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Final Ethnography

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**CrossFit and Paleo: Sustainable Positive Change**

In today’s world, content with mediocre ability and blasé action, people are subtly self-equalizing. It is rare to see individuals in the extremities of the spectrum of action or thought, and even rarer to see individuals pushing themselves harder and harder to reach the upper end of the spectrum. Last semester, however, I had the privilege of becoming affiliated with and knowing personally a few select students here at Virginia Tech who have proven the exception to my cynical view of the human condition. These two students, whom I will refer to as John and Justin, are both members of the Corps of Cadets, John being the Cadet Colonel and Justin being a Cadet Captain. These exceptional men have both opened my eyes to a new plane of thought and determination, in regards to one community in which they are involved.

Upon our meeting, I noticed the difference in which they held themselves, both mentally and physically. Physically, they were best described as *solid*. Not an ounce of fat on either of them, perfect posture, the look of perfect health. Not just purely for aesthetic purposes I could tell- I have at times maintained a hobby of weightlifting, and the physical look I attained from my pushing weights in the gym was in NO way similar to the look of these two gentlemen. In fact, none of my weightlifting friends looked remotely akin to the pure *health* of John and Justin; while weightlifting makes you unequivocally bulky, veritably clumsy, and unnaturally big, John and Justin were, I venture to say, *aerodynamic*. Like they could cut through the wind faster than anybody else, muscle striations making themselves manifest at each bound. Naturally, being a fairly serious runner and priding myself on keeping in shape, I was drawn to figure out what could possibly allow John and Justin to assume such a physical condition that shames me to refer to myself as an athlete

Asking my closer friends from the Corps of Cadets about John and Justin, I heard all kinds of stories of athletic dominance about them, almost in a mythical way. Almost as if they were Paul Bunyan hammering together an entire railroad and moving an entire mountain with only one hand.

“*Oh that’s Steger, he ran a 56 minute Army 10-miler and place fourth in the nation.*”

“*I’ve seen Steger do 200 pushups consecutively, with the last 30 being one-armed.”*

Both of which turned out to be true.

I sat down with Cadet Colonel Steger over a cup of coffee one early October morning, when he had some free time and I was on campus just wasting time. Well, I should say, I sat down over coffee; he sat down over almonds and water. *What?* We started talking about any which thing, sports, school, classes, until my billowing curiosity finally got the better of me and turned our mutual conversation into one of me asking questions about every aspect of his exercise routine and diet.

“Okay John, what gives? College kids are supposed to drink coffee all the time. And what’s with the almonds? And how can you possibly live on a breakfast of a handful of nuts? Aren’t you the top dog in the Corps, don’t you need like a stack of twelve pancakes in the morning and a dozen raw eggs?”

And what I got in return for my penchant of asking too many questions in a row was, to put it simply, too many answers. Answers I’d never heard before based on concepts I was unaware existed. Long-standing diet and exercise ideas that were passed as being “Fad” diets or “too much work,” in favor of simple diets that let you eat 3 Dairies and 3 Fats and 12 Carbs and 1 Saturated Fat and 2 Sugars and on and on and on.

The immense amount of food knowledge, to which he was uncomfortable using the word “diet” and instead favored the term “nutritional habit”, was encompassed under the overarching term “The Paleo Diet.” To ring a bell, sometimes it is called the “Caveman Diet,” based on the premise that you don’t eat anything a caveman wouldn’t eat. I, being skeptical, immediately scoffed at this ridiculous notion. It was a gimmick if I’d ever heard one!

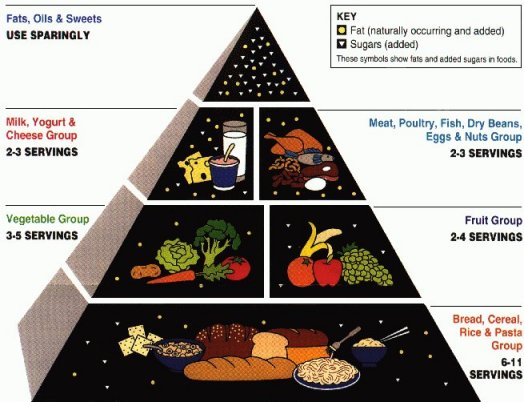
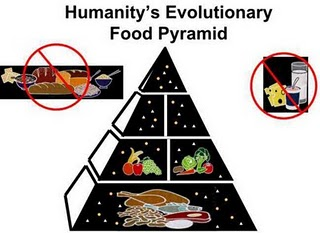
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To put it short, The Paleo Diet (henceforth deemed simply “Paleo”) focuses on the fact that the human diet has evolved so much more quickly than human genetics. Humans, in one form or another, have inhabited this Earth for upwards of 500,000 years. The natural selection of humans over this unfathomable amount of time led to “cavemen” being able to most efficiently use the food that they were easily able to obtain in the most efficient way possible, promoting strength and preventing diseases, two large factors in natural selection. Their diet was based on what was easiest to get for hunter-gatherers, namely lean meats, nuts, seeds, vegetables, and little fruit. For the most part, there existed no sugar, and especially no grain or starches, all three of which outpaced human genetics.

