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Waving the American Flag in the Gym: CrossFit and American Nationalism

CrossFit, the fitness craze that has exploded in popularity and notoriety, becoming the largest gym chain in history by 2015 after only existing for 14 years, is associated with countless stereotypes (Alfonsi). It's easy to imagine the grungy gym in an old warehouse filled with barbells and medicine balls and rowing machines, all covered in chalk and being used by shirtless athletes frantically running from station to station while blasting music from a speaker and being cheered on in coded acronyms (WOD? EMOM? AMRAP?). Yet, there is something missing in this stereotypical depiction of the typical CrossFit "box," or gym, in non-CrossFitter terms, and I argue that these elements are even more fundamental to CrossFit than blender bottles and copious amounts of chalk, though they may be slightly more hidden to the typical gym-goer: libertarianism, conservatism, and American nationalism.

As an avid CrossFitter myself, I have been to nine different boxes across four U.S. states and two countries (the United States and England) over the course of about five years. In every box I've attended in the U.S., there have been some notable signifiers of how CrossFit aligns itself with American nationalism and patriotism. For example, I have never been to a CrossFit gym in the U.S. that doesn't have both an American flag and, interestingly, a POW/MIA flag from the National League of Families, a flag designed to be a symbol of support for U.S. service-people held as prisoners of war in Vietnam ("History of the POW/MIA Flag"). Every

box I've trained in has also had some kind of discount for people in the military or in law enforcement, as well as regular workouts intended to honor service-people who died in the line of duty. While these observations could just be the result of my accidentally stumbling on boxes owned by people with similar political affiliations and not actually something indicative of the nature of CrossFit itself, I propose that there is something more to the phenomenon I have casually witnessed in box after box. CrossFit, by its very construction as a business and by the way it is branded and manipulated by those at the top of the organization's leadership structure, has made itself a distinctly *American* sport according to its own narrative of what this means, marked by a dedication to what it considers to be values of freedom, liberty, and patriotism. Moreover, through its international influence, CrossFit is exporting its politics to gyms and communities around the world, and it is curating just how international the company can be to continue to prop up the politics it espouses.

CrossFit was founded in 2001 by Greg Glassman, a former gymnast who is well known in the community for being what could tamely be described as a "rabid libertarian" (to use his own words) who injects his beliefs into his business (Feine and Manning). In a 2017 interview with "60 Minutes," Glassman summed up the personality he's so famous for in two sentences: "Oh, I don't mind being told what to do. I just won't do it" (Alfonsi). He approaches conventional understandings of business in a similarly transgressive way, allowing all CrossFit affiliates to plan their own workouts, set their own rules, and design their own gyms, only requiring potential owners to attend a weekend-long seminar on the basics of CrossFit, pass an examination, pay \$1,000 for the title of "Level One Trainer," and pay a flat rate of \$3,000 for use of the CrossFit name ("How to Affiliate"). The model at the root of the CrossFit system is

simple, straightforward capitalism that allows extreme freedom of choice for all affiliates. CrossFit doesn't pretend to be social justice-minded or expanding economic access to potential gym owners; you pay the fee, you get to use the name. Further, because Glassman and others in charge at CrossFit Headquarters allow all affiliates to program for themselves and be as innovative as they want, CrossFit becomes what Paul Feine and Alex Manning refer to as an "open-source fitness community" in their article on Glassman (Feine and Manning). From its very structure, CrossFit functions as a distinctly libertarian business that attempts to let the "free market" run its course.

For years, CrossFit has also publicly broadcast its political leanings on social media. In 2013, for example, the official CrossFit Twitter page tweeted a link to an article from the Cato Institute, the Koch-funded libertarian think-tank, arguing that "'minimum wage laws... can reduce employment'" (CrossFit). In April of 2018, the page re-tweeted a post from an executive at CrossFit HQ that claimed that when he owned a gym, his "worst, most difficult clients" were those he gave free memberships to, making what appeared to be a coded statement on the company's beliefs on welfare programs and assistance for the poor (Berger). CrossFit Games director Dave Castro also regularly posts photographs and videos on his personal Instagram account, which has 658,000 followers as of May 2018, featuring him firing various kinds of guns and making snide comments about the gun laws in his home state of California (Castro 2018). Many CrossFit-affiliated athletes, such as three-time Games competitor Jacob Heppner and six-time Games champion Rich Froning, post videos of themselves completing "WODs" (workouts of the day) that combine CrossFit movements with shooting, using hashtags like

#fitnessandfirearms (Hepper, Froning). CrossFit's politically right public presence goes beyond the realm of social media into real-world action as well.

