

Article

Training for the “Unknown and Unknowable”: CrossFit and Evangelical Temporality

Cody Musselman 

Religious Studies, Yale University, New Haven, CT 06520, USA; cody.musselman@yale.edu

Received: 30 August 2019; Accepted: 2 November 2019; Published: 11 November 2019



Abstract: This article looks at the relationship between the U.S. military and CrossFit, a functional fitness training method and sport, and focuses on how their affinities coalesce around the idea of preparedness. CrossFit makes a sport and spectacle out of preparing for the “unknown and unknowable” challenges of life. This approach to life and fitness is attractive to service members, first responders, and average citizens alike who live in an age of constant anticipation, awaiting unknown threats. This article draws from fieldwork observations, interviews, CrossFit videos and articles, social media posts, and discussion board threads to argue that CrossFit, with its emphasis on preparedness, exhibits an evangelical temporality that is particularly symbiotic with American militarism. This article introduces two new terms, “evangelical temporality” and “generic evangelicalism,” to discuss a disposition towards time marked by a sense of expectation; by the anticipation of rupture and change that necessitates a state of constant preparedness; and by a firm conviction that time is running out. In three acts, this article explores how CrossFit, as a militaristic sport and a lifestyle centered on preparedness, benefits from and adds to the prevailing sense of uncertainty, expectation, and preparation that characterizes evangelical temporality in America.

Keywords: CrossFit; military; evangelical temporality; generic evangelicalism; preparedness; premillennialism

1. Introduction

On a hot and muggy July day in Madison, Wisconsin spectators stand on the grass alongside an obstacle course, awaiting the start of the 2018 CrossFit Games’ fifth event. The air is thick with anticipation as the crowd presses against the thin rope chord that is the only barrier between them and the course. The occasional Marine or event staff-person walks by and surveys the crowd. Their presence is an attempt to contain the fans’ palpable excitement and maintain a sense of order. This is the eleventh annual CrossFit Games, a four-day spectacle that grew out of a backyard contest among people who train with CrossFit’s fitness methodology, which combines weightlifting, aerobic conditioning, gymnastics, interval training, and functional fitness movements (meaning exercises that mimic everyday activities like lifting boxes or pushing a wheel barrel) performed at high intensity. Professional CrossFit athletes (40 men and 40 women) are about to face off in an event sponsored by the U.S. Marine Corps called the “Battleground,” inspired by Marine combat conditioning exercises (Figure 1). During the Battleground, professional competitors will wear weighted bulletproof tactical vests over their clothes as they drag “Rescue Randy,” a 165-pound mannequin used for military and first responder training, 132 feet across a turf field. (Figure 2) Matching the armed forces theme, Rescue Randy wears military fatigues and a tactical vest. His nameplate reads “Pukie,” a nod to CrossFit’s mascot Pukie the Clown, inspired by the frequency with which CrossFitters vomit from intense exertion. After rescuing Randy, the athletes will climb two hanging ropes and then exit the stadium, running 650 m to an obstacle course. There they will scale walls, crawl under one net, climb over another, dangle and leap from one hanging rope to the next, hop over low walls, and swing through a set of monkey bars before running back to the stadium,

ascending the first two ropes yet again, and complete their last casualty carry by rescuing Randy one last time. They must finish all of this in less than eleven minutes. Whoever wins the event will be one step closer to winning the \$350,000 cash prize and the CrossFit Games' title as the "Fittest on Earth." Like most events at the CrossFit Games, the specifics of the Battleground obstacle course were not advertised ahead of time. The CrossFit athletes had never done this exact event before, but they trained all year with the CrossFit motto in mind, preparing for the "unknown and the unknowable."



Figure 1. The Marines sponsored an event and recruited at the 2018 CrossFit Games. Photo by author.



Figure 2. Rescue Randy, prostrate on the field, before the Battleground event begins. Photo by author.

How does one explain the urgency exhibited at this obstacle course event, where a confluence of fitness and militarism was on full display? What does this dense intersection—and its intensity—direct us towards, and what can it teach us about the relationship between religion and sport? In this article I draw from fieldwork observations, interviews, social media posts, discussion board threads, and videos and articles posted by CrossFit Inc., to argue that CrossFit, with its emphasis on preparedness, exhibits an evangelical temporality that is particularly symbiotic with American militarism. In the example of CrossFit we see three intersecting strands of American readiness coalesce: physical fitness, military preparation, and a particular brand of evangelical premillennial expectation.

This article has two aims. The first is to draw increased attention to the role of the military in shaping the relationship between religion and sport in America. While scholars of sport and religion often acknowledge the interlocking dynamics of Christianity, sport, and nationhood, the military lies beneath this wealth of scholarship as a consistently overlooked, yet massively influential institution. Several scholars have remarked upon the use of sport among Greek and Roman armies or the nineteenth-century adoption of sport by U.S. military academies (Higgs 1995; Hoffman 2010; Ellis 2014). And scholars of muscular Christianity, a Progressive era effort to attract more men to Christianity by making it more masculine, often remark on the movement's imperial context (Putney 2001), but besides these few instances, scant attention is paid to how America's "romanticized view of soldiers, tendency to see military power as the truest measure of national greatness, and outsized expectations regarding the efficacy of force" impact the relationship between sport and religion in America (Bacevich 2013, p. 2). In the following article I detail how CrossFit emerged as a paramilitary community; how it attracted military personnel to its method and made gym members into military-adjacent people who memorialize soldiers and civil servants through workouts; and how it cultivated an ethos of civilian readiness through its motto of "preparing for the unknown and unknowable" (Glassman 2007).

The easy marriage between CrossFit and the military is itself remarkable, and offers a porthole to consider the relationship between contemporary sport and the security state, between CrossFit's claims to *preparedness* and the military's construction of *readiness*. Yet I want to insert a longer through-line of American Protestantism's hopes for physical evidence of the spirit into this critical coupledness. Within this context we can consider the ongoing inquiries into "religion and sport" anew. Many theorists of "religion and sport" work hard to see "religion" in that dyad as plural, yet in the American context this is an occluding reach for sectarian diversity. Together, CrossFit and the military reflect a more covert and pervasive dynamic of American culture that is present across sporting culture at-large: an evangelical temporality. The second aim of this paper, therefore, is to offer evangelical temporality as an interpretative response to the affective urgency I witnessed during the CrossFit Games Battleground event, where a sport and spectacle were made of rescuing a fallen comrade and scaling a wall as if participants were in imminent danger.

In this article I use the term "evangelical temporality" to acknowledge the undercurrents of urgency, striving, and the sense of impending doom that exist in American culture and are exhibited by ever-ready CrossFitters. What I call evangelical temporality is a way of being in time that reflects dynamics of evangelical premillennialism, such as the firm conviction that time is running out and the desire to spread the news. Evangelical temporality, as I use it, signals a relationship to time marked by a sense of expectation. It is the anticipation of rupture and change that necessitates a state of constant preparedness. Others have effectively written about evangelical temporality to describe faith-based healing, domains of non-normative time, and practices of evangelical place-making (Hovland 2016; Hardin 2016; Jen and McMahan 2017).¹ I use the term differently than these scholars and employ it to

¹ It is notable that the term "evangelical temporality" has appeared only recently. Yet its varied usage, in diverse fields, indicates that while there is a need for the term, there is not yet a single or definitive definition. Ingie Hovland reviews temporal concerns in evangelical place-making habits. Jessica Hardin uses the phrase to discuss a dependence on God in faith-based healing among the sick in Samoa. Joanna Tice Jen identifies evangelical temporality, alongside messianic and queer temporalities, as a non-normative time in her search for political possibility.

indicate the affect and attitude of anticipation. Historically, a sense of anticipation among premillennial evangelicals would refer to awaiting providential acts and signs of the end times. Several scholars of evangelicalism have indirectly contributed to the concept of evangelical temporality by paying specific attention to the way apocalyptic thinking and premillennial theologies have influenced American evangelicals' being in time more broadly (McAlister 2007; Lahr 2007; Sutton 2017; Vox 2017). However, on the whole, the term "evangelical temporality" has yet to accrue definitional coherence or witness widespread use, so I use it here to explain a sense of evangelical time—one that is cautious, optimistic, and prepared—observable in American culture at large.