Just (and I use this term loosely) 10,000 years ago, the dawning of the Neolithic period brought upon the onset of the Agricultural Revolution, which allowed for the domestication of plants and, most important to Paleo, the processing of grain. This was a very easy, very maintainable way to get a sufficient amount of calories for the people of the time, yet the human diet was not adapted to the intense insulin spikes from eating neither processed grain nor the nutrient-deficient grain products that became available. However, due to ease of making grain and the calorie denseness of grain products, hunter-gatherers in the Neolithic made the logical decision to save time and effort and domesticate plants (The Paleo Diet, 2002).

Also tied into the domestication of plants was, accordingly, animal domestication soon thereafter, feasible with a definite food source. From the furthering of animal domestication, humans were provided with dairy products. This too, the theory goes, is not efficiently used by the human body, which is relatively new to its exposure.

According to John, this in no way means that the diet that developed from the Agricultural Revolution (and I’m not just talking cakes and butter; Paleo denies pastas, potatoes, bread of any kind, cereals, oats, milk, cheese, yogurt, sour cream, butter, etc.) was in any way “right” in terms of what is best for the human body. One day, according to Paleo pretense, maybe the human body will evolve to properly handle this new grain- and dairy-loaded diet. However, our bodies are in no way equipped to efficiently use dairy or grain currently without storing unnecessary fat and producing unnecessary byproduct

The United States Department of Agriculture Food Pyramid

The Paleo Diet Food Pyramid

My skepticism for this scam diet knows no bound. Not only will it be extremely difficult for anyone to avoid any kind of grain for the rest of their lives, how could it possibly make you feel *better* to give up things that you eat for breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day?

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The culture of Paleo is very small and represents a sliver of the entire population, making it seemingly difficult to perform a proper ethnographic study. As such, I am going to follow the Paleo Diet fully for the length of the term that we are writing this Ethnographic study, and find out everything I can about it through research, anecdotal evidence, ridiculous stories of pure health, and my own observations of my weight, my strength, and my overall well-being. By adding my own observations about myself to the observations of the Paleo community, I will be able to garner a thorough foundation of study. By immersing myself into this whole nutritional subculture, I will be able to gain a proper perspective on these health radicals and for a time become a radical myself. It is my goal in this project to properly either give credit to or disclaim the Paleo diet as a way of perfect health whilst learning the intricate ins and outs of the subculture that surrounds it.

By following the day-to-day habits of Paleo while following such hardcore Paleo-ers such as John Steger and Justin Elder, I plan to be able to perform a proper ethnographic study on such a radical, yet paradoxically fundamental, way of eating and, to a more important extent, living.

Easy to gather from my conversation with John Steger about Paleo is the idea of minimization. The way he eats stresses quality *and* quantity. He speaks about feeding himself with the foods that make him feel the best- not the best right now, but the best an hour from now. He “cuts the crap” from all of the sugars, processed foods, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), and anything else unnecessary to live. The idea, he explains, is to eat enough to support the activity you do, and with John being a Cadet Colonel in the Corps of Cadets, his activity level is high. Just how high I was soon to find out.

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My first ten days of strictly following Paleo was as difficult as it sounds. In a strange way, it was heartbreaking to leave the foods that gave me the comfort I was used to: the ice creams, the macaroni and cheeses, the fried apples, the chicken nuggets, etc. I felt generally awful. I had low energy, shown by my inability to walk to campus anymore. The cravings I had around meal times were unendurable, and the thought of running again for fun seemed so far out of the picture. My head hurt at times for no reason, I caught myself taking a thirty minute nap every few hours, and I never was full after meals. It seemed the closet you could get to withdrawals from being truly dependent on a substance.