In 2016, CrossFit made headlines when Games director Dave Castro announced that both the male and female individual winners of the CrossFit Games would receive a Glock pistol as a part of their prize package (Castro 2016). The announcement came in the midst of increased national attention to gun violence in the U.S., in light of numerous mass shootings and police killings of black men. It immediately led to pushback from CrossFit athletes and fans around the world, with a Change.org petition asking the Games to cancel the partnership with Glock receiving over 22,000 signatures (Bartels). However, CrossFit doubled down on the controversial prize. Castro told Fox News that, "Guns are legal in all 50 states and are a normal part of life for millions of law-abiding citizens" (Chiaramonte). He denied that the gun prize was in any way attached to the political climate of the time. Yet, the massive response to CrossFit's partnership with Glock made it evident that the move was political. If CrossFit leadership was truly unaware, they would have been impressively out of touch with the social and political climate.

Broadly, an offshoot of Vice News, obtained a quote from Reebok in response to the Glock prize announcement. The CrossFit title sponsor seemed to be frustrated with the sport's leadership's choice, writing to Broadly, "...we unfortunately do not have input regarding other partners or promotions. While we understand CrossFit's foundations are tied to law enforcement, military and first responders, we do not agree with this decision, particularly in light of current events in the United States" (Carroll). Though Castro and CrossFit Headquarters vehemently denied that the partnership with Glock was intended to be a political statement, even Reebok understood its implication and felt obligated to publicly denounce the decision.

Moreover, in a sport that claims to test athletes to find “The Fittest on Earth,” the decision to include a gun in the Games prize package made it evident that CrossFit HQ was really only trying to appeal to American athletes—specifically the kind of American athletes who would cheer on the idea of having a weapon included in the prize for a fitness competition. In a deeply ironic twist, though the male champion of the Games was an American, all three spots on the women’s podium were occupied by athletes from countries with extremely strict gun laws. Third place went to Icelandic Sara Sigmundsdottir, Tia-Clair Toomey from Australia took second, and the winner and recipient of the Glock pistol was Katrin Davidsdottir, another Icelandic woman (“Leaderboard”). Obtaining clearance to own a gun in Iceland is an extensive process, and being able to use that gun requires even more effort. Moreover, without a special collector’s license, owning a handgun like the Glock pistol awarded to Davidsdottir is entirely illegal (Alpers). The Icelandic winner of the 2016 Games never announced what she ended up doing with her awarded pistol, but she was definitely unable to use it to any significant extent legally. The gun thus functioned solely as a grab for political attention, not as a genuine attempt to give a useful prize to the athletes who earned it.

The kind of people who are drawn to CrossFit also shed light on the political meanings of the fitness empire. Alongside the wide array of everyday people looking to get fit through CrossFit’s unconventional methods are a number of high profile celebrity CrossFitters, from Jessica Alba to Channing Tatum (Hudson). However, one of the most interesting of the countless celebrities who associate themselves with CrossFit is Donald Trump Jr., the son of the sitting U.S. President. It would be easy to look over the politics of the younger Trump’s fitness routine, as most public figures play some kind of sport or go to the gym, and their actions generally

aren't significantly analyzed (with the notable exceptions of the amount of news coverage devoted to criticizing both President Obama and President Trump's time spent golfing). Yet, what differentiates Trump CrossFitting from playing golf like his father is that CrossFit is not just a sport he is participating in that can be associated with the politics and meanings of whomever is playing it. CrossFit is a *brand*, and the brand of CrossFit has very specific meanings. While the Trump family is not necessarily the most self-aware or careful with maintaining their public image, it is still unlikely that Trump Jr. would associate himself with any brand that he considered to be contradictory to his politics or his family's political goals. CrossFit as a company, as a brand, and as a lifestyle must, at least in Trump Jr.'s mind, not rub up against the Trump agenda. This is where CrossFit's associations with patriotism and with United States law enforcement and the military become especially key.

On May 29, 2017, Trump Jr. posted a photo on his Instagram account featuring himself working out in a CrossFit box in New York City. The caption explained that the Workout of the Day (WOD) he just participated in was "Murph:" run a mile, do 100 pull-ups, 200 push-ups, 300 bodyweight squats, and then run another mile, all for time, and he included #memorialdaymurph (Trump). Murph is a particularly popular WOD, done every Memorial Day by most boxes in the United States. It's common for a box to host a massive party for the workout, complete with a barbecue, beer, and perhaps even prizes for the top finishers in the WOD. However, the workout is not just an excuse to grill hamburgers and do an absurd amount of pull-ups in a row. Murph is what CrossFit refers to as a "Hero WOD."