Evangelical temporality is not the only way to make sense of CrossFit's foreboding motto of preparing for the "unknown and unknowable" and its alliance with the military. With CrossFit's founding in 2000, it is tempting to understand CrossFit's commitment to preparedness simply as a reaction to the events of 9/11, after which all Americans were called upon to be militaristically ready civilians. While the impact of 9/11 on CrossFit as an emerging business and fitness method was undeniable, as I discuss in greater detail later, it is not the only explanation for why Americans readily embraced CrossFit, prompting Forbes to deem it "one of the fastest growing sports in America" (Rishe 2011). CrossFit's emphasis on community formation has also contributed to its widespread appeal, with cultural commentators likening its tight-knit communities to churches (Beck 2017). There's something to this comparison, considering that many of the most celebrated and influential CrossFit athletes are outspoken Christians who have used their platforms as niche celebrities to proselytize. The affinity of the CrossFit community for Christianity, which I discuss at greater length in this article, may be enough to suggest that its culture exhibits an evangelical temporality, but I offer evangelical temporality here to invoke a longer history of pious expectancy that informs attitudes of the present. Such a genealogy includes Millerites using numbers and dates in the Bible to predict the exact date of the end of the world, doomsday preppers, and Cold War evangelicals motivated to organize politically by the looming end times. In short, CrossFit, when viewed through the lens of evangelical temporality, appears as a cultural phenomenon representing a pattern of thought and organizing ethos familiar to Americans steeped in a history of providential promises and anxious anticipation.

My use of evangelical temporality sits within a larger ethnographic and analytical project that identifies aspects of what I call *generic* evangelicalism. Generic evangelicalism names forms of American evangelicalism that are not tied to specific denominational histories or sectarian disputes; instead, they express behavioral dynamics, affects, temporalities, and webs of associations that shape distinctive types of community formation, recruitment strategies, proselytization techniques, architectures, language games, and bodily comportments.² Generic evangelicalism eschews specificity, in part, because even among scholars of evangelicalism there is some debate about who to include within the scope of evangelicalism. There is also an increasing interest among some scholars to investigate how evangelicalism and its history reflect a scholarly construct (Hart 2004; Fisher 2016; Altman 2019). Whereas D.G. Hart argues for scholars to stop using evangelicalism as a generic term and return to denominationally specific studies, ethnographic observations prompt me to argue for the opposite. A generic evangelicalism emerges as a way of talking about purportedly secular phenomena that have an overwhelming resonance with traditional religion, such as CrossFit.³ For example, during

² The numerous scholarly investigations into specific aspects of evangelical culture underscore this point. For works on evangelical approaches to the body, see: (Blazer 2015; Griffith 2004; Gerber 2011). For work on the distinctiveness of evangelical megachurch cultures and architecture, see: (Loveland and Wheeler 2003; Richardson 2017). For more on the specificity of evangelical language games, see: (Harding 2001).

³ My thinking on generic evangelicalism is similar, in some respects, to William Connolly's notion of the "evangelical-capitalist resonance machine." In this article he discusses "affinities of sensibility," "affinities of identity," "existential affinities," and "latent intensities" to get at how diverse elements of politics and religion "infiltrate into others, metabolizing into a moving complex—Causation as resonance between elements that become fused together to a considerable degree." In the resonance machine these cultural factors morph "into energized complexities of mutual imbrication and interinvolvement, in which heretofore unconnected or loosely associated elements *fold, bend, blend, emulsify, and dissolved into each other*, forging a qualitative assemblage resistant to classical models of explanation (italics and capitalization in original, 870)." I see generic

fieldwork at CrossFit competitions and in CrossFit gyms across the country, my interlocutors frequently described CrossFit as religious by enumerating the ways CrossFit was analogous to evangelical Christianity. They provided examples, such as testifying to others after experiencing the life-changing impact of the CrossFit method, or frequently returning to and quoting from memory Glassman's foundational *CrossFit Journal* articles that are now part of the Level 1 instructor guide.⁴ While CrossFit is not a religious organization, and its founder and sole owner is a professed atheist, it is telling that so many of my interlocutors described CrossFit as religious by turning first to dynamics of evangelicalism. This conflation of evangelicalism with religion reflects not only how Protestantism has become the de facto establishment in United States (meaning Protestant practices have helped define what constitutes religion—legally and culturally—throughout American history), but also how a concept of generic evangelicalism is already circulating outside of scholarly analysis and debate (Sullivan 2005; Fessenden 2007).

This article focuses on evangelical temporality as one aspect of generic evangelicalism. It progresses in three acts to demonstrate how evangelical temporality unites CrossFit (as both sport and lifestyle) and the military, which are both enlivened by a sense of preparedness.⁵ Because anticipation and preparedness lie at the heart of evangelical temporality, as I use the term, each section will focus on how the CrossFit methodology and philosophy prepare practitioners' minds, bodies, and spirits for the future, in a way that is attractive to military personnel. Act one briefly details the history of CrossFit and explores how its commitment to preparing for an "unknown and unknowable" future results in a general physical preparedness. The second section demonstrates how Christian CrossFitters, as a special-interest group within the world of CrossFit, have adopted the "unknown and unknowable" for their own preparatory purposes. Here Christian CrossFitters use the CrossFit method and motto to help spiritually prepare for the world to come. The final section provides a close reading of an ethnographic scene where physical and spiritual preparedness come to a head in the Hero workouts. In Hero workouts CrossFitters honor fallen soldiers by physically reenacting soldierly suffering and imagining themselves in the trenches. In these moments CrossFitters test whether their emotional, spiritual, and physical training has sufficiently prepared them to confront scenarios of ultimate sacrifice and their inevitable demise. Looking at CrossFit through the lens of evangelical temporality, it becomes possible to understand its affective and organizational affinity with the military. Together, the three sections demonstrate how CrossFit, as a paramilitary fitness community, exemplifies an evangelical

evangelicalism as something that both reflects the resonance of evangelicalism with American culture at large, and as an actor in the creation of culture—as a force that does the folding, blending, and dissolving Connolly describes (Connolly 2005).

⁴ CrossFit Inc. has devised its own coaching program with four distinct levels. Any CrossFit coach must have at least a Level 1 certification and must renew or upgrade their certification every five years. Many CrossFitters take a Level 1 coaching class to become better acquainted with CrossFit's methods, even if they do not plan to become a coach or affiliate gym owner. Certified CrossFit trainers use their level number (i.e., Level 1) as a title when referring to their qualifications.

⁵ CrossFit exemplifies a generic evangelicalism in a variety of domains. This article focuses on temporality, but it is necessary to note how CrossFit resembles a generic evangelicalism (and the historiography of evangelicalism) in the areas of race and gender as well. Like evangelicalism, CrossFit is now a worldwide phenomenon, practiced by people of all different races, ethnicities, and nationalities. Yet, in the world of CrossFit, the majority of media attention is paid to its white male founder and its white elite athletes who make up a disproportionate number of CrossFit Games competitors. This resembles much of the scholarship on evangelicalism in which whiteness persists as an un-named organizing category. In this sense, a generic evangelicalism could be understood as denoting a particular kind of religio-racial dynamic in which whiteness fails to disclose the power and prevalence of whiteness. (Here my use of religio-racial refers to Judith Wisenfeld's work that examines the co-constitution of religious and racial identities). See, (Weisenfeld 2016). With regard to gender, Crossfit both replicates and differs from the gendered dynamics generally associated with American evangelicalism. CrossFit culture is, in many respects, invested in classic cues of masculinity (such as muscularity, virility, and toughness), yet it strives to carve out equal space for women as tough, muscular competitors. CrossFit promotes the idea of strong females, for example, by paying male and female winners at the Games the same sum and by redefining beauty as strength, like in their "Beauty in Strength" video. (CrossFit Inc. 2012) Here, femininity is unlike evangelical womanhood wherein submission to male authority is a defining characteristic. For more on evangelical womanhood, see: (Griffith 2000). Yet, despite CrossFit's redefinition of female beauty as strength and its promise to pay female competitors equal prize money, there is nevertheless an overwhelming commitment to the gender binary and gendered difference within the world of CrossFit. Some special-interest groups like OUTWOD, the CrossFit LGBTQ advocacy group, strive to make CrossFit—a community with over 15,000 gyms—more inclusive of gender non-binary people. In CrossFit, gender remains a contested category.

temporality in which members do not passively await death, destruction, and salvation. Instead, they actively prepare for a future rife with challenge—be it international conflict, chronic disease, or environmental devastation—but saved by fitness.