The food I ate was completely unappetizing at first. When I was hungry, I’d reach for the walnuts or the almonds or the cage-free hardboiled eggs, but my body just craved the foods I had all my life fed it amply. I would eat “clean” Paleo foods (“clean” in Paleo-speak means without added anything and all-natural), but I could never *stop* eating them. My handful of almonds that I reached for when I was hungry for a snack would turn into my eating an entire jar of almond butter. My can of tuna I would eat after my morning meals (my second of what was usually 5 or 6 eating sessions per day) would turn into 3 cans of tuna and an entire jar of coconut milk. But, I did my reading, and knew this was what to expect from such a cold-turkey attempt. “The important thing is,” John told me, “that you only eat Paleo foods. Don’t stray, because your body needs to learn how to use fats as energy instead of carbohydrates.”

What John spoke of, and what I read at length about, was a process called *ketosis*. The human body has an extraordinary mechanism from which to draw energy in the absence of carbohydrates, but this process doesn’t need to be tapped in our Western diet. When you consume a low amount of carbohydrates, your body, over a short time period, “rethinks” how it gets its energy for survival. Between the ranges of about 0-75 grams of carbohydrates per day, your internal programming has a second energy source it can tap into, the amazing, highly useful fat (Phinney, 2004). When your body has to break down fats for energy because of its low-carbohydrate and thus low-blood sugar environment, the liver gets inundated with fatty acids. These fatty acids are metabolized into ketones, which are then used by the body as an efficient fuel source in place of the simple carbohydrates to which it’s acclimated (Sisson, 2008).

Essentially, my body was refiguring how to live because it had been addicted for quite some time to the insulin rushes characteristic of eating grains and simple sugars. For ten days I hurt. Then about a week and a half into the diet, I woke up and was no longer tired. I was wide awake, a little hungry, and felt *good*. I kept eating Paleo and over the next few days kept feeling better and better. The meals I ate became smaller in portion as I got full on less and less food from the dining halls on campus, and I started tinkering with supplements. For the next week after that, I remained on strict Paleo eating, eating a diet that was roughly:

**Breakfast- 8 A.M**.

6 whole eggs, 18 almonds, 1 orange, and a small cup of coffee (which was soon phased out)

**Pre-Lunch- 10:30 A.M.**

2 tablespoons of almonds butter, 10 walnut halves

**Lunch- 2 P.M.**

2 whole chicken breasts, a large spinach salad with carrots, mushrooms, broccoli, all soaked in extra-virgin olive oil

**Pre-Dinner- 4 P.M.**

1 apple, 1 cup of canned tuna fish

**Dinner- 6:30**

Steamed Vegetables (zucchini, squash, mushrooms), 20 pecans, and a large helping of turkey or chicken or pork

**Post-Dinner-10 P.M.**

1 can of coconut milk, watered down to taste, with some organic cinnamon and blueberries

I ate solidly like that for about a week, during which I became really excited about the new way that I felt and, to a lesser extent, looked. The body fat I had that I convinced myself I needed to run long distances started melting off, and I started running again at a faster pace and over longer distances than I had in the past. I looked into what more I could do to improve myself, and I started tinkering with fish oils, different multivitamins, Vitamin D, and probiotics (naturally-occurring gut bacteria).

John and I would talk at length about what they had tried, what they had found worked, and what they were willing to do become better athletes and more fit Cadets. I soon took a large leap into the entire culture, more so than I already had. From speaking with John and Justin, I assumed that the diet was the main focus of their health, that their diet alone allowed them to run at machine-like speeds over ridiculous distances and then report to Formation (a daily ritual of the Corps of Cadets at 7:30 A.M.)

What I was curious about soon took me into the deeper workings of the lifestyle, into the mainframe of Paleo, and showed me just how deep the culture went. According to Mark Sisson of marksdailyapple.com, your body composition consists of 80% of your diet and 20% of your exercise regimen. And although I found a great way to achieve 80% easily (well, not *so* easily*)*, I somehow managed to find the other 20%

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CrossFit

Speaking to Justin and John one day after an organizational meeting for a club on campus, they spoke fluently in a language I didn’t quite understand. They spoke of “burpees,” “Fran,” and “snatches,” and I was completely lost. Prodding for more information, I found that they were both members of an elite school of fitness: Crossfit Blacksburg. I had found the quintessential epicenter of Paleo where these words were the norm, and were actually movements. *CrossFit was the (cage-free) chicken, Paleo was the (organic, enhanced with Omega-3’s) egg.* Still having a strange image in my head, I asked more questions, attempting to get my head around the idea. They answered my preliminary questions in fragmented sentences, told me they couldn’t quite explain it, but did manage to relay the fact that it was “hardcore” and, well, “different.” *Hmmm…* So, of course, I checked it out as soon as I could, addicted to this great idea of *goodness* and searching for more ways to *improve* myself.