Interestingly, while the official CrossFit website features descriptions of all the Hero WODs, it lacks any singular definition of what a Hero WOD actually is and what its purpose is

(“FAQ: Explain the Hero Workouts”). However, most affiliates post explanations of the Hero WOD concept on their websites and/or social media pages, and when these explanations are combined with the information about the workouts provided on the CrossFit site, a working definition can be constructed (McCarty, CrossFit Hardcore, Steinmetz). Hero WODs are particularly long and/or difficult CrossFit workouts named after either United States military or law enforcement officers who died while serving. As the CrossFit narrative goes, these WODs are intended to honor the “heroes” by giving those doing the workout some semblance of the kind of pain the person the workout was named after endured as a way to reflect on the sacrifice of the military or law enforcement personnel. Extreme praise of the military and the police is highly politically charged in the United States, especially when the actions of these groups have led to the loss of countless lives of color both historically and currently, and many people of marginalized groups feel understandably distrustful of forces like the police and the army. Yet, the kinds of servicemen and women CrossFit chooses to honor through Hero WODs make the workouts even more political.

Murph, the workout Donald Trump Jr. so proudly shared that he was participating in, is, according to the original 2005 CrossFit.com post announcing the WOD, “In memory of Navy Lieutenant Michael Murphy, 29, of Patchogue, N.Y., who was killed in Afghanistan June 28th, 2005” (“Workout of the Day”). Murphy was a part of the now famous Operation Red Wings mission chronicled in the 2013 film *Lone Survivor* (Klein). He died calling in reinforcements to save his team after an unfortunate accidental encounter with Taliban forces, and he was posthumously given a Medal of Honor (Klein). While Murphy’s death was undoubtedly a show of great courage and sacrifice for the sake of others, Operation Red Wings was a part of the

controversial and problematic “War on Terror,” a war that, according to the Watson Institute at Brown University, has taken the lives of 31,000 civilians in Afghanistan alone since it began in 2001, and the United States is not without blame for these deaths (Crawford). CrossFit supports U.S. military action without asking questions or allowing for complication, and it asks this unquestioning patriotism of its athletes as well.

Moreover, not only does CrossFit push for its U.S. athletes to participate in workouts that are shows of American patriotism and are honoring systems and groups that are not as faultless as the CrossFit narrative would make them seem, CrossFit also exports this ideology internationally. The company markets itself as being “international,” with the front page of their website proudly proclaiming that “CrossFit gyms are located in 142 countries across 7 continents” (CrossFit Inc.). While all affiliates are free to create their own programming, most still use official CrossFit workouts like the “Girls” and the Hero WODs regularly, since they are the most heavily publicized and have hundreds of thousands of scores attached to them online that can be used to compare benchmarks for fitness. Thus, Hero WODs are not only done by Americans.

I spent three months training at CrossFit Blackfriars, a box in London, England, and I distinctly remember my confusion the first day I saw a Hero WOD written on the whiteboard. It was “Glen,” a workout consisting of running, rope climbs, burpees, and clean and jerks (“FAQ: What are the Hero Workouts?”). The workout is done in honor of U.S. Navy SEAL Glen Doherty, who died in 2012 in Benghazi, Libya during the attack on the U.S. consulate, an event that is incredibly politically loaded in the United States, with many on the political right claiming that Hillary Clinton was responsible for the deaths (Browne and Bradner). Being in London only

a year after the election of Donald Trump, whose campaign heavily used the Benghazi attack to argue that Clinton was unfit for office, I found it shocking that anyone, much less someone in a country other than the United States, would decide to do a workout wrapped up in so much controversy. I was even more shocked to discover that CrossFit Blackfriars was not using the Hero WOD as a way to honor Doherty, nor did they even seem to be aware of the story attached to the workout. Rather, Glen was, in their eyes, just a good test of fitness posted on the CrossFit website that looked fun and challenging. Unknowingly, this gym in England was making a statement on U.S. politics and the U.S. military, a statement handed to them through a pre-made workout, and a statement that they had payed an American company to be allowed to make. Moreover, CrossFit Blackfriar is located in England, a country that has not been directly negatively impacted by the modern actions of United States military. What kind of complicated meanings must lie in CrossFit in countries directly involved in the wars the “heroes” of Hero WODs died in? There are two distinctly different examples of CrossFit affiliates in countries with extremely political relationships with the United States that are especially worth noting: Kandahar CrossFit in Afghanistan and CrossFit Ramallah in Palestine.

Kandahar CrossFit is a non-profit box that “serv[es] civilians, soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines from around the world deployed to Kandahar, Afghanistan” (“About Us”). The gym is located behind the American post exchange on the U.S. Army base in the city, and it is run by volunteers. There are two phrases found on the gym’s website, both of which are clearly intended to cater to an extremely specific audience. The first, found alongside the box’s name when it appears in Google search results, reads, “You only wish a rocket attack would stop this workout!” The second is the box’s motto, written on shirts and gear: “The best damn [b]ox, in

the worst damn place!” (“About Us”). Clearly, Kandahar CrossFit is not intended to be used by Afghan people, who would likely take offense to hearing their country referred to as “the worst damn place” or to reading casual jokes about rocket attacks, especially considering that United States missiles have killed both Afghan fighters and civilians alike in the last 17 years. The box is made for American military service-people. In a similar manner as the way Donald Trump Jr. is able to reconcile his public political figure with the politics of CrossFit, CrossFit is seen as supporting the mission and the beliefs of the U.S. military enough to be allowed an affiliate in a U.S. military base in Afghanistan.