Before proceeding it is worth noting that throughout this article I talk about CrossFit in multiple ways. At times I discuss decisions made by CrossFit's founder Greg Glassman and the company CrossFit Inc. At other times I refer to the culture of CrossFit at large. I also make a distinction between CrossFitters, the people who do CrossFit, and Christian CrossFitters, the people who purposefully incorporate their Christian identity and worship practices into their CrossFit workouts. I make reference to CrossFit as a sport and its members as athletes because these are the terms CrossFitters use. Greg Glassman and CrossFit members frequently call CrossFit "the sport of fitness" and within the world of CrossFit anyone who does the workouts or is a member of a CrossFit gym is considered an athlete (CrossFit Games 2014). Given that every CrossFitter is referred to as an athlete, there are several tiers of athleticism. Local competitions and the Open, a worldwide competition open to everyone in the Crossfit community, highlight "the feats of everyday athletes," while the annual CrossFit Games features only elite athletes who train professionally for international CrossFit competitions (CrossFit Inc. 2019). These various ways of referring to CrossFit indicate how the CrossFit community is heterogeneous, despite cohering around shared traditions, identity markers, mottos, and ways of being in time.

2. The Unknown and Unknowable

In 2015, the CBS show *60 Minutes* profiled CrossFit's founder Greg Glassman, calling him the "King of CrossFit." In the interview, reporter Sharyn Alfonsi said to Glassman, "I have heard you say that CrossFit prepares athletes for, quote, the unknown and unforeseen." Glassman attempts to correct the "unforeseen" to the "unknowable," but she continues, stating in disbelief, "it sounds like you're getting ready to go to war!" Glassman gives a wry smile. Sitting across from Alfonsi in the studio, Glassman wears a grey t-shirt. His shaggy grey hair tumbles out from under his red backwards baseball cap. He responds in his usual casual tone. "Yeah, why not? Yeah, getting ready for war, getting ready for [an] earthquake, getting ready for mugging, getting ready for the horrible news that you have Leukemia. What awaits us all is challenge. That's for sure" (CBS News 2015). In this segment Glassman acknowledges the martial qualities inherent to CrossFit, but in the same breath he normalizes it as an appropriate way to respond to the hardships of the human condition. Challenge, of any sort, is nondiscriminatory and, as such, challenge requires vigilance. Above all, challenge necessitates preparation.

Preparation for the unknown and the unknowable is fundamental to CrossFit's approach to fitness, which seeks to optimize human performance. "This whole thing starts for me with what I call a belief in fitness," Greg Glassman told a crowd during a lecture at the National War College in 2009. "I believe there is a physical capacity that would lend itself generally well to any endeavor. Optimally? No. Generally well" (Glassman 2009). Glassman was talking about training well-rounded athletes that would be exceptional at nothing but great at everything. When Glassman, a former gymnast, bike enthusiast, weight lifter, and personal trainer, developed CrossFit he sought to create a strength and conditioning cross-training program that was "broad, general, and inclusive." The intent was to allow clients to perform "well at any and every task imaginable." He embraced variability and eschewed specialization. "Our specialty is not specializing," Glassman wrote in his seminal article "What is Fitness?" published in a 2002 issue of the *CrossFit Journal*. In the article he further justified his "broad, general, and inclusive" approach to fitness, remarking that "combat, survival, many sports, and life reward this kind of fitness and, on average, punish the specialist" (Glassman 2002). Glassman championed being generally good at everything and excellent at nothing. The generalist would win. The generalist would survive.

For Glassman, who is still a primary figurehead in the CrossFit community, training for the unknown and unknowable began, in part, when he was still a young personal trainer at Gold's Gym in

Venice, CA. He credits training alongside policemen, firemen, and some military men with inspiring his foundational commitment to adaptability. “These people were largely confronted with unknown and unknowable challenges,” he explained (Glassman 2009). A fireman did not know what exactly to expect when entering a burning building. A law enforcement officer could receive a call and, at times, only guess whether the ensuing confrontation would end with a citation or a foot race. When Glassman established CrossFit in Santa Cruz, CA and began publishing his workouts for free online in 2000, first responders and military service personnel were some of CrossFit’s earliest adopters and most dedicated followers. They were drawn to CrossFit’s intensity and to the promise that it might help prepare them for unanticipated events and protect them from unexpected hazards. For this population, unknown dangers and unknowable threats were regular occupational hazards.

The 2018 Battleground event was certainly not the first instance of the military’s collaboration with CrossFit. CrossFit’s connection to the military is undeniable, and yet there is no single moment or event that defines their relationship. Instead, it developed gradually through grassroots connections. At first individual service members would find CrossFit.com and follow the main-site workouts, supplementing the military’s mandated physical training routines. This was due, in part, to the timing of CrossFit’s founding. Glassman and his ex-wife, Lauren Jenai, conceived of CrossFit in the late 1990s, and founded the company in 2000 when they opened a gym and began building a virtual online community. In the early days of CrossFit.com the Glassmans encouraged users to post about their experience doing the workouts on discussion threads on the website. From these posts the Glassmans could see that a large segment of the CrossFitting population was affiliated with the military. The company was still in its infancy on 11 September 2001, but it would soon gain popularity among soldiers stationed abroad in Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq during the War on Terror. CrossFit was particularly well suited for use by these soldiers because of its versatility and practicality. The workout routines require very little equipment and are efficient, with many exercises lasting less than fifteen minutes. CrossFit also emphasizes the importance of functional movements, turning everyday activities like climbing stairs and lifting sandbags into timed workouts. For these reasons, military personnel could easily follow the main-site regimens while deployed abroad. Early on Glassman and his staff embraced this population and even published articles in the *CrossFit Journal* geared towards helping deployed soldiers maximize their training in austere environments (Glassman et al. 2006).

The *CrossFit Journal* also began to publish articles by guest authors, including military officers who had converted to the CrossFit methodology and advocated using CrossFit to ameliorate military fitness at large. In 2009, First Lt. Matthew Hoff of the U.S. Army contributed an article from his station in Iraq about how military physical training (PT) could be improved. The basic PT tests, he explained, “are an attempt to ensure a minimum standard of fitness for all service members,” but they do not accurately represent the physical challenges recruits face while moving unusually shaped objects, in full tactical gear, under duress. “Current tests don’t always pinpoint strengths and weaknesses,” he writes, before suggesting training solutions that borrow from CrossFit’s methodology (Hoff 2009). This logic follows the pitch Glassman made earlier that year at the National War College where he was adamant that the best way to achieve readiness for all of life’s challenges, including combat, is to optimize human performance by training weaknesses. “It is our contention that you [ought to] focus on your weaknesses if you want to protect yourself from the unknown and unknowable,” he told the crowd (Glassman 2009). While Glassman admitted to the audience that he had neither a military background nor any familiarity with combat, he was sure, just as his audience was, that war in the twentieth-century was full of unknowns.

Indeed, the twenty-first century has been characterized by the mobilization of a counterterror ethos, a swell CrossFit has been able to ride. “Unknown unknowns” continually threaten the world in the age of counterterror, as Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld famously warned during a press conference in 2002. “A vision of a world without borders, generating threats without limit” justified the initiation of the War on Terror in the early 2000s (Masco 2014, p. 1). In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, an imagined menace became just as important as a real one. In short, threat was

imminent and everywhere. Joseph Masco describes the constant speculation and anticipation of catastrophe as forming a national security affect. Fear, uncertainty, and imminent danger created a “new affective politics” informing the background of everyday life (Masco 2014, pp. 17–18). The national security state, he argues, used its influence over the public imagination to build anticipation and concern, and ultimately, to sanction preemptive military action on behalf of the American people. It also created citizen-subjects for whom vigilance, nervousness, and excitability are normalized states, making continual preparation for the unknown a constant imperative. CrossFit was born into, fed off of, and benefitted from this national security affect. Through its motto (preparing for the unknown and unknowable), CrossFit warned citizens and servicemen alike of the costs of being unprepared.