I quickly e-mailed the Coach of the gym (translated: the owner) and signed up for the first information session I could. Letting me know that I could come that next day at 2 P.M., I was ready to find out what the hype was about. Pulling into the parking lot fifteen minutes early, I figured I had plenty of time to find a gym. *How different can gyms look?* I looked, and I didn’t find. I saw a massage therapist office with a back door and a Tae Kwon Do building, but I saw no gym that could produce some of the fittest people at Virginia Tech. Turns out the back door to the massage studio was the gym. *Different? I’d say so*. I walked into a room no larger than my living room at home, a room covered with a floor-length rubber mat that smelled like sweat. In the corner of the “gym” were 4 stacks of Olympic-style weights, ranging from 10 lbs to 45 pounds. Up against the walls, starting at noon and going clockwise around the room, were 3 white boards with at least 75 names written and numbers next to each, a few windows, 5 tough-looking pull-up bars taped for your hands, a hook with at least 10 jump ropes, a few dumbbells, a few kettlebells, a couch, a computer, a sink, and 6 blue boxes labeled with bold black numbers. *Oh yeah, I almost forgot!* And at least 8 people dripping sweat, sprawled out on the floor in what looked like a war scene. *I had found homebase.* Scribbled on one whiteboard was “Lean Meats, No Sugars!” and underneath were listed two books named The Paleo Diet and Good Calories, Bad Calories by esoteric authors, along with what looked like a head of broccoli and an apple.

Sitting in the chair right in front of me was the Coach, Amy. She sat in her chair quickly answering emails on her computer in front a desk adorned with a bottle of 1000 mg/teaspoon EPA/DHA Fish Oil. In her bare feet, a sweatshirt emblazoned with “CrossFit Blacksburg” across the chest, and some Adidas long pants, she offered words of encouragement to the corpses (now beginning to stand up) and gave out copious high-fives. As everybody made their way out of the room (“*Bye Amy! See you when I can stand without support again!”)*, Amy introduced herself to me and motioned for me to sit down on the couch. What followed was a brief breakdown of the idea of CrossFit: high intensity, functional movements performed powerfully. Revolving around the basic ideas of Olympic lifting (the power clean, the jerk, the squat, and the snatch), the idea of CrossFit was to condition one to have *real* strength, not just bicep-curl-strength.

Then came the question of nutrition. “How’s your diet?” Luckily, for the first time this meeting, I was able to know a little about the topic of conversation. We talked about diets, and she reinforced my working knowledge of Paleo with her own anecdotal evidence of her health improvements over the 3 years she’s been “clean.” *3 years??!!* Telling me she never knew how bad she felt until she started eating better, she applied her own knowledge to my own Paleo experiences, but encouraged me that the positive aspects for outweighed the inconvenience of it.

What came next was something I was not exactly expecting. Over e-mail, she said she would put me through a quick workout to assess where I was physically (I had been a recreational runner for years, and had even finished with a respectable half-marathon time a month earlier). *No problem, Coach!* I assumed maybe a mile jog, a few jumping jacks, whatever. I brought my running shoes, and was ready for what I thought was going to be a cookie-cutter workout. *Not so fast there, Turbo*. Lacing up my tennis shoes, Amy asked me where I was going with a hint of sarcasm. “Um, just ready to work out, I guess?” was my not-so-assuring response. Letting me know that it’s beneficial to workout in bare feet to gain a more natural, organic feel, I slipped my shoes off and tried to play off my misstep.

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The workout she put me through was called “The Baseline.” *Funny, this looks like it could be a pretty high line to be considered Base.* Baseline seemed to be, well, a baseline for everything. Every member of CrossFit Blacksburg had their name and time for Baseline written on the white board, with times ranging from 3:30 to just over 9 minutes. Amy wheeled out a rowing machine, and told me I’d be doing a timed 500 meter row, into 40 deep squats, into 30 unanchored sit-ups, into 20 pushups, into 10 pull-ups*.* She said “GO!” and I went into the workout in a fury. By squat 3, I knew I was hopeless. My legs felt like jelly and my calves were burning. *Uh-oh.* Muscling my way through my last pull-up (needing help from an elastic band), I dropped onto my hands and knees, breathing heavily, not being able to talk. I felt like the people I had just replaced, and could still feel the sweat still very much not yet evaporated from the people twenty minutes before.

Not able to walk the next day, I knew I had done something right. I signed up for a semester membership as soon as I could grip a pen and move my arms enough to sign the check, which, laughably, was about three days later. Essentially wasting away on the floor, a sweaty clump of college kid in an old teeshirt and a thicket of hair, I understand the simplicity of everything. Everything in this subculture is minimal, because that’s the best way to do it. No fancy machines, just your body weight, a few functional movements, your bare feet, proper technique, and a stopwatch.