Reflecting a completely different side of the American politics of the supposed international brand of CrossFit is CrossFit Ramallah. Of its 15,000 plus affiliates around the world, CrossFit lists 70 official boxes with the CrossFit name in Israel, three of which are in the West Bank, and one of which, CrossFit Ramallah, is listed as being in “Palestinian Territory” (“Official CrossFit Affiliate Map”). CrossFit Ramallah is the gym’s official name as it is registered with CrossFit Inc., but across its social media pages, the owners and athletes of the box refer to it as “PalFit,” short for “Palestine Fit.” Understandings of the conflict regarding Israel and Palestine are extremely divisive in the United States, and generally, politically conservative Americans (especially the Christian right) support the state of Israel and the Israeli settlers in the West Bank. (According to the Pew Research Center, in 2018, 79% of U.S. Republicans sympathize with Israel over Palestine, compared to 27% of Democrats) (“Republicans and Democrats...”). Even directly acknowledging the existence of Palestine can be a political statement, and attaching the name “CrossFit” to the word “Palestine” could easily ruffle the feathers of the political base CrossFit markets itself and caters to. Thus, considering

CrossFit's already vocal political leanings, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that, even if CrossFit did not have a direct say in determining the official name of PalFit, the name it chooses to recognize the box as (CrossFit Ramallah) is not accidental.

In 2018, PalFit head coach Basel Qatamesh qualified for the CrossFit Regional competition in the “Africa Middle East” region. Out of the 35,000 plus athletes in the Africa Middle East region who competed in the preliminary competition to the CrossFit Games, the Open, Qatamesh placed in the top twenty and earned a spot in the next round (Aruri).¹ He is the first Palestinian to ever qualify for a Regional, an enormous and impressive feat that has received a shockingly low amount of press coverage from any sources other than local Palestinian newspapers and online news sites, as well as, peculiarly, Xinhua News, the Chinese government-run media agency, and its subsidiaries, such as CNC News International. There is no CrossFit Journal article or piece written by any of the other major CrossFit websites and blogs commending Qatamesh for his accomplishment or exploring what it means to compete as a Palestinian professional athlete living in the West Bank during the Israeli occupation. There is no video on the CrossFit website or Facebook page telling the PalFit athlete’s story. For a company that is well-known for its love of using “underdog” stories and emotionally charged fitness journeys as advertisement, CrossFit is remarkably silent on the man who is the first in Palestine to qualify for the elite competition. In late May of 2018, Qatamesh will compete at Regionals, and how he is described, understood, and perceived by CrossFit commentators (the majority of whom are American and publicly prescribe to the politics of CrossFit) will be highly illuminating.

¹ Of course, it is noteworthy that CrossFit chooses to lump all countries in the Middle East and in Africa into one massive region with the clunky title “Africa Middle East,” though to their credit, that may be at least partially due to the simple proportion of people in that area of the world who CrossFit compared to the United States or Europe.

CrossFit and its affiliated brands also profit off of American nationalism in direct consumerist ways. For example, Rogue Fitness, the supplier of gym equipment for most CrossFit boxes and the official equipment sponsor for the CrossFit Games, sells “Gym Flags” on their U.S. website, which include options of five United States military flags and the United States flag (“Military Gym Flags”). These exact same flags are also for sale on the Canadian and European Rogue websites, though there are no flags for sale from Canada or any European countries. The company also sells American flag themed wrist wraps in all three markets (“Rocktape American Wrist Wraps”). For a limited time, Reebok, CrossFit’s title sponsor and the brand that sells all official CrossFit-branded clothing, even sold lifting shoes with an American flag pattern on them, named the “Liberty Pack” color scheme (“Reebok CrossFit Lifter...”). It is evident that not only does CrossFit push American patriotism and conservative values, but the company knows that it has attracted a market to whom it can sell these values, and this market extends beyond U.S. borders.

Even when CrossFit claims to be an “international” business, it is still an American company, and its international outreach only goes as far as this Americanism can be exported. CrossFit doesn’t mind how paradoxical it may seem to sell U.S. flags in Canada or to give a pistol to an Icelandic winner of the CrossFit Games because above all, CrossFit cares about constructing itself as a proudly capitalist, proudly libertarian, proudly *American* company. Greg Glassman and his team have molded CrossFit into a product that can be publicly supported by the Trump administration and the U.S. military, but can also survive in the heart of London or in Palestine with careful marketing that leaves politics unspoken, even as they’re still communicating loudly to CrossFit’s core market.

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