The psychopolitics of national security—that is the “state and non-state strategies for administering the psychic lives of individuals and population-level aggregates”—predates the War on Terror (Orr 2012–2013). Preparedness became a civilian watchword during the Cold War decades following the Second World War. When the specter of international threat did not subside with the conclusion of the war, preparedness dialogue expanded from local preparations for natural disaster to national discussions of low probability high impact events. Government suspicions of Soviet nuclear weapon capabilities prompted the formation of the Federal Civil Defense Administration under President Harry S. Truman in 1950, which devised public campaigns to fan the flames of preparedness rhetoric nationwide. Pamphlets and posters warned of communist threats and advised citizens to practice “duck and cover” atomic air raid drills.⁶ The physical readiness of the nation became implicated as well, with social commentators comparing the physique of U.S. men to Soviet soldiers and deeming the “muscle gap” as commensurate with the “missile gap” (Griswold 1998). The creation of the President’s Council on Youth Fitness (PCYF) under President Eisenhower framed “our growing softness, our increasing lack of physical fitness” as “a menace to our security” and made exercise and physical preparedness a national priority (Kennedy 1961).⁷ This spate of speculative planning marked the beginning of the national security state, “one that made feelings (fear, terror, shock, aggression, futility, revenge) a new national project” (Masco 2014, p. 17).

Living in an uneasy state of anticipation and preparation was familiar to a politically and culturally emergent group of religious Americans: premillennial evangelicals. Awaiting the return of Christ, or Millennialism, has held a longstanding place in the history of Christianity and especially among American evangelicals. While a variety of millennialisms exist, premillennialism understands history as building towards a climax wherein chaos and disaster, the rise of the anti-Christ, tribulation (or the rapture of god-fearing Christians into heaven), and the return of Jesus will usher in the Kingdom of God on earth where Jesus will reign for a thousand peaceful years. Belief in this divine plan stems from prophecies found in the biblical books of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation. While there is a rich tradition of predicting when Armageddon will happen and Christ will return, there is nevertheless an overriding sense that the eschaton could transpire at any time. Amidst the mounting tensions of the Cold War security state, an eschatological point of view provided Cold War evangelicals with an explanation for the widespread fear and anxiety they witnessed in the face of nuclear war. Disaster hanging on the horizon confirmed God’s divine plan and gave believers hope that they might witness or play a part in bringing about the return of Christ. Preparedness was almost a welcome dictum for those who could see signs of the end times at every turn (McAlister 2007).

Premillennialism would seem to position believers as helpless bystanders in the face of God’s interventions. And yet, a sense that one could take action to ensure the salvation of themselves and others nevertheless remained. If anything, the looming devastation of the atom bomb and the creation of the state of Israel spurred Cold War premillennial evangelical action to ensure that the country was

⁶ For more on American preparedness from 1940-present, see: (Redlener and Berman 2006).

⁷ The PCYF continued under John F. Kennedy’s administration. Kennedy promoted physical fitness as a Cold War strategy and warned the populace of the dangers of growing soft in an article entitled “The Soft American,” featured in 1961 issue of *Sports Illustrated*.

fit to withstand the catastrophe of Armageddon and that Americans were saved by their professed faith in Christ (Lahr 2007). The notion that evangelicals could spread the good word and hasten the second coming of Christ played out in the realm of politics as well. While early twentieth century Fundamentalists (evangelicals' predecessors) adopted a more isolationist stance, prominent white, politically conservative mid-century evangelists were now mobilizing large swaths of believers into a voting block that would later be known as the Religious Right. The here and now, they determined, required as much intention, preparation, and faith as God's glorious ever after. The fate of the future was known, but how it would all come to pass was still unknown. Welcoming the apocalypse would require a readiness of mind, body, and spirit that new evangelicals were prepared to adopt as self-designated "guardians of the nation" (Sutton 2017, p. 226).

As evangelicals readied their hearts and minds for Christ's return, the military became more serious about maintaining combat-ready levels of fitness throughout their various branches. The Cold War era witnessed the first implementation of fitness standards as a service requirement. Army personnel now had to demonstrate physical readiness by attaining a minimum score on a physical achievement test. Standards differed with respect to gender and age, but the notion that the Army must maintain a baseline level of fitness reflected lessons learned from the first half of the twentieth-century after soldiers' overall fitness repeatedly declined when the military was not actively engaged in conflict. To be a modern military and a global superpower, it was critical that the armed forces be staffed with people who were always physically and mentally at-the-ready. Warfare readiness training throughout the 1960s incorporated skills that were commonplace in combat such as running, jumping, climbing, swimming, dodging, balancing, carrying, and vaulting. Simultaneously, a broader fitness culture was experiencing changes that would ultimately impact military fitness as well. Aerobics exercises and an emphasis on cardio-respiratory endurance shaped the exercise culture of the military such that by the 1980s the culture of military fitness had shifted from combat imitation to maintaining general cardiovascular fitness. The new physical training test, which soldiers took twice a year, required no equipment and consisted of push-ups, sit-ups, and a two-mile run done in combat boots and military fatigues. This test remained largely unchanged through the end of the twentieth-century, even as commanders began to express concern that it did not adequately prove combat readiness. Entering the twenty-first century, officers worried that recruits were too preoccupied with passing the test rather than developing physical capabilities that could prepare them for the unexpected challenges of modern warfare (East 2013).⁸ Enter CrossFit.

Since its founding, CrossFit has been used in nearly every branch of the military. While not all divisions are keen to claim outright allegiance to the brand, the Marines and Special Operation Forces have developed a tighter relationship to CrossFit—the company and the fitness method—over the past two decades. Some members of the Marines have been particularly vocal about CrossFit as a necessity in preparing soldiers for the unknown and the unknowable. For example, in April of 2009, CrossFitter Brian Chontosh, then a Captain in the Marine Corps, spoke to an audience at the American Society of Exercise Physiologists, following a presentation by Glassman. In his lecture, Chontosh lamented the state of military training. The branches of the military cannot agree on what fitness is and how it best prepares soldiers for war, so they tend to have soldiers do some sit-ups, pull-ups, and run 3 miles, he shared. Yet none of the exercises are done wearing heavy protective gear or under pressure. "Is that enough to prepare for war?" he rhetorically asked the crowd. The key to effective preparation, he says, is to practice as if one were in combat. For him, CrossFit is essential because it incorporates everyday movements. He then described a hypothetical scenario where a soldier is lying on the ground shooting, gets up and sprints for 20–30 m and then quickly lies down to shoot again. "There's an element of applying accuracy while maintaining and controlling my physiological

⁸ The late twentieth and early twenty-first century witnessed widespread changes in military fitness standards. These changes underwent various iterations. For more, see chapters 6 and 7 in (East 2013). See also: (Knapik and East 2014).

response to stressors in the environment. What does that sound like to you?" he said, gesturing towards the CrossFit members of the audience. "So what we're saying is combat is CrossFit and CrossFit is combat?!" he asks, anticipating the audience's question. "I don't know. I'm not here to sell one or the other, but I am here to say this: it's friggin workin'! It's allowing me to perform and excel [in combat]" (Chontosh 2009). Training the body under pressure at high intensity, he explained, is the future of military fitness training. Because CrossFit exercises mimic the intensity of battle, and its programming embraces physical and mental preparation for the unknown and the unknowable, Chontosh is able to suggest that, outside of combat experience, CrossFit is the best form of preparation for soldiers and civilians alike who exist in a state of perpetual anticipation amidst a culture of perpetual war.

The Marines, in particular, understood CrossFit's philosophy of preparing for the unknown and unknowable as symbiotic with a military mindset. "From the very beginning, the cultures of the Marine Corps and CrossFit have aligned perfectly," Maj. Gen. James Bierman, the commanding general of Marine Corps Recruiting Command, shared after the 2018 CrossFit Games. "As Marines, we don't know what to expect, so we work hard—train hard—physically and mentally, so we can thrive in situations of uncertainty, and that is exactly what CrossFit athletes are all about" (Gawronski 2018). While CrossFit is attractive to active duty soldiers, the Marines also understand that CrossFit is likewise attractive to military-adjacent civilians—meaning those who have military relatives, firearms users, or those who consider themselves able-bodied defenders of liberty. In Wisconsin, Marine Corps representatives stood under the high sun, looking on, as the Battleground event commenced. Men and women in uniform lined the course but they were not attending the CrossFit Games as spectators. They had come as recruiters to capitalize upon the physical and mental similarities between CrossFitters and Marines. The mental toughness, the physical strength and stamina, and perseverance of CrossFitters made them attractive recruits. After watching the Battleground event, fit young fans could walk less than a quarter of a mile from the obstacle course to the vendor village where the Marines had set up their Battles Won Challenge trailer, a mobile obstacle course, for passersby to try. (Figure 3) Here, the Games' spectators could test whether their training had prepared them to be *semper fidelis* to country and CrossFit.