This was the main vein of Paleo; people of all ages and abilities come here first and get turned onto Paleo second. Although I happened to do it the opposite way, the message nevertheless got across loud and clear. There’s no room for vanity when you truly want to make yourself an exceptional athlete at the pinnacle of your own health. You just need to have the will power and the determination to eat and exercise *the right way*. Not *longer than anyone else* necessarily, and certainly not with the idea to get bulging biceps. CrossFit, and its accompanying diet, Paleo, coupled with a little hardwork can make anyone the natural athlete we’re genetically designed to be. With all of the new lifestyle information I gathered from CrossFit and Paleo, I realized we owe it to ourselves to function at a point that optimizes the rare feeling of *good*. We can accomplish this working minimally, even naturally with our environment. After Baseline, dripping sweat and coughing uncontrollably, Amy left me with this bijou of information: “It’s about getting the most out of the least.”

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Hidden in the middle of a strip mall, right between a Radio Shack and a hair dresser, lies the most unassuming building. With large windows encompassing the entire front side of the building, one passing on the street a few yards away can see an anomaly in the layout of the “office space.” Held in this esoteric space lies the CrossFit Blacksburg gym, easily distinguished by the eight or so pull-up bars and squat racks seen from outside the building. Consumer electronics or high-dollar shampoo is not sold here. Computer nerds tend not to enter, and the old ladies who get the hair cut on Friday afternoons walk past the gym with not-so-subtle snobbery. The members of the gym, who are prone to CrossFit (verb) barefoot and shirtless, are definitely out of place, strewn out in sweaty clusters outside on the sidewalk post-workout. Ask any CrossFitter (noun) basking in the sun what they are doing and they will respond with a wry smile and a cordial, “Oh, just getting some Vitamin D.” A different breed, indeed.

The parking lot is off the right of the entire strip, where all members (who don’t run or bike to their workout) keep their cars amongst the RadioShackers and the HairDressed for the duration of their stay at the gym. Almost comically, it is not very difficult to ascertain CrossFit cars from, well, *normal* cars. As you see CrossFitters exit their cars to traverse the parking lot towards the gym, one notices that their cars typically are pick-up trucks, Jeeps, Subarus, or any other form of a rugged 4x4. Typically, every single truck or car in the parking lot with a U.S. Army sticker or U.S. Marine graphic belongs to somebody in CrossFit. The ruggedness is no-so-hidden among the Acura’s and Lexus SUV’s belonging to the old women tending to their hair.

Walking into the gym, the smell of rubber hits you before you can fully take in the simplicity of the room. Wall-to-wall flooring consists of weightlifting mats designed to absorb hundreds of pounds of weight dropped on them. Usually standing in the back of the room on her computer is Amy. Amy and her husband, Neil, are the proud owners of this particular CrossFit affiliate, of which there are now almost 2,000 across the world. Short and powerful, Amy is a very intimidating athlete with impressive strength numbers and incredible flexibility. Neil looks to be in his late 30s, with graying facial hair and lanky arms that deceive his strength and work ethic. On this particular day, Neil is hanging upside from gymnastics rings that were just tied to the ceiling. *Typical.*

On each side of the entrance sits beige couches that people are sitting and chatting on before their workout. On the left there are four Cadets from Virginia Tech talking about military things that are way beyond my span of knowledge or interest. The rightmost couch houses Chuck, a 40-some-year-old rugby player, his wife, Monica, and a quiet lady who seems to come in and go out without saying much. It’s a vast range of personalities in the gym, all having physical health a priority.

On this particular day, a Friday afternoon at 1 pm, nine people are present for the workout. At exactly one o’clock, Amy announces loud and confident to our crowd that we need to get started with some hip flexibility stretches known as the Walking Samson Stretch and the Plank Lunge Series. Almost as amazing as Amy’s knowledge of the human body is her ability to command the undivided attention of all nine in the gym, who all act quickly on her every word. As we all do walking stretches with our arms extended upwards across the length of the room, you hear the cracks of backs and see the winced faces of those who are still sore from yesterday’s workout. A guy named Mike walks in nine minutes late and is told to do 45 burpees, which is a cute name for a horrible exercise that combines a pushup, an abdominal extension and contraction, and a jump. Five burpees are a chore, and the fact that he is told to do 45 makes everybody in the room grateful for their own punctuality.

