical tests with the same regularity as the results of their WODs.

Anyone who has been a member at a CrossFit box for more than a few minutes knows how important community is to CrossFit, from Labor Day barbecues to the everyday support CrossFitters give each other in the gym to the friendships that are forged there. I Heart CrossFit is a microcosm of that community, only there is much more at stake for its members. “The day I



found DJ’s article was the worst day I had had since I got the news about my heart,” Henriksen says. “It was a dark, sad and angry day that involved me not leaving bed and fighting with my girlfriend over nothing. Then I found DJ and the group and my entire world was turned the right way up again.”

Farmiga agrees. “It’s a club, a gang, a family, a rope for support,” he says. “We’re all woven together with our heartbeats.”

And with CrossFit. □

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