Preparation for the unknown and unknowable is CrossFit's answer to life's uncertainties and many CrossFitters have liberally applied this motto to many aspects of life outside of the military and first responder contexts. Some credit their CrossFit training with physically and mentally preparing them to face the challenge of a collapsing parachute in the middle of a routine skydiving jump (Harris 2011). Others reflect upon freak accidents, like getting hit by a car moving at 40 miles-per-hour as a pedestrian and walking away almost completely unscathed, and attribute their survival to the "organic armor" and can-do-attitude they cultivated through CrossFit (Cecil 2018). Still others, like sportswriter Stephen Madden who published a book about his experience training in CrossFit, understood the pursuit of CrossFit ("to prepare us all for whatever life asked of us") in "a much more metaphysical way" (Madden 2017, p. 27). For Madden, persevering through the challenge of the daily workout (or workout of the day, WOD for short) meant he could withstand the pressures of work and the chaos of family life. He was confident that the mental fortitude he forged in the gym would carry over into other areas of life. Others, like the Christian CrossFitters we encounter below, extend Madden's metaphysical understanding CrossFit's motto to their religious lives. The varied applicability of the unknown and unknowable ethos means that CrossFitters can relate any number of struggles, big and small, to their training life. The unknown and unknowable links CrossFitters' actions in the here and now to the contingencies of the future. It also reframes the banal grunt-work of exercise as a form of risk-management and proactive anticipation. Through this ethos, CrossFit transcends its status as merely a training methodology, a lifestyle, or even a mindset. It becomes, instead, a way of being in time.



Figure 3. The Marines' Battles Won Challenge mobile obstacle course at the 2018 CrossFit Games. Photo by author.

3. The Unknown and Unknowable Return of Christ

As of fall 2018, there are more than 15,000 CrossFit affiliate gyms in 162 countries, supporting millions of CrossFitters.⁹ With the scope of CrossFit widening rapidly, various interest groups have emerged, creating new opportunities to understand how an ethos of preparation is at work in a diverse population of exercisers. While many, like the service members mentioned above, value CrossFit for how it contributes to physical preparedness, others, like Christian CrossFitters, understand CrossFit as essential for generating a sense of spiritual preparedness as well. A closer look at the Christian CrossFit subculture reveals how readily CrossFit reflects an evangelical temporality, such that CrossFit becomes the ideal choice for soldiers and civilians alike, whether one is preparing for overseas combat or spiritual warfare.

Promoting religious aims through sport has become commonplace in the American experience. From 1880 through 1920 men like the evangelist Dwight L. Moody promoted a type of masculine religiosity that would become known as muscular Christianity. Muscular Christianity was a transnational phenomenon, beginning with the publication of several novels by British authors Thomas Hughes and Charles Kingsley in the 1850s that depicted Christian male protagonists as robust, vigorous, sporting, and manly. In spreading to the U.S., muscular Christianity soon found support in YMCAs, which adopted sports programs, and the Boy Scouts, which incorporated a muscular Christian attitude and a sense of military preparedness into the foundations of its scouting community. Scholars of muscular Christianity suggest that this religious disposition served two primary purposes.

⁹ (Henderson 2018). This statistic appears in the *Morning Chalk Up*. The *Morning Chalk Up*, founded in 2016 as a daily newsletter for CrossFitters, has become one of the most trusted sources for news about CrossFit within the community.

The first was to attract more men to the church by pairing faith and recreation. The second was to make Christianity and church life, which was predominantly populated by female adherents, seem less effeminate and more suitable to men living in an imperial age (Putney 2001). Muscular Christianity reoriented attitudes about the body, such that it was not merely a source of temptation or a means of labor, but a “vehicle for good” in the world (Putney 2001, p. 56). As such, exhibitions of physical feats and a strong physique, when paired with Christian declarations of faith could serve as platforms for proselytization.

Using athletic achievements and athletes to spread the gospel became particularly popular in the latter half of the twentieth-century when evangelical parachurch organizations began to proliferate after the formation of National Association of Evangelicals in the 1940s. In *Playing for God*, Annie Blazer charts the development of evangelical sports ministry programs, like Athletes in Action and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, from the 1950s onwards. Sports ministry used the celebrity of star athletes to introduce prayer, testimony, and Bible study into the process of training and competing. This turn to sports and its niche celebrities reflected a greater overall trend in American evangelicalism to embrace “engaged orthodoxy,” wherein forms of popular culture were adapted to convey a Christian message (Blazer 2015, p. 4). The legacies of engaged orthodoxy and sports ministry have impacted the CrossFit culture, with many of its most famous athletes, like four-time CrossFit Games champion Rich Froning, using their platform to proselytize their Christian faith. Froning, like many other Christian athletes, attributes his athletic success to his faith and articulates his participation in CrossFit as a way to honor God.¹⁰

While testimonies of Christian faith dot the landscape of the competitive CrossFit world, far more people integrate Christianity into their CrossFit routines in the privacy and relative anonymity of their local gyms. In 2014, a CrossFit Games athlete, Becky Conzelman, founded Faith RXD, a network of Christian CrossFit chapters that facilitates evangelism and the congregation of Christian CrossFitters.¹¹ Faith RXD, with over seventy chapters spread across the United States and several international chapters, has emerged as the primary religious organization for the sizeable portion of CrossFitters who identify as Christian and, like the muscular Christians who came before them, want to integrate their faith and fitness.¹² At chapter meetings CrossFitters merge Bible study and prayer with CrossFit workouts. A pastor or volunteer will select a Bible passage—usually one that reflects themes of hard work or perseverance—and then delivers a short sermon. After a group prayer there is a workout that strives to connect the Christian story and the theme of the sermon with an exercise movement, such as doing burpees (which involve jumping in the air, quickly lying down with one’s chest on the ground, and then jumping back up into a standing position) to represent Christ’s death and resurrection.

In 2017, Christian CrossFitters gathered at a Faith RXD affiliated gym in Houston, TX to hear Andrew Thompson, a Level 1 CrossFit coach and a local reverend, deliver a sermon, which was also recorded for the gym’s podcast. The crowd quieted to hear Thompson’s message, which was inspired by CrossFit’s relentless preparation for the “unknown and unknowable.” “We train, in CrossFit, for the unknown and unknowable,” Thompson began. “I really love that particular element of

¹⁰ Froning narrates an intertwined story of faith and fitness in his book, *First: What it Takes to Win* (Froning 2013).

¹¹ CrossFit, like many subcultures, has developed its own nomenclature. “Rx” refers to pharmacy prescriptions and the phrase “Rx” is commonly used in CrossFit gyms to describe the prescribed, or suggested, weight someone use for an exercise. For example, a workout may include 20 clean and jerks at 100 pounds and to do the workout as written, without lessening the weight or the repetitions (which is called “scaling”) is to complete it “Rx’d.” The name of this Christian network therefore prescribes faith.

¹² There is currently no reliable data on the number or percentage of CrossFitters who identify as Christian. Faith RXD is the most prominent Christian CrossFit organization and their website reports the number of Faith RXD chapters, which gives some indication of how many Christian CrossFitters there are. See, <https://faithrx.org/chapters/>. However, the information Faith RXD provides on individual chapters does not disclose the rate of attendance or the number of members each chapter claims. Even if this information were available, it would not necessarily represent the totality of Christian CrossFit. From my interviews and conversations, I have spoken to many CrossFitters who are Christian or were raised Christian but do not participate in Christian CrossFit groups. I have likewise met many CrossFitters who do a private Bible study at home before working out.

CrossFit.” He continued by extolling the virtues of functional fitness, remarking that whatever your goal (“to carry your kids up the stairs to put ‘em to bed at night”) or your fears (perhaps a car accident), CrossFit can prepare you. Yet most importantly, this mindset could be leveraged to enhance one’s spiritual preparedness as well. Despite all of the uncertainties that CrossFitters train for, returning to the Bible could offer solace in an age of imminent threat; when time is running out:

“Jesus actually tells stories of the unknown and the unknowable future to prepare us... Stories that remind us to be prepared . . . To keep following him because one day, Jesus tells us, Jesus is going to return to this earth in a time unknown to us in a time unknowable to anyone, including himself. He’s going to return to make all things new.”