After a few minutes of stretching, we are all told to circle up around Amy, who grabs eleven thin PVC pipes and passes them around the group. She explains that today we are going to do something called the Burgener Warmup and a Snatch Balance technique to work on our Olympic lifts and flexibility. About five minutes goes by in which she explains the movements, and another ten goes by in which we are all tormented into contorting our bodies in every which way to work on the positions of the Snatch. The whole sequence is fairly miserable but challenging, as you tend to compete with yourself over time to get more flexible and work for the approval of Amy. As we are all down in our flexed positions, Amy comes around and puts pressure on different parts of our bodies to mold us into the correct form for the exercise.

After our Cash In, as is the terminology at CrossFit, we all work on strength. Today, the workout is 20-15-10 Front Squats, meaning that you increase weight over three sets, the first being twenty repetitions (reps), the second set being fifteen reps, and the third set being ten reps. After the first set, pretty much everybody was hunched over trying to catch their breath, and Amy was in the corner smiling sadistically, as she tends to do. See, Amy does the W.O.D. (workout of the day) everyday for herself, and then seems to do a second workout through demonstrating the movements to CrossFitters throughout the day. Her smirk is not condescending; it is one of understanding of the pain we are going through. We all joke around and laugh about how difficult twenty reps of anything would be. A dirty joke emanates from somewhere in the corner, and the whole crowd lets out a chuckle in between racking and re-racking weights on the weight bars.

After the Front Squats, with quadriceps burning, we proceed to move on to the Split Jerk (SJ), five sets of 6 reps. Everybody keeps glancing back up at the whiteboard which keeps track of our workout and our weights as we call it out to Amy, and all gauge how strong we are relative. I tend to be on the weaker side of the strongest group in there, but the ranges of everybody are widely spanned. The SJs pretty much leave everybody gasping for air, and some shirts are stripped already and smiles become grimaced determination. About thirty minutes into the hour, the atmosphere of joviality about the beautiful weather turns into total business as we set upon the last part of our workout.

The last exercise is one that we have done already, but that everybody hates anyway. It is called an AMRAP, CrossFit code for As Many Reps as Possible. We have 5 minutes to do as many rounds of different amounts of different exercises, today being 3 Overhead Squats, 6 Pullups, and 9 pushups. The clock goes off and after about one minute people start slowing down from their initial sprint and settle into a rhythm, and the only noises made other than grunts and weights knocking is the collective groan let out when Amy announces we are halfway into the five minutes.

The five minutes of pure, unadulterated physical exertion leaves everybody sprawled on the ground for a few minutes, as some try to regain their breath and some are just lying down, reveling in their ability to sweat on the rubber mats. People start to gather their things and make their way out, some putting back on their work clothes to return after lunch, some putting on their wool Corps uniforms to return to Virginia Tech Corps life. I decide to hang back to talk to Amy, who keeps interest in my progress and has fun getting on my case of limited flexibility. I like to think she knows I can take it, instead of constantly criticizing my range of motion. I’ve never really seen her ever sit still, so my impromptu questioning is actually my shooting questions at Amy as I lay in pretzel positions, stretching on the ground.

A no-nonsense lady, I know Amy will be less than welcoming to accept a formal invitation of an interview, so I draw her interest by telling her about my plans to go eat a huge stack of pancakes from IHOP. She balks at my idea and tells me, without a hint of joking, for me to “not be a [expletive deleted] idiot” through rolled eyes. I play dumb and ask her what she means, hoping that she won’t remember the previous conversations about nutrition I’ve had with her. She starts by saying that there is no real benefit to eating sugar, and that most corbohydrates are not good, to screen for expletives, again. I laugh at her hatred towards refined carbohydrates, and tell her I think I’m going to start incorporating some sweet potato into my diet. Seeing me as a walking nutritional time bomb, she immediately asks why I want to do this. I tell her I want to improve recovery post-workout and be able to study the night following a workout, which is tough to do when you push yourself to your limits during CrossFit that day. A look of relief spreads across her face, almost as if trusts me with some secret, dangerous weapon. It is now ten minutes after the end of the last workout and Amy gravitates towards the corner to prepare for the next workout and begin paperwork for the dozen or so others who are coming in an hour to try CrossFit. A different breed indeed, these CrossFitters

I walk outside shirtless and barefoot and lie in the sun on the sidewalk out front, and decide whether I’d rather walk into Kroger to grocery shop or proceed to class with my newly acquired aroma. I go to Kroger to buy a sweet potato, a can of coconut milk, and a can of pink salmon and decide I’ll check how I feel before I make any decisions about coming back tomorrow.

In my efforts to find out more about Paleo, I stumbled upon so much more. I thought that my determination to submerge myself in the diet was hard enough; little did I know, the diet was only the entrance to the rabbit hole. I cleaned up my diet, sure, but in the midst I became addicted to a gym that is so much more than a gym. I became a follower of a way of life, of a personality, of a feeling. I learned just how far I can push myself, how hard I can go, and how much control I truly have over myself. Setting aside the physical gains from the gym, I became civilian competition to Corps guys at the gym, and damn stiff competition at that.

Paleo is truly just the beginning of the movement. It is the ways, whereas CrossFit is the means. You eat Paleo to sustain your CrossFit performance. So everybody at CrossFit Blacksburg, from all diverse areas of the spectrum, all have in common that they care about their bodies, care about their performance, and truly wish to better themselves. When everybody gets together for a workout, CrossFit Blacksburg undergoes a drastic transformation. It turns from a superficial sweat box into a lifestyle clearinghouse, whereas ideas, jokes, tips, and advice are exchanged for an hour. CrossFitters laugh with another goof off regardless of how long they’ve known each other and encourage one another to excel personally. No topic is too uncomfortable for the truly open personalities at the gym; girlfriends are discussed, school is discussed, military service is talked about.

In the hour of the workout, I sincerely become closer to everybody in the gym. We struggle together, making us that much closer. We sweat in front of each other, dropping all stigmas of embarrassment. We yell, grunt, and grimace in front of one another. We talk about diets and how to clean them up, as well as how much beer we drank the past weekend. We laugh about the struggles of school and get sad about broken relationships. We encourage each other one day when we finish the timed workout before then and then, in turn, are encouraged the next day when they finish before us.

In the process of this semester, I have become a stronger, more determined, more confident person. Yesterday, I did 16 dead hang pull-ups, an increase in twelve from my pre-semester total. My CrossFit total increased 335 pounds, up to 725 combined. I learned a new lingo and made new friends I may not have met otherwise. Most importantly, I found just how truly powerful the CrossFit movement has become. Not for superficial reasons, but because it is a transformational process. In all ways, it *makes you better*. I am leaner (*O.K.)* and I can run faster (*cool*). But the changes that I experienced were so much more than about how I look. It is about how I view myself. I know that I am capable of doing difficult things now. I can gauge doing accounting homework against doing a Death by Pullups workout, in which you do one pullup the first minute, two the second minute, and so on. I can judge the difficulty of studying for a test against ‘Helen’, a workout consisting of 3 rounds of a 400 meter run, 21 kettlebell swings of 55 lbs, and 12 pull-ups. I enjoy the things that make me feel better and spurn what I know is poisonous to me. Poisonous to my body. Poisonous to my mind. And, most importantly, poisonous to the new person I have become.

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**Annotated Bibliography**

# Booth, Frank W., Chakravarthy, Manu V., Spangenberg, Espen E. “Exercise and gene expression: physiological regulation of the human genome through physical activity.” The Journal of Physiology. June 28 2002. Online. Accessed March 1 2010. <http://jp.physoc.org/content/543/2/399.full>.

# [This journal article is based around the idea of human evolutionary programming relative to physical activity and a person’s ability to manipulate his or her genome to maintain optimal athletic performance. This topic is strongly rooted in CrossFit and Paleo eating, and the result of the experiment examines whether a sedentary lifestyle allows for genetic differences in humans. There is no noted bias included, and it is a respectable source as an offshoot of the Physiological Society. Notable results from the experiment shows that a difference in lifestyle does, in fact, alter you gene expression for disease control and health maximization.]

Guyanet, Stephan. “For those not scientifically inclined”. Whole Health Source. 31 May 2009. Online. Accessed 1 Apr 2010. < <http://wholehealthsource.blogspot.com/2009/05/for-those-not-scientifically-inclined.html>>.

**[A casual article by an intelligent source, the information presented in “For those not scientifically inclined” is very much for the audience towards which the ethnographic study is geared who would tend to be uninformed of the scientific background. Guyanet does an excellent job of explaining some of the more complex concepts simply but some of his broader topics cannot have too much emphasis placed upon them due to the excessive use of conditional terms such as ‘probably’ and ‘likely.’ This undermines overall confidence in an otherwise well written, casual soliloquy.]**

Phinney, Stephen D. “Ketogenic diets and physical performance.” 17 Aug 2004. Online. Accessed 2 March 2010. <http://www.nutritionandmetabolism.com/content/1/1/2>.