Here, Thompson exposes the symbiosis between premillennial Christian eschatology, evangelical temporality, and CrossFit’s mode of being in time. Just as CrossFit burst onto the American fitness scene as the ideal fitness methodology of the national security state, in Thompson’s sermon CrossFit likewise appears as the ideal exercise regimen for those awaiting Christ’s return. “There’s a lot of stuff that we don’t know about that new creation and Jesus’ return to earth,” Thompson warns. “It is truly unknowable to us. . . . And still Jesus calls us to be prepared for that. He calls us to be prepared for the unknowable creation that will come” (Thompson 2017). For Thompson, the takeaway is clear: preparation for the Antichrist, tribulation, the final judgment, and the glorious future of a Kingdom on Earth requires faith and CrossFit.

It is significant that CrossFit’s motto so easily facilitated an apocalyptic sermon. In this sermon Thompson builds upon Glassman’s conviction that fitness helps us all face life’s inevitable challenges to suggest that fitness, when paired with faith, can culminate in a state of spiritual preparedness for eternal life’s inevitable bliss. But preparing for the unknown and unknowable, and the unknown and unknowable return of Christ, is not a passive pursuit. “. . . Follow the instructions of Christ in your life so that when He returns, not only will you be ready, but the world around you will be ready,” Thompson challenged his listeners. Spiritual preparedness, like physical preparedness, takes constant effort. CrossFit’s fixation on the unknown and unknowable amplifies anxieties, whether the source is military conflict, twists of fate, or biblical prophecy. Yet it also spurs members to action, valuing efforts made in the here and now. Thompson could readily exegete the ethos of CrossFit because, much like the premillennialist believer who does not cease proselytizing just because Christ’s return is imminent, CrossFitters likewise push on; together they try to transform the world while they await the future, one burpee-box-jump at a time.

From this Faith RXD chapter meeting, we clearly witness an instance of evangelicalism and CrossFit coming into alignment. The affects of urgency, anticipation, and readiness course through each and demonstrate how they similarly orient participants in time. While the eschatological sense of waiting that Thompson depicts has shaped American dispositions and ideologies long before the founding of CrossFit, CrossFit nevertheless *benefits from and adds to* the prevailing sense of expectation and preparedness that characterizes evangelical temporality in America.

4. Gym Class Heroes

The previous sections demonstrate how the CrossFit ethos of preparedness is attractive to service members and evangelicals (and evangelical servicemen and women) alike. Yet these are just two, albeit large, subsets of a diverse global CrossFit community. For the average CrossFitter physical preparedness and spiritual preparedness combine most potently in a commonplace CrossFit devotional activity, the Hero WOD. A Hero WOD (workout of the day) is a workout dedicated to someone who died while serving in the military, law enforcement, or as a first-responder. Doing a Hero WOD, for CrossFitters, functions as a time to reflect upon the sacrifice, perseverance, and freedom of American military men and women. It is also an opportunity for civilians to reenact and inhabit the sacrifice of fallen soldiers. The Hero WOD invites CrossFitters to invest themselves in a narrative of national

sacrifice by suffering as a soldier might. During the Hero WOD citizenship is reconfigured from a passive status into an active identity.

This activity is important for illuminating evangelical temporality because it injects urgency into the lives of everyday CrossFitters by asking CrossFit members to imagine themselves as soldiers in peril. The imaginative activity of Hero WODs heightens the general sense of preparation that permeates a regular CrossFit class. It also mirrors the meditative exercises Christian CrossFitters do during Faith RXD workouts, wherein the suffering felt during a workout prompts reflections on the suffering of Christ on the Cross. In the Hero WOD, as in the Christian CrossFitters' exercises, martyrs and futurity are brought to bear on the individual body in a single workout. The Hero WOD reinforces the lesson of CrossFit's motto: that encountering the unknown and unknowable, preparing for and surviving the unknown and unknowable, and perishing in the face of the unknown and unknowable deserves time set apart in solemn reflection of human imperfectability and reverence for those who strive regardless.

On a sunny and cool Memorial Day morning in New Haven, Connecticut a crowd anxiously awaited the beginning of a Hero WOD at one of the city's several CrossFit gyms. I have been a member of the gym, doing participant observation and conducting interviews with members, for nearly a year. When I arrive I see people massaging their muscles over foam rollers and stretching out overnight muscle kinks. Others stand around, mixing protein powder into their water bottles and strategize for the workout ahead. The gym was unusually crowded on this Monday holiday as members anticipated the grueling, yet cherished, workout of the day named "Murph." Murph is one of CrossFit's most iconic Hero WODs. It consists of a one-mile run, followed by 100 pull-ups, 200 push-ups, 300 air squats, and finishes with another mile run. Some of the more elite athletes try to complete Murph wearing a weighted vest but the average CrossFitter scales the workout by foregoing the weighted vest, doing push-ups from their knees, and substituting ring rows for pull-ups.

The clock on the wall shows that it is almost 10 a.m., the designated start-time of the workout. The instructor rounds up all the members in a semi-circle around a whiteboard. The nervous chatter of the participants quiets down as the instructor begins to speak in a reverential tone. "Murph is a very longstanding CrossFit workout," the instructor states. "It's a workout that, in my opinion, epitomizes this community, this family we have built here together through CrossFit [by] honoring those who have gone before us; those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice so that we can literally be here today to do whatever the hell we want." Murph is named after Lt. Michael Murphy, a Navy Seal who died in a firefight in Afghanistan. Murphy did CrossFit while deployed and made up this routine to do on base. Since his death in 2005, one can find CrossFitters doing his workout in nearly every CrossFit gym in the United States on Memorial Day. The Murph workout unites the broader CrossFit community and with CrossFit rapidly expanding across the globe it is increasingly found in other nations as well. CrossFitters abroad dedicate Murph and other Hero WODs to their own armed forces. "One of the things I love most about CrossFit is that it takes time, as a sport, to honor and to bring attention to men and women in our armed forces who have essentially given all—most of them CrossFitters on base or who have now originated many of the movements and exercises we do on a daily basis," the instructor continues. Halfway through her speech she breaks from her sermonic tone as her emotions build, "I'm sorry if I get tearful." The thought of sacrifice—of others dying so that she could live—overwhelms her. The crowd around her stands with stoic expressions. Many people present are already familiar with the workout and its context. Few members require a reminder of Murph's significance and many remember the misery of the workout from last year. Nevertheless, the ritual recitation of Murphy's story serves its own purposes. It reminds CrossFitters of their common bonds; it establishes Murphy, the CrossFit exemplar, as a colloquial saint; and it underscores how time on this earth for all of us—soldier or civilian—is running out.

The Hero WOD is equal parts physical exertion and imagination. These workouts, more so than other CrossFit exercises, require instructors to coach the minds of members. At the outset of a Hero WOD CrossFit coaches introduce the fallen hero and provide details about his or her occupation and untimely death to help participants flesh out the scene in their mind. Next the coach reminds the

participants that they owe the deceased individual a debt. Then the coaches instruct participants on how to interpret the muscle aches and mental fatigue they will undoubtedly encounter during the WOD. “I want you to work hard, I don’t want you to scale just because it looks hard. It *should* be hard,” the instructor directs. “I want you to be out on that second run really contemplating *why* we’re here today, and thinking about the fact that *we are physically here today*. Alive. Working out. Having a day off. That’s what I want you to reflect upon,” she implores. Fighting the internal voice that is aroused by fatigue will be crucial for this workout. When the exhaustion sets in during in the middle of the workout “and you’re thinking ‘okay legs. I don’t know how many more squats I can do or how many more push-ups I can do,’ you *can* continue. You *can* do more than you think. I want you to challenge yourself for that today. Please.” Unlike other CrossFit classes, where the instructor focuses on walking the class through the specific body movements and proper form of an exercise, for this, and all Hero WODs, the primary instruction is to become the suffering soldier, with danger all around and your life on the line. In this headspace the contingency of life becomes undeniable. With proper Hero WOD coaching, lactic acid no longer represents mere physical effort, it now serves as both a reminder that someone died to protect your freedoms and that the deceased person the workout celebrates could just as easily be you. No time is spent discussing whether or not the soldier’s death and the military conflict he or she died in furthered a just cause. No one questions if the U.S. has become a police state. No moment of silence is given to reflect upon the right to life of people on the other side of the armed encounter. Instead, threats to American well being and patriotic responses are presumed. The personal histories of the fallen heroes and rhetoric of reverence and vigilance “give the athlete a little extra incentive to push harder during the workout” (McCarty n.d.). Threats, real and imagined, act as crucial motivators for CrossFitters training for the unknown and unknowable.