[**This scientific article published in Nutrition and Metabolism expounds upon the perception of low-carbohydrate diets and its potential evolutionary benefits as well as its divergence from the popular low-fat diets that exist today. The entire article gives significant weight to something that even most CrossFitters consider “soft science.” It goes into detail of the pathway of ketosis in the human body and an individual’s athletic performance without the presence of simple carbohydrates in the diet. It seems to be unbiased in nature, and even discredits the eucaloric diet for competitive athletics long-term.]**

Shai, Iris et al. “Weight Loss with a Low-Carbohydrate, Mediterranean, or Low-Fat Diet”. The New England Journal of Medicine. 17 July 2008. Online. Accessed 1 Apr 2010. < <http://content.nejm.org/cgi/content/full/359/3/229>>.

**[This article does an excellent job of distinguishing between the Mediterranean and low-carbohydrate diet and comparing both diets against the low-fat diet that is prevalent today. The authors clearly state in the abstract that the Mediterranean and low-carbohydrate diets are more effective at total weight loss than a low-fat diet. The article is also historically-based, drawing on background of evolution and prevalent diets of today, to compare to the results of a 2 year study in which almost 85% of participants complied. No conflict of interest was present in the study and the overall results look to be free of overall bias.]**

Sisson, Mark. “Primal Living in the Modern World.” 30 June 2008. Online. Accessed 3 March 2010. <http://www.marksdailyapple.com/dear-mark-ketosis>.

[**This article is an informal piece written by a proponent of a brand of the Paleo Diet and CrossFit that he calls The Primal Blueprint. Written by Mark Sisson, his writings in the past have featured CrossFit as being an exercise regimen that is unsustainable over a lifetime due to its intensity. However, he is a large figure in the dieting aspect of living healthily as shown by this writing. Mark claims that in a range of 100-150 grams of carbohydrates per day from fruits and vegetables, you will deny fat gain and be able to sustain large amounts of exercise.]**

Suny Downstate Medical Center. "Low-Carb Diet Reduces Inflammation And Blood Saturated Fat In Metabolic Syndrome." ScienceDaily. 4 December 2007. 5 April 2010 <http://www.sciencedaily.com­ /releases/2007/12/071203091236.htm>.

**[This article is an exposition on the effects of a low-carbohydrate on the group of symptoms called Metabolic Syndrome. According to the article, one in three Americans is afflicted with Metabolic Syndrome, the cluster of symptoms including high blood pressure, high cholesterol, high amounts of abdominal fat, high blood triglycerides, and overall lack of exercise. The article addresses vague inflammatory agents in one’s diet in contrast with typical nutritional information regarding caloric restriction. The authors place high priority on the idea that your body does what you eat, meaning that if you want to be physically fit, you need to clean your diet of inflammatory agents such as trans fats and high omega-6 fats.]**

Westman, Eric C. et al. “Low Carbohydrate Nutrition and Metabolism”. The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition. Aug 2007. Online. Accessed 2 Apr 2010. < <http://www.ajcn.org/cgi/content/full/86/2/276>>.

**[The article by Westman et al. addresses the “persistence” of the epidemics of obesity and Type 2 diabetes, showing that in order for these issues to be addressed, contemporary nutritional information must be forgotten. Defining a Low-carb diet as one between 50 and 150 carbs/day, the article takes great pains to explain the physiological effects and biochemical pathways of a low-carb diet. Addressed are the issues of hunger control and satiety on a low-carb diet, which are satisfactory in both cases relative to a traditional Western diet. After going specifically into a low-carb diet and metabolism, the authors state that insulin sensitivity can be increased with an overall low-carb diet. The entire article seems strictly scientific, lacking bias or slant.]**

**“What Your Cholesterol Levels Mean.” The American Heart Association. March 25 2010. Online. Accessed 5 April 2010. <** [**http://jp.physoc.org/content/543/2/399.full**](http://jp.physoc.org/content/543/2/399.full)**>.**

# [The American Heart Association is a well-known organization geared towards the prevention of cardiovascular-related diseases. As such, it is important to see a perspective unaffiliated with contemporary methods of weight loss and total health as it applies to the Paleo Diet, specifically. The AHA shows in detail the desired blood triglyceride level and recommends ways to attain healthy levels, including exercise and eating a good diet. The AHA tends to be biased towards popular opinion, as they are in the business of fund raising, and fund raising does not occur for companies too far against the norm. It is good to see an opinion backing up the importance of diet and exercise; however, it is necessary to maintain skepticism about the AHA.]

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Works Cited

“The Paleo Diet: Optimize your Health, Lose Weight, and Reduce Disease!” 2002. Online. Accessed 20 Jan 2010. <http://thepaleodiet.com>.