The challenge of the Hero WOD is to fight the naysaying tendencies of the mind and to “stay on mission” (Structure Your Strength 2018). Instructors’ frequent reminders during the workout keep participants within the imaginative world of danger and heroism they’ve crafted. One combat veteran, who now owns a CrossFit gym in California, recounts how he encouraged gym members during a Hero WOD in a video segment released by the CrossFit Headquarters’ media department. He created the workout to commemorate the men he served alongside in Iraq. Each number in the WOD was significant and the numerology of the workout kept participants focused on the themes of sacrifice and peril. Fifty-three wall-balls (throwing a weighted ball up against a wall and then catching it in a squat) honored 53 wounded soldiers, and 18 pull-ups commemorated the 18 soldiers who died. “When people are doing the 18 pull-ups I’ll go up to people and say ‘guys, every one of those pull-ups you’re doing has a name.’ Man when I say that, I gotta be careful with that one because I’ve literally seen people break down [in tears],” he shares. Encouragement during a Hero WOD transposes weariness into guilt. The overwhelming guilt soon becomes gratitude, and these strong emotions further enmesh CrossFitters within a kind of psychosomatic patriotism: an allegiance that is first imagined and then made real. But such reminders can also derail members who are overwhelmed by the imaginative exercise. The veteran and coach recalls a member who began crying halfway through the workout and said, “I felt like if I’d have been there [in combat], everyone would have been dead” (CrossFit Inc. 2017). When imagining herself as a soldier, the member felt physically and emotionally unprepared. The Hero WOD elevated the stakes of her training and made them explicit. At any given moment—on the battlefield or in the everyday—someone’s life could be on the line. Would she be ready to act? To save and be saved?

Throughout this imaginative endeavor, the possibility of actually experiencing armed conflict—whether in the military or as a civilian in a mass shooting—is never far from the realm of possibility. The Hero WOD and its narration heighten the affective tugs of the evangelical temporality CrossFitters inhabit. As CrossFitters listen to the stories of war and ill fortune that befell the workout’s namesake they become aware of their own mortality. Suffering through the taxing exercises likewise exposes their frailty and reminds the exerciser that more can be done—more strength-conditioning, more speed work, more mobility—to be prepared for whatever fate has in store. Through the Hero

WOD, we see an example of how CrossFitters respond to the physical and psychological anxieties of the twenty-first century, in which conditions of the present and expectations for the future generate a state of constant threat. Their answer is to exist in a state of constant preparation, as if one were in the military. This culture of training in anticipation generates a culture of paramilitary fitness, primed for the future, and ready in the here and now.

5. Conclusions

“Are you ready for the Apocalypse?” a CrossFitter playfully posted on the CrossFit discussion forum in 2010 (Moon 2010). Other posters responded by listing the guns they’d stockpile and the strength and conditioning workouts they’d do to prepare for the end of the world. On the discussion thread posters joked and fantasized about what they, as CrossFitters, would do if “left to fend for ourselves in a land of anarchy, looters, and zombies.” While the forum participants may not have been stowing away canned foods or purchasing vast amounts of ammunition in any serious attempt to prepare for an end-of-world scenario, they were nevertheless exercising their bodies and conditioning their minds to face whatever unknown and unknowable future was on the horizon, be it in the realm of fantasy, faith, or reality. Apocalyptic thinking has inspired American mainstream culture for decades, although only a small fraction of those who participate in doomsday ideation are evangelical. Nevertheless, the tradition of prophecy watching stokes “the distinct passions and proclivities of politics junkies, sci-fi fans, horror aficionados, and spy-novel readers” who, like CrossFitters, dream of surviving in a world hastily coming to an end (McAlister 2007, p. 200).

The aim of this article has been to show how CrossFit exhibits an evangelical temporality. This, of course, does not mean that CrossFit as an organization or that all CrossFit participants are Christian. Many are not, although as the second section of this article discusses, numerous CrossFit participants profess a Christian faith and strong evangelical currents course through CrossFit culture. Instead, I employ evangelical temporality to indicate a way of orienting oneself in time that is reminiscent of evangelical eschatology. In this sense, evangelical temporality reflects aspects of a more generic evangelicalism found in American culture at large. As such, the link between CrossFit and evangelical temporality is implicit. It is marked by common affects and dispositions: urgency, preparation, uncertainty, and futurity. With its abiding commitment to train members for the “unknown and unknowable,” CrossFit is a forward-looking culture. Its founder prophesizes a future in which chronic disease, international conflict, and existential anxiety can be quelled by proper nutrition and “constantly varied functional movement, performed at high intensity” (Glassman 2010). Here, exercise is a metonym for survival and salvation.

CrossFit’s evangelical temporality is most evident when one examines CrossFit’s relationship with the military. Here, too, urgency, preparation, uncertainty, and futurity appear in an unparalleled fashion, as the precarity of life becomes undeniable in the face of perpetual war. Over the past two decades CrossFit has, perhaps more than any other exercise regimen, made itself indispensable to military physical training for combat readiness. CrossFit’s attractiveness to the military lies in its acknowledgment of misfortune. It does not deny tragedy. It trains for it. And when tragedy strikes, the community mourns and remembers in an act of ritual devotion during the Hero WOD. The Hero WOD, in addition to being a way of paying respects to deceased soldiers, serves as the ultimate test of one’s physical, mental, and spiritual preparedness. It creates an imaginative landscape in which all CrossFitters are military recruits and the stakes of proper preparation are do-or-die.

CrossFit benefits from, and contributes to, the legacy of end-times theology and Cold War anticipation. Emerging at the outset of the twenty-first century, it proved to be the ideal fitness regimen for a country plunging headlong into a temporally boundless War on Terror. CrossFit, responding to a general state of uncertainty, fear, and uneasy anticipation that many were experiencing in the U.S., offered a simple solution: train. Train for the present. Train for the future. Train for the inevitable. And when facing the unknown and unknowable, train not just to be fit, but to be Cross-Fit.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank Kathryn Lofton, Tisa Wenger, Lucia Hulsether, Amanda Gustafson Napior, and Anne Taylor for their feedback, help, and enthusiasm. I would also like to thank Dana Logan and Andrew Walker-Cornetta for their conversation at a formative stage of this piece.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Altman, Michael J. 2019. 'Religion, Religions, Religious' in America: Toward a Smithian Account of 'Evangelicalism'. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 31: 71–82. [CrossRef]
- Bacevich, Andrew J. 2013. *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Beck, Julie. 2017. How CrossFit Acts Like a Religion. *The Atlantic*. June 24. Available online: <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/06/the-church-of-crossfit/531501/> (accessed on 11 October 2019).
- Blazer, Annie. 2015. *Playing for God: Evangelical Women and the Unintended Consequences of Sports Ministry*. North American Religions. New York: New York University Press.
- CBS News. 2015. King of CrossFit. 60 Minutes. Available online: <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/king-of-crossfit/> (accessed on 29 June 2019).
- Cecil, Andréa Maria. 2018. Earned Organic Armor Withstands 40 MPH Car Strike. *CrossFit Journal*. March 17. Available online: <https://journal.crossfit.com/article/denis-cecil-2> (accessed on 4 April 2018).
- Chontosh, Brian. 2009. CrossFit for Combat Fitness by Brian Chontosh. video posted to *CrossFit Journal*. Available online: <http://journal.crossfit.com/2009/08/asep-lecture-another-speaker.tpl> (accessed on 29 August 2019).
- Connolly, William E. 2005. The Evangelical-Capitalist Resonance Machine. *Political Theory* 33: 869–86. [CrossRef]
- CrossFit Games. 2014. The Test of Fitness. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3eGgWER-Vv8> (accessed on 10 October 2019).
- CrossFit Inc. 2012. Beauty in Strength. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zvqNHDTf8Y> (accessed on 29 August 2019).
- CrossFit Inc. 2017. Combat Veteran Finds CrossFit. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxHa7oBdSA8> (accessed on 29 August 2019).
- CrossFit Inc. 2019. Sport, CrossFit Homepage. Available online: <https://crossfit.com/sport> (accessed on 10 October 2019).
- East, Whitfield B. 2013. *A Historical Review and Analysis of Army Physical Readiness Training and Assessment*. Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute Press.
- Ellis, Robert. 2014. *The Games People Play: Theology, Religion, and Sport*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock.
- Fessenden, Tracy. 2007. *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Fisher, Linford D. 2016. Evangelicals and Unevangelicals: The Contested History of a Word, 1500–1950. *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 26: 184–226. [CrossRef]
- Froning, Rich. 2013. *First: What It Takes to Win*. Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, INC.
- Gawronski, Lance CPL Haley. 2018. CrossFit Competitors Take on Marine Corps' 'Battleground'. *Marine Corps Recruiting Command*. August 5. Available online: <https://www.mcrc.marines.mil/News/News-Article-Display/Article/1593995/crossfit-competitors-take-on-marine-corps-battleground/> (accessed on 10 June 2019).
- Gerber, Lynne. 2011. *Seeking the Straight and Narrow: Weight Loss and Sexual Reorientation in Evangelical America*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Glassman, Greg. 2002. What Is Fitness? *The CrossFit Journal*. October 1. Available online: <https://journal.crossfit.com/article/what-is-fitness> (accessed on 10 July 2019).
- Glassman, Greg. 2007. Understanding CrossFit. *CrossFit Journal*. April 1. Available online: <http://journal.crossfit.com/2007/04/understanding-crossfit-by-greg.tpl> (accessed on 25 June 2019).
- Glassman, Greg. 2009. National War College Speech: Part 1. *CrossFit Journal*. January 14. Available online: <http://journal.crossfit.com/2009/01/national-war-college-speech-part-1.tpl> (accessed on 25 June 2019).
- Glassman, Greg. 2010. Defining CrossFit. *CrossFit Journal*. December 27. Available online: <http://journal.crossfit.com/2010/12/glassmandefining.tpl> (accessed on 15 July 2019).

- Glassman, Greg, Capt Wade Rutland, and Capt J. T. Williams. 2006. AOFPP/CrossFit Austere Program. *CrossFit Journal*. Available online: http://library.crossfit.com/free/pdf/AOFP-Austere-Program_equipment.pdf (accessed on 15 July 2019).
- Griffith, R. Marie. 2000. *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Griffith, R. Marie. 2004. *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity*. California Studies in Food and Culture 12. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Griswold, Robert L. 1998. The "Flabby American", the Body, and the Cold War. In *A Shared Experience: Men, Women, and the History of Gender*. Edited by Laura McCall and Donald Yacovone. New York: New York University Press.
- Hardin, Jessica. 2016. 'Healing Is a Done Deal': Temporality and Metabolic Healing Among Evangelical Christians in Samoa. *Medical Anthropology* 35: 105–18. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Harding, Susan Friend. 2001. *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Harris, Meg. 2011. Survival of the Fittest: A Skydiving Mishap Proves to Meg Harris That Her CrossFit Training Has Prepared Her for the Unknown and Unknowable. *CrossFit Journal*. December 12. Available online: <http://journal.crossfit.com/2011/12/survival-of-the-fittest.tpl> (accessed on 28 August 2019).
- Hart, Darryl G. 2004. *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Henderson, Scott. 2018. CrossFit's Explosive Affiliate Growth by the Numbers. *Morning Chalk Up*. October 23. Available online: <https://morningchalkup.com/2018/10/23/crossfits-explosive-affilaite-growth-by-the-numbers/> (accessed on 29 August 2019).
- Higgs, Robert J. 1995. *God in the Stadium: Sports and Religion in America*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Hoff, Matthew, 1st. 2009. Toward Better Military PT Tests. *CrossFit Journal*. June 24. Available online: <http://journal.crossfit.com/2009/06/toward-better-military-pt-tests.tpl#featureArticleTitle%20https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E6yR3kikADc> (accessed on 15 July 2019).
- Hoffman, Shirl J. 2010. *Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sports*. Waco: Baylor University Press.
- Hovland, Ingie. 2016. Christianity, Place/Space, and Anthropology: Thinking Across Recent Research on Evangelical Place-Making. *Religion* 46: 331–58. [CrossRef]
- Jen, Joanna Tice, and John McMahon. 2017. Timely Politics: A Political Theory of Messianic, Evangelical, and Queer Temporalities. *Theory & Event* 20: 923–49.
- Kennedy, John F. 1961. Council on Youth Fitness: 'The Soft American'. December 26 Departments and Agencies; President's Office Files. JFK Library. Available online: <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKPOF/094/JFKPOF-094-003> (accessed on 15 July 2019).
- Knapik, Joseph J., and Whitfield B. East. 2014. History of United States Army Physical Fitness and Physical Readiness Training. In *U.S. Army Medical Department Journal*. April–June: 5–19.
- Lahr, Angela M. 2007. *Millennial Dreams and Apocalyptic Nightmares: The Cold War Origins of Political Evangelicalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Loveland, Anne C., and Otis B. Wheeler. 2003. *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch: A Material and Cultural History*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.
- Madden, Stephen. 2017. *Embrace the Suck: What I Learned at the Box About Hard Work, (Very) Sore Muscles, and Burpees Before Sunrise*. New York: Harper Wave.
- Masco, Joseph. 2014. *The Theater of Operations: National Security Affect from the Cold War to the War on Terror*. Durham: Duke University Press, Available online: <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=1824113> (accessed on 1 July 2019).
- McAlister, Melani. 2007. Left Behind and the Politics of Prophecy Talk. In *Exceptional State: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the New Imperialism*. Edited by Ashley Dawson and Malini Johar Schueller. Durham: Duke University Press.
- McCarty, Patrick. n.d. The Meaning of A Hero WOD and Those Who Must Not Be Forgotten. *Breaking Muscle*. Available online: <https://breakingmuscle.com/learn/the-meaning-of-a-hero-wod-and-those-who-must-not-be-forgotten> (accessed on 8 October 2019).

- Moon, Shannon. 2010. Are You Ready for the Apocalypse? *CrossFit Discussion Board: Stuff and Nonsense*. September 4. Available online: <https://board.crossfit.com/showthread.php?t=61227&highlight=apocalypse> (accessed on 29 August 2019).
- Orr, Jackie. 2012–2013. Punk Justice. *The Scholar & Feminist Online*. Edited by Elizabeth Bernstein and Janet Jakobsen. no. 11.1–11.2 (Fall/Spring). Available online: <http://sfoonline.barnard.edu/gender-justice-and-neoliberal-transformations/punk-justice/> (accessed on 1 August 2019).
- Putney, Clifford. 2001. *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880–1920*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Redlener, Irwin, and David A. Berman. 2006. National Preparedness Planning: The Historical Context and Current State of the U.S. Public's Readiness, 1940–2005. *Journal of International Affairs* 59: 87–103.
- Richardson, Kip. 2017. Gospels of Growth: The American Megachurch at Home and Abroad. In *Secularization and Religious Innovation in the North Atlantic World*. Edited by David Hempton and Hugh McLeod. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 291–308.
- Rishe, Patrick. 2011. CrossFit's Relationship with Reebok Enhances its Financial and Commercial Credibility. *Forbes*. July 22. Available online: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sportsmoney/2011/07/22/crossfits-relationship-with-reebok-enhances-its-financial-and-commercial-credibility/#2461119c1bd2> (accessed on 11 October 2019).
- Structure Your Strength. 2018. Murph, Why We Do It. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LCizvH4nX_0 (accessed on 15 August 2019).
- Sullivan, Winnifred Fallers. 2005. *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Sutton, Matthew Avery. 2017. *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Thompson, Andrew. 2017. The Unknown and Unknowable Return of Christ. Faith RX'd Houston Chapter. March 11. Available online: <http://crossfitisi.com/podcast/the-unknown-and-unknowable-return-of-christ> (accessed on 10 October 2019).
- Vox, Lisa. 2017. *Existential Threats: American Apocalyptic Beliefs in the Technological Era*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Weisenfeld, Judith. 2016. *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity During the Great Migration*. New York: New York University Press.



© 2019 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).